A Study in Darkness

by Severus_divides_into_H

Summary

Will Graham.

As a man, Hannibal is appalled to catch himself courting a troubled, rude, messy individual.

As a Chesapeake Ripper, he is deadly curious how many games can be played with a beautiful mind like this until it breaks.

As an alpha, he is hopelessly in love and just wants to possess him, to make sure that imprinting works both ways and he isn't the only one going crazy.

He doesn't know which side will win.

Notes

Additional warning: I feel like this version of Hannibal is darker than in the show, so read at your own risk ;)

I hope you'll enjoy it, and feedback is much appreciated!

If you have any questions about the ending, please contact me on Tumblr k-s-morgan ;)

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Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: M/M
Fandom: Hannibal (TV)
Relationship: Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
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Collections: Hannigram ABO Bonanza
The story now has the cover thanks to amazing marlahanni!

Translation into Russian is available here https://ficbook.net/readfic/7516287. Huge thanks to the wonderful АсторияГринграсс for her work!
Hannibal: A Break in Routine

The thick wall of rain hid the sky from the view, dulling the colors to misty gray. Hannibal stifled a sigh and looked at the blonde in front of him, barely suppressing an impulse to drum his fingers against the arm of his chair.

“I’m confused,” the woman uttered, wringing her hands nervously. “I thought you would react differently to the fact that I have imprinted on you, Doctor. It’s such a rare thing to happen, aren’t you thrilled?”

“I apologize, Emily,” Hannibal tilted his head in respect, to balance out the coldness of his voice. “Even if that was true, I’m afraid I wouldn’t be a suitable alpha for you. I care deeply about my patients, so much that I have no time for a family.”

“Oh,” Emily frowned, but then her body relaxed. “So you’re not planning on bonding with anyone?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal’s lips stretched in a semblance of smile. Seemingly mollified, Emily leaned against the back of the chair, showing off her lovely legs and the newest pair of her expensive shoes.

An insipid woman, but with a good taste. Pity she couldn’t mysteriously disappear — such a rare thing as an omega, and from a wealthy family, would be definitely missed.

Still, Hannibal let his mind wander.

He detested liars. While the concept of omegas and the idea of being imprinted fascinated him to some extent, he knew very well that Emily Sawyers had lied to him, and the thought of leaving her unpunished left a sour taste in his mouth.

Emily wasn’t the first to lie. In his life, Hannibal had encountered more than enough omegas and betas, patients and casual acquaintances who claimed to have imprinted on him. Some were attracted to his status in the society, some genuinely enamoured, and some were scared of losing their source of stability. Emily belonged to the latest category.

As a psychiatrist, Hannibal understood her.

As a man he was, he would have liked nothing better than to kill her, tearing out her tongue and turning it into something delicious.

“All right, then,” oblivious to his thoughts, Emily sent him a wide, flirtatious smile. “I admit I may
have exaggerated a bit.”

“I know,” Hannibal pretended to lift an imaginary speck of dirt from his sleeve, glancing at the clock surreptitiously.

Seventeen more minutes.

“But how?” Emily leaned forward again, her eyes alight with excitement. “How could you know for sure? I could have easily imprinted on you without you feeling anything at first — you know how it works. It's different for every couple. Sometimes weeks or even months might pass before both people experience the effects of imprinting.”

“Yes, time might pass indeed,” Hannibal agreed. “However, it doesn’t change the fact that imprinting is a unique thing, Emily. It doesn’t happen often. And it can only happen between people who fit each other perfectly, which is not something that can be said about us.”

“I know,” Emily pouted, and Hannibal glanced at the clock again. Fifteen minutes. “As you said, you are too focused on your work to consider having a family.”

“What about your own family?” Hannibal asked. This same old topic always worked as a distraction with Emily, and fortunately, she fell for it now as well. Her face turned dejected. “The last time we spoke of them, you said your parents were disappointed with your decision to enter the university.”

“They are still disappointed. They probably always will be. The only thing they’re proud of is my being an omega,” hurt flickered in Emily’s eyes, and Hannibal suppressed another sigh.

Thirteen minutes left.

Emily was his last patient, so Hannibal was taken aback when he saw a stranger in his waiting room. Emily glanced at him, curious, and the man bowed to her slightly, as was appropriate in a company of omega.

“May I help you?” Hannibal inquired.

“Dr. Lecter, I presume?” At Hannibal’s nod the man relaxed and held out his hand. “My name is Jack Crawford, I’m with the FBI. I would like to discuss an important matter with you — can I come in?”

“Of course,” Hannibal kept a small smile on his face, but his eyes studied another alpha sharply, noting the width of his shoulders, the muscled arms and the gun at his waist.
An FBI agent. In his office. Was he here for him?

His instincts remained dormant, though, nothing screamed of danger, so Hannibal closed the door and slowly approached his table, where the recently sharpened scalpel was lying.

“How can I help you?” he asked aloud. Jack Crawford hummed in appreciation, looking around his office.

“I’m sorry for intruding,” he said finally. “Alana Bloom gave you a recommendation, she said you’re a brilliant psychiatrist with years of experience.”

“Is that so?” Hannibal uttered politely.

“Yeah, and we really need help with a case, maybe you’ve heard about it. The Chesapeake Ripper?”

Hannibal pretended to think for a moment, barely hiding his amusement.

“Yes, I believe I’ve read something about it in the papers,” he confirmed. “Do you wish me to work on this killer’s profile?”

“Not exactly.” Crawford hesitated, shifting from foot to foot uncomfortably. “Doctor Bloom told me that you often treat omegas. Since I’ve just seen one leaving your office, I assume it’s true?”

“You assume correctly. I have met many omegas during my practice, with problems of different levels of difficulty.”

“That’s great!” Crawford’s eyes flashed enthusiastically. “Listen, Doctor, I understand that it’s asking a lot, but maybe you could take a look at one of my agents? He’s our only chance to catch the Chesapeake Ripper. He has a hyper empathy disorder, but the way he sees things, the minds of the most violent of killers — that’s amazing. You might find a lot of interesting things in his head, Will’s like a dream-patient.”

Hannibal’s amusement faded slowly, replaced by hostility. Jack Crawford was a big, clueless pig who believed all people around him to be mere objects. If he had a male omega in his employ, and with an empathy disorder no less, it was no wonder he was about to break. Omegas were vulnerable to outside pressure, and Jack Crawford looked like a man who would sooner snap and bark and order everyone around instead of showing patience, even feigned one.

Still. A male omega empath, with disorder? Who could look into the minds of the killers and who worked specifically on the Chesapeake Ripper?
It was too good to be true. And definitely too interesting to refuse.

“I don’t need to be persuaded, agent Crawford,” Hannibal said pleasantly. “It’ll be an honor to help the Bureau with investigation, and to assist your omega in getting steadiness.”


“Of course,” Hannibal pointed at the patient-chair. “I must insist that you call me by name either, then. Now, tell me more about your omega, so I could get a clearer picture.”

“He’s not really my omega,” Jack wrinkled his nose almost in distaste. “Will Graham is... complicated. He had a difficult life and it affected him badly. He’s edgy, antisocial, rude, and when he is focused on a case, he forgets all about the world around him. He even forgets to eat or change clothes, things like that. Other agents dislike him, his behavior is atypical for omegas.”

“Do you also dislike him?”

For a moment, Jack looked embarrassed.

“It’s not that I dislike him,” he said carefully, “it’s that I don’t understand him. Will makes communication difficult. He has his reasons, I’m sure of it, but I don’t have time to be his babysitter. I need results, and Will brings me results, but his state deteriorates. Quickly. He needs some positive influence, but since he doesn’t let anyone near him, I decided to seek someone not from force.”

“How long have you been working together?” Hannibal asked. For now, Will Graham sounded like someone who could prove to be a curious distraction and who could eventually decorate his table in the most beautiful way. A rude, empathetic, male omega — it was definitely refreshing.

“Two years,” Jack sighed. “You need to know that Will is just twenty-three.”

Against his will, Hannibal’s eyebrows started to climb up his forehead.

“Twenty-three year old?” he repeated. “How can he be an FBI agent?”

“He’s not exactly an agent. I’ll share his story with you, but please don’t share it with anyone else.”

Hannibal nodded, adding another insult to the Jack Crawford’s file his mind had already conjured up.
“Will’s father was killed by the Chesapeake Ripper when he was thirteen.”

Shock ran through him in a quick wave, and Hannibal struggled to maintain a mask of polite interest.

This was… not what he had expected.

“Will was taken to an orphanage then,” Jack continued, unaware of Hannibal’s inner turmoil. “You can imagine how shitty the rest of his childhood was. He got obsessed with the Ripper and started profiling him back then. When he was twenty-one, Will came to us, insisting that we listen to him. We refused, of course. He seemed like a grief-struck teenager who didn’t let himself heal. We sent him on his way, and in the next twelve months, Will caught seven murderers just by reading the newspapers. Seven. He proved his skills and his abilities, so I welcomed him to my team — in an unofficial capacity, of course.”

“Of course,” Hannibal echoed.

“But now, see, he’s starting to get anxious. The Ripper hasn’t been active for months, and Will began to connect the crimes that have no obvious connection. Two days ago a male body has been found in the forest. Some animals have done a job on it, it’s all torn and messy, impossible to identify or to establish the cause of death, but Will insists the Ripper has killed him.”

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully, but his heart skipped a bit.

He had indeed put the body of an obnoxious beta in the forest several days ago. The man had struggled and annoyed him so much that killing him elegantly was not an option, though Hannibal had still managed to procure several delicious organs.

How could anyone connect that tasteless brutality to the Ripper’s artful murders? Was he somehow becoming sloppy?

Hannibal considered this idea for a short second and then discarded it.

No. He was as careful and meticulous as always.

It meant that Will Graham was much more interesting than he had originally assumed.

“You think he’s getting desperate to catch the Ripper,” Hannibal said out loud. “Too desperate, so he tries to find connections somewhere they don’t exist.”

“Yeah, exactly!” Jack stood up again. “Maybe Will needs some time for himself, you know, to do
some omegian stuff. To have a few days off, to go shopping, to talk — anything at all, but he needs
distraction.”

“I’m sure I can provide it to him,” a slow smile touched Hannibal’s lips.
Considering Jack Crawford’s relieved sigh, he didn’t see the predatory threat behind it.

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They headed directly to the morgue, where the body of the man from the forest was being kept. Jack
looked almost annoyed as they opened the door and saw a young man bent over the body, so
closely that his face was practically at his torn stomach.

“Will!” Jack said sharply. The young man startled and recoiled, as if caught doing something
illegal. Their eyes met, and Hannibal blinked when the smell hit him — bewildering, soft, floral,
and strangely enticing. The fleeting notes of omegian sweetness interlaced with something else,
something unrecognizable yet so intoxicating that he inhaled sharply, staring and unable to look
away.

Omega’s eyes widened at his reaction, and then his pale skin flushed, a beautiful shade of light red
that only intensified the fog in Hannibal’s mind.

Jack cleared his throat loudly and the magic was lost. Omega busied himself with pretending to
look at the body, and Hannibal felt how his sense of self-control returned to him, sharp and steely
as always.

Will Graham was beautiful, there was no denying it. His delicate features, his unruly, chocolate
curls of hair, his eyes — green? blue? gray? — everything screamed of an exquisite omega, rare
and unique.

Hannibal was usually immune to such beauty. Although he would probably find himself unable to
avoid sketching this young man later, he wasn’t overly impressed.

The smell, though.

It was a well-known fact that the better alpha and omega smelled to each other, the more
compatible they were. Will Graham did smell good, better than anything Hannibal could
remember, but who in their right mind would decide that he and this badly-dressed creature truly
complemented each other? It was absurd.

“Will, this is Doctor Hannibal Lecter,” Jack said, his voice weary. “Before you introduce yourself,
maybe you could go to the bathroom and clean up a bit? You have blood on your face.”

Still blushing miserably, Will rubbed his chin, but only smudged the drops of blood further.

Jack sighed again, louder this time, and looked at Hannibal apologetically.

“He’s always like that,” he said, disapproval heavy in his voice.

“I’m right here,” Will snapped suddenly, and Hannibal raised his eyebrows.

Interesting.

Ignoring this outburst, Jack continued, “I asked Doctor Lecter to help me with this case.”

“What?” Will straightened his back defensively. “With the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“Will, I told you, this man was not killed by the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“So what, you decided to bring someone so they would confirm your opinion?” Will’s lips curled derisively and he stared at Hannibal. “Do you know anything about the Chesapeake Ripper?” he asked. “Anything at all worth mentioning?”

“Only things that I read in the newspapers,” Hannibal answered politely, and the omega scoffed.

“Exactly,” he declared. “And I have been working on him for years. He is mine. Why is he here?” Will turned to Jack again. “He knows nothing.”

“He’s not here to consult me on the Chesapeake Ripper, Will,” Jack snapped. “He’s here to help me with you.”

The flush finally faded from Will’s face, replaced by paleness. He looked as if he’d been hit, and Hannibal wondered how someone so young, vulnerable, and impulsive could stand being around Jack Crawford at all. Omegas rarely tolerated harshness and remained sane in the process.

“With me,” Will repeated quietly. “So, he is a psychiatrist? And you want him to do what — to study me, to prove that I can’t work?”

“I just want you to talk to him, that’s all,” Jack said conciliatorily. “It’s not too much to ask, is it? Just talk and see if you feel better.”
“I feel good enough!” Will hissed. “I don’t need you to push every possible shrink on me when you just don’t want to agree with what I say! This man was killed by the Ripper, and this fact won’t change, whether you accept it or not!”

With that, Will stormed out, leaving both Hannibal and Jack behind. Jack shook his head in exasperation, cursing under his breath, and Hannibal approached the table, looking at the body displayed and trying to see what Will Graham had seen. What about this unfortunate beta had spoken of the Ripper to him? It was all blood and meat, no elegance, no beauty.

No organs, though, so there was that.

“I apologize, Hannibal,” Jack uttered. “Will can be a real pain sometimes, I don’t even know what to do with him.”

“It’s not a problem,” Hannibal replied. “If you excuse me, though, I would like to go and talk to him. Alone.”

“Good luck,” Jack waved his hand, obviously giving up on the idea.

An impatient man. Did the FBI honestly think someone like this could catch the Ripper? Someone who wasn’t interested in the mind and subtext, but only in the hard, visible evidence?

Well, at least Will Graham was going to provide some entertainment.

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Will was the only person in the bathroom, but Hannibal still knocked and asked, "May I come in?"

He was immediately subjected to a narrowed-eyed, dangerous stare.

"It's a public place," Will said coldly, turning off the water. "I can't prohibit you from entering, but I can warn you right away — none of your shrink's tricks are going to work on me. I'm not interested in therapy and I can't be legally forced into it, so whatever deal you and Jack have struck — "

"There has clearly been a misunderstanding," Hannibal interrupted, making one small step toward Will. "When agent Crawford asked me to help you, he failed to mention the fact that you're against it. I assure you, all my patients come to me willingly, I'm not used to forcing my services on anyone. I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression."
Some of the fight seemed to leave Will, because his posture relaxed slightly.

"Okay," he said. "Apology accepted. Now excuse me, I have to go back to the lab."

Hannibal waited until the omega crossed the bathroom and approached the door, and said, "I believe you."

Will froze. His shoulders stiffened, and his voice sounded dull when he murmured, "I thought you said you weren't going to use any tricks on me. Is your approach always so crude, Doctor, or do you just think I'm that of an idiot?"

"On the contrary, I think you are a very bright young man. Agent Crawford shared the information about your accomplishments with me, and I can admit that I'm impressed." Hannibal was amused to see how his compliment had affected Will, making his face redden once again. "You clearly have a unique and effective way of thinking," he continued. "You've been studying the Chesapeake Ripper from your childhood, so who can offer better insight into his mind and his crimes than you?"

His amusement intensified when a tentative hope entered Will's eyes, slowly replacing his hostile expression.

Wishing to secure his success, Hannibal added, "If you think that man has been killed by the Ripper, then I trust your instincts. You must be right, although I'd love to hear your reasons."

"You want me to tell you the Ripper's story in a bathroom?" Will asked, but despite sarcastic words, his voice was quietly wondering.

"Actually, my office would be a much better place for this," taking out his card, Hannibal offered it to Will, who looked wary again.

"I'm not doing this because Jack Crawford asked me to," Hannibal said after a pause. "I'm genuinely interested in your theory and the profile of the Ripper you have devised, and conversations with me might save you from Jack's scrutiny and disapproval. Think about it. We might have a mutually beneficial arrangement."

After more hesitation, Will accepted the card and hid it in his pocket, carelessly and without looking.

Irritation tickled him from inside, more powerful than Hannibal had expected.

He resented seeing his things mistreated.
He resented feeling dismissed even more, which was somewhat surprising. Having an omega indifferent toward him was a relief, wasn't it?

Still, Will Graham could be a little less rude about it.

"You might come to my office tomorrow, at seven o'clock," Hannibal said evenly. "If it's inconvenient, please let me know in advance. My phone number and address are on the card."

Will studied him intently, as if unsure of whether or not to trust him, and then nodded.

"I'll be there," he uttered. "But if it's some kind of plot you and Jack have cooked up, I will know. Don't delude yourself, Doctor Lecter. I know when I'm being lied to."

Hannibal watched him leave, and he couldn't say if he was more amused or offended.

Or intrigued.

Definitely intrigued.

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The next evening, fifteen minutes after seven, Will Graham knocked on his door. Hannibal knew it was him even before he opened it — the scent was already recognizable yet no less intoxicating, clouding his mind and playing with his instincts.

Frowning, Hannibal let Will in, wondering how someone this messy and socially inept could smell in such almost irresistible way.

He was rude. He was disorderly. He was late.

But when Hannibal smelled him, the alpha in him wanted him.

It was a bewildering and utterly incomprehensible experience for him.

"Good evening, Will," he said, since omega was obviously not going to break the silence. "I'm glad you came here today."

"Did you mean what you said?" Will turned to him suddenly. "Do you really believe me?"
"Yes," Hannibal answered without missing a beat. "As far as I know, you have already proven how capable of understanding the minds of the criminals you are. I see no reason for Jack to doubt you now."

Will nodded slowly, and the relief and gratitude he felt were palpable, filling Hannibal's nose with herbal smell.

He took his place and pointed at the patient-chair, but to his annoyance, Will completely ignored him and proceeded to wander around his office, looking at the shelves, paintings, and everything around them.

"I met the Ripper when I was thirteen," he said, and Hannibal forgot about his irritation, focusing entirely on the sound of Will's voice. "He came at night, when my father and I were already sleeping. I don't know what woke me up. He was stealthy. Unnaturally, inhumanly silent, like a predator. It was like he didn't even breathe, but I still felt... something. I can't explain it, I just knew he was in the house."

"A foreign smell, maybe?" Hannibal suggested. He was grateful now that Will had refused to sit down and that they weren't facing each other. He wasn't sure he'd have managed to hide the extent of his fascination from someone with the supposed empathy disorder.

"No, he must have used suppressants because the house smelled as it always had, I remember that," Will tousled his hair in clear agitation and finally turned to him. His eyes were lost, and Hannibal reveled in the confusion that shone in them. "I felt something, so I went to my father's room. The Ripper was there. His fist was in Dad's mouth, and he kept pushing it inside. Dad tried to struggle, he was a fisherman, a strong beta, but it was like the Ripper didn't even notice. And then he saw me."

Hannibal knew how the story was going to end. He had checked the old articles yesterday, after returning home, and soon enough, he remembered Louisiana, Edgar Graham, and his young son, a wide-eyed omega that hadn't fully bloomed back then, making it almost impossible to feel his scent.

Hannibal didn't touch children, but he also didn't leave witnesses. He'd let the boy live only because darkness had sufficiently covered his face, and he knew he wouldn't be remembered.

Who would have thought that the boy would turn into Will Graham, obsessed with catching the Ripper, beautiful and tragic and so strangely desirable?

"What happened next?" Hannibal asked softly, and heard how Will took a deep breath.

"He told me to leave," he said. "I'm not sure why. I have no idea why I listened to him, I was never a coward and I loved my father more than anything. But he said it, and I just left. I went back to my
room, hid under the blanket, and kept lying there until the morning."

"You don't have to be a coward to feel scared," Hannibal noted. "You saw something traumatic, something no child should see. There is nothing strange or reprehensible about you choosing to flee rather than to fight."

"No, you don't understand," Will stepped close enough for Hannibal to see the fervent glint in his eyes. "It was like he hypnotized me. I felt compelled to do what he said, I didn't even stop to think. And it's what kills me most, because I'm the only person who saw the Chesapeake Ripper and survived, yet I can't remember anything about him other than him being some magician who cursed me into silence and obedience. I keep going back to that night again and again, but I still don't understand how he did that to me. Why I let him murder my father and turn him into one of his grotesque masterpieces without even trying to ask for help."

"Interesting phrasing," Hannibal said, and was curious to see how Will immediately tensed. "'Masterpieces'. Do you consider the work of this murderer art?"

"It is art," Will snapped defensively. "He might be a sadist and a monster, but what he does cannot be compared to the crimes of other killers. There is elegance, beauty, history in his murders, and refusing to accept it won't help to catch him."

With every minute spent in his office, Will Graham was getting more and more interesting. Something within Hannibal shifted, as if waking up after a long nap, and he shook his head, trying to get rid of the unfamiliar feeling.

"Forgive me if I sounded skeptical," he said. "I'm in no way diminishing the complexity of the Chesapeake Ripper's crimes. I've seen the pictures, and what they depicted was fascinating."

Will looked shocked.

"Do you really think so?" he asked quietly. "You don't think it makes me crazy, or twisted, or a sympathizer?"

"Not at all. It makes you brave enough to admit that even the most horrendous deeds might have beauty in them. As for sympathy... do you sympathize with the Ripper?"

"Never," Will said, and even though his voice remained quiet, the venom in it was biting. "He took everything from me, and I won't rest until I make sure he pays for it. But I do empathize with him. Sometimes too much."

"How is it displayed?" Hannibal was content to realize that his voice sounded only mildly curious.
Will sent him another tormented glance, and the force of his longing to be understood and accepted suddenly hit Hannibal, practically throwing him into the ocean of sadness, grief, and hurt.

He blinked, and emotions that weren't his dissipated, leaving only a shadowy taste behind.

"I feel him," Will whispered, and a shiver ran through Hannibal's spine, paralyzing him with something he didn't understand. "I feel him all the time. It's like we are connected, because every time he's experiencing intense emotions, every time he's getting ready to strike, I know it. I can't stop him, but I know what he's doing, and it scares me. Sometimes I doubt he's even human."

"Why?" Hannibal asked, so hoarsely that he barely recognized himself.

Something was happening to him. His head was swimming, his heart jumping erratically in his chest, and his vision kept clouding, as if he'd been injected with some drug.

Will seemed oblivious.

"Because I know why he kills," he murmured. "I know what people he targets. I never told anyone about it, not even Jack, because I know they won't believe me. They'll ask me to prove it, and when I can't, they'll just think I'm crazy, crazier than they believed me to be. I don't know if I could survive it if they decided I cannot help them with the Ripper and send me away."

"And what people does the Ripper target?" His voice was coming from some other, distant place. Everything within Hannibal had gone numb, and only a strange fluttery sensation kept warming his chest, gaining strength with every passing second.

"Rude," Will breathed out, terrified, and there was a small yet powerful explosion that shattered the stillness of the air. Hannibal felt like he was falling, could almost feel the wind whipping at his hair, the stomach-clenching sensation of rapidly approaching the end of something, whether it was a precipice or the boundaries of his freedom.

The world around him reformed. For a moment, it centered on the omega standing in front of him, and all Hannibal's instincts came to life, snarling and raging and desperate for possession, for unity, for a claiming bite.

And then his mind rebelled, forcefully pushing the primitive, mindless wants to the back of his brain. Rationality returned together with self-control, and Hannibal stared at Will Graham with new eyes but without feeling a maddening impulse to jump on him and mate him.

Imprinting.

He had just imprinted on omega, on someone who lived for the opportunity to catch him. The phenomenon he'd been so interested in for years had finally paid him a visit, and Hannibal had never felt less prepared.
Will clearly interpreted his silence as rejection of his ideas. His shoulders slumped, and Hannibal was fascinated to watch how the hopefulness in his eyes died.

"Right," Will said sharply. "Sorry, I have no idea why I talked so much. I never do it, I don't know what the hell is wrong with me today. Thank you for your time, Doctor Lecter, and feel free to share everything with Jack. I'm sure he'll be grateful."

Will stormed out without bothering to close the door after himself, and Hannibal stood up slowly, watching him go through the window.

There was no doubt he'd imprinted on Will, just as there was no doubt that Will himself felt nothing.

Yet.

It would happen sooner or later. Will was already feeling connection to the Ripper, enhanced by his extreme empathy, so what would happen when he went through imprinting?

The aftershocks of this new revelation were still echoing through his mind and body, but Hannibal could already think critically again.

The fact that he was imprinted now didn't change anything. While there was a part of him that longed to sink its teeth into Will's neck and claim him, Hannibal knew he would be able to control it. It was a mild drawback when compared to the power he would have once Will imprinted on him as well. With his empathy and his loneliness, his yearning to belong, he would be easily manipulated, and Hannibal would use it to his advantage.

What a unique experience it was going to be.
Hannibal: Fighting the Instincts

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your support! It makes me absolutely giddily happy})

Hannibal was getting restless.

A more grounded part of him watched the growth of the swell of longing in his chest with detached interest. The other part, though, the one that was purely alpha, was frustrated with his continued refusal to contact Will. Three days had passed, and the effects of imprinting kept intensifying, filling Hannibal with nonsensical and foreign emotions.

He wasn't overly concerned, since controlling his impulses was something he excelled in, but the growing dissonance between the parts of him was still bothersome. Hannibal wasn't used to it. He knew very well what thoughts and desires belonged to his human and alpha selves, and they had always been in perfect sync.

Until now. And if those three days were anything to go by, then the symptoms would only get more severe in the future.

His work phone rang.

Frowning at the unknown number, Hannibal picked it up, murmuring a terse greeting.

"Doctor Lecter?" The voice was achingly familiar, and for a moment, Hannibal closed his eyes.

He'd forgotten the unique way it sounded.

"Yes," he said calmly.

"It's Will, Will Graham." There was an awkward pause which Hannibal allowed to stretch. He could practically feel the agitation rising within the omega at his silence, and a small smile touched his lips.

"Will," he said finally. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you. Is there something I can help you with?"

The dejected silence came from Will this time. His pride, whatever was left of it after Jack Crawford, obviously suffered from not having made a sufficient impression and from being
forgotten so easily.

"You haven't told Jack anything," Will uttered at last. "He didn't even know that I came to your office."

"I don't break my promises," Hannibal's words sounded clipped. "You trusted me to keep everything you shared with me in the walls of my office. I did."

"Thank you," Will blurted out. "I appreciate it. Really. I also wanted to apologize for jumping to conclusions that day, I shouldn't have done that. If you are still interested, maybe we could meet again — I promise I won't act as rashly again."

Hannibal let out a thoughtful sound, pretending to consider it.

"It's Saturday," he drawled reluctantly, and was rewarded by a mortified gasp.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to... I'll call you back on Monday."

"Will," he cut him off. "It's not a problem. You can come tomorrow at ten, and we can resume our conversation."

"You're against taking calls on Saturday, but you want to meet me on Sunday?"

This time Hannibal couldn't tell if Will was genuinely incredulous or teasing him, which was a pleasant surprise.

He liked being surprised.

"Sunday is good," he said. "My office at ten. Please don't be late."

He hung up before Will could answer, vividly imagining the confusion on his face.

Will wouldn't be able to decide if he should be pleased or annoyed, if Hannibal truly wanted to meet with him or simply felt courteous enough to offer. His empathy allowed him to understand other people, but Hannibal knew how to turn in into weapon, to wind him up to a point when Will's mind would be set ablaze.

Imprinting had the potential to become problematic, he mused, yet at the same time, it was too unique and refreshing to give up on.
He wouldn't trade this experience for anything.

On Sunday, Hannibal woke up at six with a sense of strange urgency and conviction that he was going to be late. With his mind still being hazy from sleep, he went to the bathroom, taking an uncharacteristically long shower and washing his hair and body thoroughly, despite having just done that the previous evening. Then, he spent almost an hour in front of the mirror, trying to decide what to wear, and only when the clock struck nine did he realize the meaning of his behavior.

He was preparing himself for the meeting with Will. An alpha part of him felt anxious enough to engage in self-grooming, hoping to impress the omega and win his attention, and the feeling was so strong that it had taken over him for almost three hours.

Annoyed with himself, Hannibal tore away the tie he'd chosen and replaced it with a simpler and less expensive model.

Ridiculous. As if Will Graham was someone who could tell the difference between cheap and elegant.

He was clearly out of his mind.

By ten, Hannibal was fully in control of himself, so when his visitor arrived, he greeted him with a smile and a slight, respectful bow.

Will froze at the sight of it, looking shocked, pleased, and embarrassed.

So people he knew didn't pay him the respect omegas tended to get. Hannibal mulled over it as he let him inside, remembering how Jack bowed to Emily but ignored Will upon entering the laboratory. He knew the rules, which meant that he considered Will inferior and unworthy of being an omega. Whether he did it consciously or subconsciously remained to be seen.

Still, Hannibal couldn't ignore the dark dissatisfaction rising in him in response to such disrespect. Will belonged to him, and seeing him mistreated by others was unexpectedly frustrating.

As before, Will refused to sit on the chair and began to explore his office again, moving in the same exact places he had during his first visit. Hannibal watched this curious pattern for a while, wondering what it was about his office that made Will forget about the conversation he had come here for.
Realizing Will wasn't going to start first, Hannibal said, "I thought about what you told me, that the Ripper targets rude individuals. It's an interesting theory, not something I have ever encountered. Are there any reasons that pushed you in that direction?"

Will turned to him, though one of his hands kept caressing the statue of the stag standing near one of the shelves.

"The Ripper doesn't have any of the usual motives," he said. "He kills people regardless of their sex, gender, skin color, orientation, or location. His murders aren't personal or impulsive, he never leaves any traces, not even the smell. It means that he makes sure to take suppressants in advance — he plans everything."

"Maybe the choice of victims doesn't matter at all?" Hannibal suggested. "Violent mood strikes him and he goes looking for vulnerable and easily accessible prey."

"No," Will shook his head, tightening his grip on the stag. "That's what makes him different. His murders are not personal, but they are also not completely impersonal. He knows basic information about these people, he kills them in very specific ways. When he looks at them, he feels contempt. Disgust. He doesn't kill them because it makes him feel good, he does it because in his understanding, they don't deserve their lives."

Hannibal wondered if Will knew how passionate he sounded when he was talking about the Ripper, how fervently his eyes were glistening.

"So he kills them as punishment," he said, and Will considered it, tilting his head to a side. This movement caused him to bare his neck, and Hannibal stared at it, feeling predatory, intense hunger. Against his will, his lips started to curl in a possessive snarl, and he barely managed to school his expression before Will saw it.

"Yes," Will murmured thoughtfully. "Punishment. He punishes them for their rudeness and their lack of manners. In his mind, this is a crime worthy of the most brutal death sentence."

Licking his lips, Hannibal tried to sound as normal as he had before seeing the alluring curve of a beautiful neck, "Why rudeness? Why not something more specific, like spitting on the pavement?"

"It would be too limited to someone like him. Have you seen the pictures of his crimes — the real pictures, not those photographs of photographs from the newspapers? The Ripper always places his victims in specific positions, takes specific organs. His trigger is something insignificant yet general, something that can contain many minor offenses and give him freedom to hunt and create."

Will hesitated suddenly, turning and half-presenting his neck again unconsciously, and Hannibal had to fight to stay put. Clenching his hands into fists, he removed them from the arms of the chair,
grateful for Will's obliviousness.

He had never reacted to the sight of omegas' necks before. More than several had been pushed on him in the past, sometimes right during their heats, and all he felt for them was distaste.

His immunity didn't seem to spread to the one the fate had chosen to bestow on him, though.

"There is more," Will said. "I've spent so much time in his head that I feel his ups and downs, the change in his emotions. I feel these sharp pangs of annoyance he experiences, the ones that trigger his desire to kill. It happens so frequently that it can mean only one thing — the Ripper's surrounded by the sources of irritation all the time."

"Maybe he works in a place where his customers or colleagues are unpleasant?"

"I thought about it," Will stepped to him, as if pulled by the invisible force, and Hannibal tensed in anticipation, hoping that he would become a witness of imprinting.

To his disappointment, nothing happened. Will continued to talk, the expression on his face not changing.

"If he was killing someone who he encountered at his workplace, we would have already found him. All activities of all victims have been thoroughly checked, there are never any meaningful connections. No, the Ripper chooses him victims from the faceless crowds of people, and only those who are rude. It's the only explanation, but I can't prove it," Will finally sat down, frustrated.

"You think Jack won't believe you?" Hannibal asked.

"Of course he won't. Rudeness is a strange motive, and if I tell him that I feel the Ripper so intimately, he might stop taking me seriously. He listens to me when we investigate other murders, but never about the Ripper. He thinks I'm too close to him to be effective and stay rational."

Hannibal nodded seriously, knowing that Will was too distracted to notice how pleased he actually was.

He was right. Will Graham was desperately lonely, disliking the majority of people and being disliked in return by those close to him, those whose opinion mattered to him. If he so readily shared everything he felt and thought of with a stranger, someone who'd shown just the smallest bit of kindness to him, then he was absolutely starved for basic human understanding.

And Hannibal was ready to give it to him — for the price of watching his will crumble.
He wasn't going to mate with Will, but he was going to watch how unfulfilled imprinting would slowly drive him crazy, mad with the need to have his mark on his throat.

Earning the trust of someone this vulnerable was easy. Maintaining it, though — it was a much more difficult task. As their last meeting had shown, Will was easily spooked, so to have him take everything Hannibal was going to throw at him and stay — that was going to be a challenge, one he was looking forward to.

"That man in the forest, the beta that Jack refuses to see as the Ripper's victim... I know he killed him," Will rubbed his wrist against the arm of the chair, and Hannibal leaned forward, curious both about his words and his actions. "I felt that splash of murderous darkness right at that time, and when I saw the body... I just know that the Ripper killed him. I can't back it up with evidence, but I can practically see his mark on the body. Do you... do you understand?" Will looked at him, hopefully and hesitantly, and Hannibal pretended to think.

When the hope had almost left Will's eyes, he nodded, and was immediately rewarded by the sweet smell of relief and joy.

"I believe you," he said out loud. "Of course nothing can be proven officially without the evidence, but then again, not everything needs proof. Your theory is the only one that fills all holes in the case of the Ripper. Also, the Ripper takes the organs, and as far as I've seen, the organs were taken from that beta?"

"Yes!" Will jumped from his chair, walked around it, and leaned against its back. "Jack wants to believe the organs were eaten by the animals, but it's ludicrous. What animal can tear them out with such surgical precision?"

"What is the medical opinion?"

"They don't know what to think," Will's face twisted in a sneer, and it somehow made him look even more beautiful. "They obviously see that the organs were removed surgically, but Jack harassed them to the point where they are hesitant to open their mouths and tell the truth. Pathetic."

Hannibal's heart skipped a beat when he realized how much like him Will looked at this moment. There was coldness in his eyes that wasn't his, the coldness that could only belong to the Ripper.

Will blinked, and the magic was lost.

"So, Doctor Lecter, what is your professional opinion of me?" he asked, softer this time. His fingers kept drumming against the back of the chair nervously.

The moment for one of the first steps in his game had come, even though it involved telling the truth.
"I think you are a very promising and bright young man," Hannibal said, remembering how similar compliments had pleased and embarrassed Will during their first meeting. "You have an incredible talent that people like Jack Crawford like to exploit, but they don't appreciate the magnitude and depth of it. Your empathy is a gift and a curse, and it scares you, because sometimes you find it difficult to understand where your thoughts end and the thoughts of the murderers begin. The tragedy you survived has made you stronger, but other people see it as a weakness, something they use to diminish the truth of your words. You are not delusional and you deserve better. You are unique, and uniqueness ought to be preserved."

A myriad of emotions passed across Will's face, as if he couldn't understand what to feel. Finally, he straightened and cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Thank you," he murmured. "That's... I've never... thank you. I suppose I needed to talk to someone after all these years."

"It is I who should thank you," Hannibal interjected. "I was genuine when I told you that I'm interested in the Chesapeake Ripper. If agent Crawford allows me, I will gladly participate in the investigation. You need someone on your side, and who knows what we might achieve if we work as a team?"

Will nodded, staring somewhere at his feet.

"I should go," he said.

"Of course," Hannibal stood up. "But please feel free to contact me whenever you feel like talking. We could meet weekly without it being an appointment."

Will sent him a quick, wary glance and looked away again.

"I might call," he agreed. "But I don't want to have weekly meetings, it would resemble a therapy too much. Jack is over the moon from the fact that I talked to you at all, I don't want to give him more reasons for happiness."

It sounded callously in a way that made Hannibal narrow his eyes in silent contemplation.

This callousness did not belong to him, which meant it was all Will's.

Not that innocent, then.

"Goodbye," Will said, awkward again, and Hannibal bowed, wondering if he was going to see that lovely blush one more time.
To his surprise, Will met his eyes and smiled, so openly and warmly that Hannibal's breath caught.

Then he left, and the sudden feeling of warmth left with him.

That day, Hannibal kept going back to Will's journey all over his office, to his stubborn desire to touch all things. He wasn't sure what it meant until he came back there on Monday for an appointment with a patient and realized that everything smelled like Will. Everything, and especially the statue of the stag and the patient-chair.

Will had been marking his office.

The knowledge left Hannibal stunned.

He should have expected it — omegas were as territorial as alphas, but since Will hadn't imprinted on him yet, this behavior was strange.

On the other hand, omegas were always drawn to alphas, especially those they considered to be an appropriate mate, so Will's unconscious attraction was probably based on that.

Did it mean that he could feel the desire to mark other alphas' things as well?

The thought didn't sit well with him.

In fact, it made him so angry that he snapped at Franklyn and was subjected to the sight of his hurt face till the end of their session. Even then, Hannibal couldn't decide if he should re-mark his things and eliminate Will's smell, or if he actually enjoyed having it there.

In the end, he had to choose the former, because forcing the foreign smell on all of his patients would be rude, considering how thoroughly he tended to air the office between the appointments. It was enough that Franklyn looked devastated when he left, his nose twitching, trying to place the smell he felt coming from the chair he'd been occupying.

Less than an hour passed, and Hannibal was already missing it.

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The Chesapeake Ripper had to return, and this time, he wouldn't be satisfied with a sounder of three.

Hannibal considered the choice of his victim carefully. His new killing spree was going to be for
Will, a challenge that was meant to make him question the reality, his previous profile, and his own mind.

He was confident in his plan when he chose the card of Richard Thompson, a jeweler who advertised his beautiful creations by using his omega-wife as a model and humiliating her right in front of the customers. His belittling remarks had been as sickening as the ogling of some of the male buyers who had come exactly for that, drinking in the misery of the exploited omega.

Thompson would do nicely for a 'welcome' gift. It would be connected to Will, but not directly so, and it would only serve to confuse him further.

Hannibal picked the necessary tools and followed his prey from its workplace and to the seedy night club where it disappeared for a while. When it came out again, it was half past two. The loud music was thumping within the walls of the club, but the alley surrounding it was empty.

Hannibal left his car soundlessly, stalking Thompson to the corner, his muscles tensing, anticipating the upcoming fight. He breathed in deeply, letting the offending smell fuel his burning need for violence, and then something happened. His mind faded along with his human part, letting the alpha within him take full control.

When he came back to his senses, he found himself standing in the kitchen, staring at the vacuum packaged meat through the transparent door of his freezer.

Alarmed, Hannibal checked the time.

Five in the morning.

What in the world had happened?

Summoning all his strength to suffocate the rising panic, Hannibal closed his eyes and let himself remember.

He could vaguely recall the brief but violent struggle, the muffled screams of Thompson as the scalpel cut into his tongue and severed it entirely. The organs he'd extracted and placed in containers. The small clearing where he'd left the body.

That's all. Nothing specific, no clear memories of what had happened.

Hannibal went back to the freezer and examined the meat again. It was packaged nicely and carefully, just like he always did it.
The panic dissipated slowly, though dissatisfaction remained.

He had completely lost control over himself. He'd let the animal part of him take charge and do all the work, and even though judging by the meat, it was unlikely that he'd left any traces behind, the situation itself was novel.

What had triggered this loss of control? The murder of Thompson wasn't personal to affect him like this.

Imprinting. It could only be that. It was doing something to him, tampering with his instincts and rationality.

Pursuing his lips tightly, Hannibal turned off the light in the kitchen and went to the bathroom.

It was interesting, in a way, but he disliked not knowing exactly what was happening. Maybe Will would be the one to enlighten him. So far, his comments about the Ripper had all been startlingly accurate, so perhaps he would reveal the truth that Hannibal himself wasn't sure in yet.

With these thoughts he stepped into the shower, letting the water wash away the smells that clung to him.

Tomorrow, he would know.

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The phone call came around midday. Hannibal was pleasantly surprised to be contacted so early, and even more so when he realized the caller was Jack, not Will.

"Do you have a moment?" Jack asked, or rather demanded.

Hannibal pretended that it wasn't offensive.

"I do," he said. "Did something happen to Will?"

"A goddamn miracle has happened to Will, and I believe I have you to thank for that. Will told me you've been talking to each other — how did you manage that?"
"I have my ways," Hannibal replied ambiguously, and as he thought, Jack didn't seem interested enough to press.

"Fine," he said curtly. "We'll discuss it later, as well as your fee. That's actually not why I'm calling you — there's been another murder. The Ripper has finally started another cycle. Will asked me to let you know and give you access to the crime scene, he told me you'd be interested in it. Is it true?"

"Certainly," Hannibal purred. "Besides, it would give me an opportunity to monitor Will more closely. We are talking, but he still refuses to have an actual appointment."

"That's what I thought," Jack sounded satisfied. "Great job, Hannibal. I'm impressed. Doctor Bloom was right to recommend you — she has some story with Will, so she refused to psychoanalyze him herself, and now I'm even grateful. Everything's working out perfectly."

Hannibal kept modest silence, filing away the information about Alana for later.

He received the address, thanked Jack, and went to the car, his thoughts revolving around Will and the fact that he cared enough to ask for the access for Hannibal. It was warming him from the inside, although he didn't know why.

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When Hannibal arrived at the scene, Will was already examining the position of the body with a deeply focused look on his face. He didn't notice him, too engulfed by his task, so Hannibal stepped closer, staring at Thompson with honest curiosity.

He couldn't remember how he'd chosen to place the body or the reasons for it. Before the instincts had overcome him, he'd had a specific plan, which the alpha in him had clearly ignored.

What he was seeing now was not something Hannibal would have considered doing. Thompson was naked and standing on his knees, his face pressed against the ground, his buttocks high in the air. His severed tongue was covered with dirt and placed in one of his hands. The other one was holding his eyes, also dirtied.

It was too crude and simplistic for Hannibal's tastes, and if he could, he would growl at his alpha part in frustration.

Jack nodded at him in greeting and then proceeded to send everyone away, barking at them to give Will space. Now intrigued ever more, Hannibal watched how Will stopped moving and closed his eyes, going so deeply into his own mind that it could almost be felt physically.
Then he moved backward, walking as quickly and freely as if it were a usual thing for him to do.

Even though all Hannibal's attention was on him, he was aware of the mocking glances exchanged by other officers, of the ridiculing chuckles and taunting whispers.

He stayed outwardly calm, but a knot of darkness swelled in him, making him look and remember their faces.

Regardless of his own plans, Will was *his* omega. How dared they treat him this way, and how dared Jack Crawford allow it to continue? Will was unique, and just because these idiots couldn't grasp the grandeur of his talent didn't mean he had to be subjected to their pettiness.

Gritting his teeth, Hannibal forced himself not to react.

While the hostile attitude of others to Will made his hackles rise, it was also beneficial to him. It ensured that Will would continue to be vulnerable and lonely, and that he would jump at the chance of finding a mate who would understand him. Even if their bond would never be fully consummated.

It was fascinating watching Will work. His movements, his gait, everything seemed different, as if he was truly becoming someone else.

Becoming Hannibal.

Ten minutes passed, and Will's quiet murmurs and gestures ceased. He looked up, his eyes wide and lost, and Hannibal moved forward against his will, driven by the impulse to comfort.

Fortunately, Jack also started to approach, stopping only when he reached and broke Will's personal space.

"What did you see?" he asked. "It's the Ripper, right?"

"Yes," Will's gaze fell on Hannibal and lingered on him.

Allowing himself to smile, Hannibal tilted his head in respect, and was entranced by how much more confident Will seemed to grow after it.

"It's the Ripper," he said, "but something is different. This," he pointed at Thompson, "this is passionate. The Ripper despises all of his victims, but this time he had personal reasons for attack. Or at least more personal than before."
"Personal in what way?" Jack asked. Will closed his eyes again, a strange expression passing over his face.

"He's found an omega," he said at last. "He's courting someone. This man is his courting gift, the first one in what is going to be a long series of givings."

"A long series of givings," Jack repeated flatly. "Are you telling me he won't stop at three this time?"

"At two," Will corrected him absently. "The man in the forest counts as one of his victims. But yes, there're going to be more. Much more."

"Is this why he's naked and positioned like that?" Jack looked at Thompson again. "Is this some kind of sexual overture?"

Hannibal's lips thinned.

It seemed Jack Crawford existed with a sole purpose of annoying him.

Will wrinkled his nose in distaste, and his scowl immediately soothed the anger burning in Hannibal's veins.

"No," he practically spat. "I'd say the victim had an omega partner who he abused, psychologically rather than physically. Considering the pose, he must have objectified that omega and constantly insulted him or her. He talked filth, he stared filthily, and he was full of filth, which is probably why the Ripper did that to his tongue and eyes and why he stuffed him with rubbish."

Stuffed with rubbish?

Hannibal looked at the body again. From this angle, he couldn't see it, but it explained why the body looked full when the majority of the organs were resting in Hannibal's fridge.

"We have to see what rubbish he's chosen," Will was saying. "There might be something about it that will finally point us in the right direction. He likes someone, he's courting someone. He is going to make a mistake."

A strange feeling caught Hannibal in its web, a combination of amusement and turmoil.

What Will described could only be partly true. He wasn't courting him... was he? At least not intentionally.
He wasn't going to be caught any time soon. But he had broken his pattern, and he'd done it unwillingly. For the first time, he looked at his victim and he didn't fully recognize it. He'd been more of an animal rather than a person during the murder, and while he refused to believe he would leave prints even in that state, it was still worrying.

He'd never felt a dissonance like this. Will intrigued him, but Hannibal didn't consider him a worthy mate. Their story was going to end with Will's imprisonment and his mind in ruins. Since when did the alpha inside him have such a drastically different opinion?

Jack left to talk to other agents, and they were left alone, near the body.

The courting gift.

"Are you all right?" Hannibal asked softly, and Will startled.

"Oh," he said. "Yes. I'm glad you came here."

"I thought you would be happier that the Chesapeake Ripper has shown himself again. It proves your theory about that beta man being his victim."

"Not exactly. As I said, it's different this time. It's not about the Ripper any more, it's all about the omega he's chosen." Will stared at the body again, and a sudden wave of hatred from him made Hannibal tense.

"What?" he asked.

"I can't stand it," Will said through gritted teeth. "The bastard has killed my father, he killed so many other people whose only fault was rudeness, taking them from their loved ones, and now he's planning to build a family of his own? I won't let him. I'll do anything, but he won't get a happy ending."

Hannibal hummed, choosing not to speak for a moment.

He wasn't sure what to say.

Only when Jack moved toward them again, he asked, "What do you think about having a dinner at my place? Tomorrow night, at seven. We can discuss everything in a more relaxed atmosphere. Now that I'm a part of the investigation, I'd like to share my thoughts as well. Maybe you'll find them useful."

Will peeked at him, looking suddenly young and shy, a schoolboy when compared to him.

"Okay," he said. "I'd like that."
Hannibal smiled.
All your wonderful support kept me in an absolutely excellent mood this week - thank you all so much, it makes me even more passionate about this story.

It occurred to me that some readers might be hesitant to read without knowing if the ending's going to be happy, open, or sad. If you have any concerns, please drop me a PM on Tumblr https://k-s-morgan.tumblr.com!

Also, maybe I should have mentioned it - some chapters are going to be from Will's POV as well, like this one. Thank you again, and I hope you enjoy!

Will looked at his gloomy reflection once again, trying to understand if the suit he'd chosen was adequate or embarrassingly outdated.

He had no idea how to dress for a dinner with someone as imposing as Hannibal Lecter. During their first meeting, both times in his office and even at the crime scene, he'd looked impeccable, from the tips of his shoes to the carefully styled hair, his cold superiority masked yet still visible.

Will didn't intend to impress him, nor did he hope that something like this was possible at all. Still, the weakest omegian part of him urged him to at least try, and if that's what it took for it to relax and let him enjoy the evening, then Will supposed he could do it, no matter how foreign the suit felt on him.

Frowning, he turned away from the mirror and flinched when Winston jumped on him unexpectedly, pressing his dirty paws against his suit.

"Winston!" Will glared at him, but his hand was already patting the golden fur. "Did you go outside? I told you to stay put."

The dog let out a happy bark, and Will knelt in front of him, letting him finish destroying his suit.

"It looked stupid on me anyway. Right?" he asked. Winston licked his face in agreement, and Will laughed, a sound that was hoarse and awkward because of the rarity of it.

Sitting more comfortably on the floor, he snuggled up to Winston, enjoying his warmth and his undisguised adoration.

It was nice, feeling loved and cared for.
Maybe the evening with Hannibal would be nice, too.

Mortified by the direction his thoughts were taking, Will hid his face in Winston's neck, grateful that at least his dog could not see how pathetic he was.

Sometimes he wondered if it'd been a mistake to come to the FBI. No one took him seriously because of his age and his gender, and now that everyone was aware of his methods of work, Will was sure that he wouldn't be accepted as an agent even when he was old enough. Jack seemed more than satisfied to keep him in unofficial capacity, and while it was better than nothing, it also stole away his chance at getting some semblance of stability. Everything in his life was chaotic, and being an omega didn't help.

Unlike the majority of people in the group therapy Will had been repeatedly sent to in the past, he didn't hate being an omega. He accepted it with its flaws and benefits, but the knowledge that even his rare gender didn't save him from others' scorn was depressing. He lacked delicacy and charm all omegas were supposed to possess, and people stopped perceiving him as one as soon as it became obvious. He wished he had a tougher skin, tough enough not to be so affected by this, but the excessive vulnerability typical of everyone of his gender meant that every insult, direct or hidden, hurt. Sometimes too much.

Hannibal, though.

Hannibal was... different.

With a sigh, Will closed his eyes, unable to ignore the warmth that washed over him whenever he thought of that name.

His life was centered on one goal — catching the Ripper, so he never paid much attention to dating. When his heats gained regularity, he'd tried to find a temporary partner, but those he'd felt he could be interested in never liked him back, and others were too unpleasant to even consider. Alphas' inevitable disinterest made Will stubbornly cultivate his own indifference to them, turning his attention to betas instead. Alana was his lengthiest infatuation, but even she had turned out to be too dangerous to his pride.

That was why Hannibal didn't make much sense in Will's mind. He was significantly older, something Will hadn't much cared for in the past, an alpha, and most astonishing of all, seemingly interested in him — even after having seen Will at his worst.

The interest of a psychiatrist was not new to Will, but Hannibal's reactions to him made him doubt his interest was purely scientific. The waves of attraction he caught from Hannibal sometimes were both confusing and exciting, and the omega in him was overcome with delight.

So, dinner. Which could or could not be a date.
Flustered from the mere thought of it, Will placed a soft kiss on Winston's forehead and stood up.

The suit was ruined, so it was back to jeans and a shirt.

He'd try to pick a nice one, though.

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"Will," Hannibal greeted him with a bow that never ceased to send thrilled shivers down his spine. "Thank you for coming. Please, come in."

The house he stepped in was even more impressive than the office. Will had never been particularly interested in art or design, but he was sure that everything here was exquisite and cost more than the money he'd earned in his entire life.

A strange pull made him want to come to every wall he was seeing and touch it at least once. Miffed with his own strangeness, Will walked in the direction pointed by Hannibal instead, entering an equally beautiful dinning room.

Before he knew it, he was seated, with Hannibal pulling out a chair for him and then presenting him with a small dish.

"Veal meatballs in red wine sauce," he said, and Will rose his eyebrows in surprise.

"You mean it's an appetizer?" he asked. The dish looked too complicated to be a snack, and come to think of it, too complicated for simple meatballs.

"Of course," Hannibal poured him a glass of wine and took a place at the head of the table. "The best way to fuel the hunger and increase the anticipation of a main course."

"Do you always cook like this?" Will stared at him incredulously, and saw how a thin smile touched Hannibal's lips.

"My meals tend to be more original when I cook for myself or for others. However, considering what I've learned about you during our brief conversations, I thought you'd appreciate simpler and more basic dishes first. So, nothing extravagant. Not this time, at least."

"This time?" Will echoed, and his heart skipped a beat when Hannibal met his eyes before purring, "I hope the evening will be pleasant enough to entice you to return here."
Oh.

Blushing, Will concentrated on the meatballs, tasting one and then another one, wondering how on earth something so ordinary could have such a tender texture and taste so delicious.

At the fourth one, a thought occurred to him, and he nearly spat the meatball back on the plate.

"Wait," he said. "You mean you've devised an entirely new menu for me?"

"I admit it was a challenge," Hannibal answered, his eyes sparkling in a way that told Will how pleased he was with the reaction he'd gotten. "I wanted the dinner to be something that you would like and recognize, not something that would only serve to intimidate you."

"I'm not that easily intimidated," Will noted, and Hannibal's smile grew sharper.

"That remains to be seen," he uttered, and Will narrowed his eyes, trying to understand if he was being mocked or simply teased. After short hesitation, he sent Hannibal an answering smile and focused on his appetizer again.

It was strange, sitting here in the company of an alpha and being unable to realize what he was feeling. As much as omegas were excessively vulnerable, alphas tended to be clear as open books, at least to him. Their emotions emanated from them so strongly that Will didn't need to be an empath to understand them.

Not with Hannibal. Hannibal remained closed to him, which made Will wonder whether the emotions he sometimes detected from him were genuine or deliberately displayed.

When Hannibal presented the main course, a steak with something known as drunken mushrooms and roasted blue cheese potatoes, Will felt how his reservations temporarily melted. If Hannibal was telling the truth, then he had really cooked specifically for Will, because what he'd seen so far was indeed a combination of ordinary and exquisite.

What alpha would do that for someone out of strictly scientific interest? No, it was more, it *had* to be more.

"So, Will," Hannibal uttered, taking a sip of wine. "Have you had any new thoughts about the latest kill of the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Startled, Will realized that he hadn't thought about the Ripper even once during this evening.

Almost embarrassed, he cleared his throat and looked away from Hannibal.

"Nothing new," he murmured. "I just still find it hard to believe that he could actually find another
human being interesting, interesting enough to court. He hasn't been active for months, for so long that I started to suspect something could have happened to him. And now, to realize he spent all that time falling in love—"

"Do you equate courting with the feeling of love?" Hannibal interrupted him suddenly. When Will glanced at him again, he saw that he was frowning.

"People tend to begin courting when they are attached," he said carefully. It occurred to him suddenly that the fact that Hannibal had prepared the meal specifically for him could maybe be considered a first step in courtship, and an incredulous hope fluttered in his chest.

"What if it's an instinct?" Hannibal leaned forward, the expression on his face unreadable again. "Jack shared the files of the Ripper's case with me yesterday and I spent all evening studying them. To me, the Ripper doesn't seem like a creature who would desire a mate. If he has engaged himself in a courting ritual, maybe it was provoked by the more primal part of him? Hence the atypical display of the body."

"You mean the alpha part of him desires someone while his rational mind is against it?"

Hannibal nodded, and Will put away his fork, thinking.

He had always envisioned the Ripper as someone who was in a perfect control of himself. Even the splashes of darkness he felt from him were controlled, so how likely was it that the Ripper would suddenly act on instincts?

"May I ask you something?" Hannibal's voice tore him from his thoughts. When Will nodded, Hannibal continued, "You said you are feeling what the Ripper feels, to the point of channeling his emotions. Regardless of what motivates him now, something happened, and it had to happen some time before the murder of Thompson. Why didn't you feel it in time?"

Will sighed.

"He did change his design," he said. "But I'm not surprised I haven't noticed it. With years, I realized that if I didn't learn how to close myself from him, I'd lose my mind. So I tried to separate us — at first for a short period of time, then for a longer one. There are days and sometimes even months when I can't feel anything from him at all, to the point where I start to wonder if he's dead. And sometimes his feelings overwhelm me and I can't escape from them even when I want to."

"So he's the most unreadable yet at the same time, the most open person to you," Hannibal uttered thoughtfully.

"Yeah," his throat suddenly dry, Will grabbed a glass of wine and drank it in one gulp. Only when he noticed a pained look on Hannibal's face, he realized how impolite it must seem and flushed.
"Sorry," he muttered. Hannibal smiled, but his smile was cold, and the hope that had kept raising head in Will's chest during this dinner shriveled and died.

Right. Talk about making an impression.

Desperately wanting to salvage the situation, he added, "Your theory about the instincts that rule the Ripper is interesting. I'll have to think about it more, but you could be right. Falling in love or even being merely romantically interested in someone is a concept that the Ripper must consider beneath himself. It is possible that he rebels against his primitive side, but to no avail. If the alpha in him decided it needs a mate... then I have no idea what the Ripper is going to do."

"It will be easier to catch him then, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. No matter what possessed him to display Thompson like he did, he didn't leave any traces." Will pressed his cheek to the empty glass absentmindedly, rubbing against it. "It seems even at his worst, the Ripper is better than most killers."

Hannibal was silent for a moment, studying him with a gaze that Will found both alluring and frightening with its intensity.

"What if you tried to reinforce the connection with him?" Hannibal spoke slowly, almost hypnotically. "If you attempted to seek him out intentionally?"

"I... no," Will shook his head. "No, I don't think I can do that. It's not so easy, walking with that bastard's thoughts in my mind. What if I open that channel again and it never closes? Who do you think would go mad first, him or me? I bet he would be amused," hatred whirled up in him again, and Will regretted having drunk all wine so quickly.

As if sensing his thoughts, Hannibal stood up and poured him another glass.

"It was just a suggestion," he said apologetically. "I did not mean to wind you up." His hand accidentally brushed against Will's, and Will calmed immediately.

"It's okay," he said, softer this time. "It's just difficult, spending so much of myself on him. I've hated him for so long that sometimes, hatred seems to be the only thing I can feel at all. It's exhausting me."

Hannibal leaned over him suddenly, touching his chin gently.

"You are strong," he whispered. "Never let anyone underestimate you, including yourself. You will find him sooner or later. If anyone can do it, it's you, and only you."

Will sat frozen for a while, in a state of shocked disbelief, nervous agitation, and timid joy. He managed to get over the burn of the touch only when Hannibal put a plate with a huge slice of dessert in front of him, announcing, "Organic chocolate and peanut banoffee layer cake. Six layers
of chocolate sponge with peanut butter frosting, topped with dark chocolate sauce."

The omega in Will purred at the sight, thrilled with the way Hannibal kept proving what a good provider he could be. Following his more primitive urges, Will tasted the dessert immediately and then looked at Hannibal in wonder.

"It's banana cake!" he stated, delighted, and saw how Hannibal's lips twitched and then spread in a smile, open and genuine.

"It most certainly is," he agreed.

His eyes didn't leave Will till the end of their meal.

***

Richard Thompson. A husband of Eileen Thompson, an omega who seemed overjoyed at the news of her mate's death. The claiming mark on her neck would forever remind everyone that she had been taken once, making them unable to see her as potential worthy mate, but Eileen didn't care. She'd refused to share much information about her husband with the FBI, but Will sensed the truth in her clipped words, in a relieved smile that kept curving her lips.

Thompson had been abusing her. He'd been abusive and the Ripper found out — and it made him angry enough to strike after months of silence.

Was he turning into vigilante or was he personally incensed after seeing an omega abused?

Will kept re-creating the crime scene in his mind, but the thoughts in his head were jumbled. As if the Ripper himself wasn't sure what he was feeling.

Maybe Hannibal was right. Maybe after all these years, the Ripper's instincts suddenly rebelled and were now urging him to find a mate — and considering how specific Thompson's murder was, there was already a chosen omega on the Ripper's mind.

He was missing something. Something obvious, so obvious that he should have already figured it out.

Maybe Hannibal would be able to help. Unlike the psychiatrists Will'd met before, Hannibal wasn't
interested in dissecting his mind, and at least one of his ideas about the Ripper had been helpful.

Hannibal. And his wonderful dinner. He hadn't extended another invitation yet, but maybe...

"I said, what are you doing?!" a loud voice boomed behind him suddenly, and Will jumped, terrified.

His heart slowed down only slightly when he saw that it was Jack who'd disturbed him. The look on his face wasn't promising a pleasant conversation.

"I'm working," he said, hating how defensive his voice sounded.

"Working? Because it seems to me that you are busy with your own thoughts— unless the Chesapeake Ripper is making you smile now."

Will barely held the impulse to hiss at him angrily.

"I'm trying to see what I missed," he said instead. "The Ripper has chosen an omega, maybe unwillingly. He killed Thompson because of—"

"What do you mean unwillingly?" Jack interrupted, and Will blinked.

"What?" he asked, confused.

The look Jack sent him was so furious that the omega in Will almost whined in distress, and he stepped back automatically, biting his lip.

Sensing his reaction, Jack took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly.

"I swear that you're taking a piss out of me sometimes," he sounded calmer this time, but still frustrated. "Unwilling, Will. You've just said it to me — you said that the Ripper has chosen an omega unwillingly. What did you mean by that?"

Oh.

"It's what Hannibal suggested," Will tried to make his voice sound even. "He said..."

"Are you on the first-name basis now? I thought he was your psychiatrist."
Will felt his face flush treacherously, and he cursed himself silently as Jack's jaw dropped.

"Don't tell me!" he almost groaned. "You have a crush on him, don't you? That's why you agreed to meet with him and why you asked for his participation in the investigation. Will—"

"It's nothing like that!" Will exclaimed, mortified. Could this conversation get any worse? "He, he's not... I don't have a crush on him. It's just—"

"You are making me start having doubts about you. No, listen," Jack warned when Will opened his mouth to argue. "I have broken more rules than I can count by offering you a place in my team, no matter how officially unofficial it is. Many other agents failed to interest me, even though they were much older and more experienced than you. I don't expect miracles, Will—"

"Don't you?" Will snapped. "Because it seems like you are waiting for me to close my eyes and blurt out the name and the address of the Ripper right afterward. It doesn't work like that, Jack!"

"It works like that with other murderers. You've figured out who they are in the matter of weeks, sometimes days. But it's been a year, Will, and you are not closer to the Ripper than you were before!"

"Because he's different!"

"Because you are unprofessional!" Jack thundered, and Will flinched again. "You are so lost in your own feelings that you can't stay rational, you take everything the Ripper does too personally. You could work better if you agreed to the therapy, like I asked you to, but you either send every psychiatrist away or you develop crushes on them! First Doctor Bloom, now Doctor Lecter. When I agreed to accept you, you promised that your age wouldn't become an obstacle, that it wouldn't mess up with your work. But if you are more interested in dating—"

"I'm not!" Will finally found his voice again, even though it was higher than normally. "You misunderstood. Doctor Lecter has been only professional with me."

"Of that I have no doubt. But you have to learn how to work with him, not crush on him. Didn't Doctor Bloom's rejection teach you anything? This is FBI, not a mating playground. You have your office, you have your seclusion, you have your files. It's more that can be said about the majority of agents here, so please don't disappoint me again."

Will jerked his head vaguely, feeling miserable and dejected, and Jack nodded.

"Good," he said. "Now tell me about Doctor Lecter's theory."
Will scented her before she entered his office. It was five o'clock already, hours after Jack’d left, and he really hoped for a quiet evening.

"Will, can I come in?" Alana smiled when he looked at her, and Will's heart jumped involuntarily. Still not over her completely, then.

"Of course," he said. "Can I help you with something?"

"Actually, I hoped we could just talk," she sat on the empty chair, still smiling slightly. "It's been awhile," she added.

"I've been busy with work," Will concentrated on the files in front of him, grateful that she couldn't see his face from this angle.

Alana was wonderful. Even her rejection of him had been soft, and while it still hurt, at least she'd allowed him to save the remains of his dignity.

"Not only with work, if what Jack told me is true."

What?

Will turned to stare at her with his eyes narrowed. Had Jack honestly contacted her, told her about his so-called crush on Hannibal, and asked her to come here to read him another lecture?

Seeing his stare, Alana sighed, and her face got more serious.

"Do you really like Hannibal, Will?" she asked. "And please don't lie to me. I promise I won't tell Jack."

"Jack has blown everything out of proportions," Will barely managed to keep the anger from his voice. "And even if I do like him, what then? Will it devalue his professional advice?"

"No. But it will make him uncomfortable."
Will recoiled, not used to such bluntness from her.

"Wow," he said finally. "Okay. I guess you're speaking from your own experience."

"Will—" Alana reached out for him, but he stepped away. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be harsh. It's just I know Hannibal, and you don't. I understand the appeal, believe me. There were times when I hoped to be noticed by him as well."

Seeing his skeptical expression, she laughed and shook her head fondly.

"Of course I did," she said. "Everyone was in love with him at some point. Handsome, old-fashioned, hellishly smart, rich. He was a dream-alpha for his students. Whenever he was giving a lecture, everyone just froze, too scared of missing a word. Some even pretended to imprint on him."

"Tasteless," Will spat. The thought bothered him, making his hackles rise, although he couldn't establish what exactly it was that affected him like this.

Alana sent him a strange look.

"He never acted on it," she said gently. "He never paid any attention to anyone, at least not romantically. He considered all of us too young, even though the age difference wasn't that big."

"There are always exceptions," Will spoke before he realized he was doing it, and then the words were out, and it was too late to take them back.

Alana's face tightened, as if she was unhappy with what she'd heard.

"He is thirty-eight, Will," this time her voice was almost cold. "You are twenty-three. If Hannibal considered nine years difference excessive, then with fifteen years between you, he will see you as his ward at best. That man is painfully professional, much more than I could ever hope to get. And he's more than used to the unwanted attention from his patients. It always ends in one way — someone gets too attached, and Hannibal gives them a referral. Do you honestly want to risk losing a professional like him for something that will never become the reality?"

Alana's uncharacteristically raised voice and her palpable turmoil made Will pause. He studied her for a moment, incredulous, before asking, "Alana. Are you jealous?"

It was her turn to flush. She fidgeted, not saying anything, and Will stared at her in amazement.

"But you are the one who rejected me," he said softly. "You said you are too old for me."

"Hannibal is much older," she blurted out, and Will raised his eyebrows.
"Maybe it's my type," he said. "But it still doesn't clarify why you feel jealous. You thought I was too young and too unstable just a month ago. What changed? And did anything change at all?"

Alana tried to say something but failed to. Still red in the face, she turned and left the office in a hurry, without looking back once.

Will continued to stare after her, unable to believe what had just happened.

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The Ripper was looking at him from the darkness. Will couldn't see his face, but he knew he was smiling — a terrible, malicious smile, full of promises of pain and whispers of cruelty.

"I will find you," Will told him. "You will not stay hidden from me forever. The FBI, they are just a cover. I will not need them to deal with you. You'll die, and I'll be the one to kill you."

The Ripper tilted his head in a mocking bow.

"Will," he said, but for some reason, he sounded concerned.

"What?"

"Will," he said again, louder this time, and when Will blinked, he realized he was sitting on his bed, with the phone pressed against his ear.

"Will?"

"Hannibal?" Shaking his head to chase away the remainders of his dream, Will looked at the time. Four in the morning.

"I apologize for waking you, but Jack asked me to call you. There's been another murder. It's the Ripper again."

The sleepiness vanished, leaving only dull fury behind.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Will croaked. "What's the address?"
"It's not far from you, so you won't have troubles getting there. However, if you want, I could come and get you."

Will hesitated only briefly before Alana's words filled his head. It would make him uncomfortable.

"No," he said. "I'll call a cab. But thank you for offering."

He didn't have time for romance anyway, even if it could have been the first real romance in his life.

He was destined only for one person, and that person was the Ripper. Whenever the time for their confrontation came — and Will knew it would come, it was likely that neither of them would survive it.

Some part of him looked forward to that.
Thank you for your ongoing support, I'm so delighted and happy to see that you're enjoying the story! More assholish Jack and protective and manipulative Hannibal in this chapter. Things are progressing on both fronts, and Will's still blind to the depth of the pit he's falling to.

It seemed that in Wolf Trap, the dawn wasn't in the hurry to grace the sky with its presence. When Hannibal arrived on the scene, it was still dark, and the trees stood mournfully alongside the frozen lake, where the body of the woman was lying.

The agents talked to each other quietly and didn't pay attention to him, so Hannibal walked closer, narrowing his eyes at another unfamiliar display.

This time, he'd managed to stay in control for longer, up until the rude flowers seller stopped breathing and stared at him with eyes which were glassy yet still held the traces of that lovely terror that delighted him. After that — nothing.

Bringing the body to Wolf Trap hadn't been a part of his plan, so when Jack's phone call came, it was almost a shock. Apparently, the alpha in him had decided that bringing the dead prey to the place where his intended lived was a good idea, and if anything, Hannibal could appreciate the irony.

It seemed his plan to put the blame on Will's shoulders was progressing faster than he'd expected. Placing the body in the close proximity to his house was a brilliant move, even if the alpha part of him had done it for a vastly different reason.

The display wasn't embarrassing this time. The flowers seller had been turned into an exquisite human bouquet, with branches with blue flowers woven into the skin of her back, her legs, her arms, and into her hair.

Beautiful, Hannibal mused. Overly romantic, maybe, considering what his alpha must have had in mind, but still.

If only he could remember doing it.

"So what, we can't touch the body until the freak arrives?" someone asked loudly, and Hannibal tensed, sending a glance toward a young agent.

"That's what I said," Jack snapped. "Do you have any real questions?"

"Yeah," the agent stepped forward. "Why do we have to waste our time here freezing our asses off when Graham will just come and sputter his pretentious bullshit? He never says anything really useful, but you still invite him to every scene—"

"Are you questioning my decisions, Loffat?" Jack's voice acquired dangerous notes. "When you catch as many murderers as Graham, or as me for that matter, we will talk. Until then — shut your mouth. Do you understand?"
The agent sent him a glare but nodded.

Hannibal continued to stare at him for several more moments, cataloging his features. The simmering anger that built up inside belonged to every part of him, human and alpha, which was an interesting surprise.

It seemed like nothing in him could tolerate Will being insulted, especially by these insipid worms. He wasn't going to stand idly much longer.

Soon, the car stopped on the road, and Will tumbled out of it, his hair disheveled. He moved to them through the snow and Hannibal frowned, seeing how awkwardly he was moving.

Was he hurt?

Then he blinked, realizing that Will was in something that looked more like pajamas than clothes appropriate for a cold winter day outside.

"Christ," Jack groaned, and several agents snickered. When Will approached them, he was shivering, rubbing his shoulders absentmindedly, and despite everyone's reaction, he seemed not to notice — his focus lied solely on the body.

"Will," Jack said through gritted teeth, "what are you wearing?"

Will looked at him in obvious confusion, then looked at himself. A soft gasp left his lips and he wrapped his hands around himself even tighter, obviously embarrassed.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I wanted to get here as soon as possible."

"And yet you still arrived last! Even though you live just several miles away! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Will shifted uncomfortably, trying not to look at Jack. His eyes finally fell on Hannibal and he paled.

The sadness that was always present about him deepened, burning Hannibal's nose with acidic smell. A wave of protectiveness that welled up within him in response was partly alpha's and partly his human self's, but he didn't bother to stop and think about it.

Taking off his coat, Hannibal stepped to Will and wrapped him up in it, ignoring the surprised glances he could feel thrown at him.

"What?.." Will's paleness rapidly changed to a blush. "No, you don't have to—"

"Quiet." Hannibal finished buttoning up the coat and moved back to make sure everything was in order.

"You'll be cold."

"I'll be warmer than you. Please, proceed," Hannibal gestured at the body, standing in a way that hid Jack and the rest of people from Will's view.

Will watched him intently for a moment and then gave him a smile so genuine that Hannibal's breath caught involuntarily.

"Thank you," Will said. Behind them, Jack cleared his throat loudly, and fortunately, it broke the
magical web between them. Will turned to the body and knelt near it, his hand hovering over blue flowers.

Everyone stood in silence as Will stood up again, as he moved backward, whispering something so quietly that even Hannibal couldn't hear it despite standing closest to him.

Minutes passed, and only when Will turned to face others, Jack approached him.

"Well?" he asked, the irritation still heavy in his voice.

"It is a gift," Will glanced at Hannibal as if to make sure he was listening. "Another gift to the omega he's chosen. I don't know what flowers these are, but I think their color has meaning."

"You think? Or you are sure?"

"I think I'm sure," Will looked at the body again. "It was meant to be a gesture. Blue... it may be the color of the omega's eyes."

Hannibal repeated the words in his mind, unable to keep himself from checking the blueness of Will's eyes. Did such sickly sweet part of him even exist? Picking the color of the flowers by this method in an attempt to be romantic?

It wasn't him at all.

"It's not him at all," Will echoed, making Hannibal temporarily freeze. "It was instinctual. He wasn't in control. He was..." Will's eyes suddenly flew wide open. "Oh," he breathed out. "The Ripper has imprinted on someone. That's what's happening. He's imprinted, and it's confusing him, because he never saw it coming."

No one looked at him, and Hannibal appreciated it, for he was still frozen in disbelief.

Fascinating, his mind whispered.

Dangerous, his brain warned.

"That's it? He's imprinted, that's all you can tell me?"

Will took a tiny step back, and Hannibal's focus went back to Jack, who was almost vibrating with frustration.

"It's a lot," Will said. "If he's imprinted, it changes things. It means there is an omega out there who is going to imprint on him in return. Imprinting happens rarely, so we can..."

"We can nothing!" Jack interrupted him forcefully. "It's private information, Will, people don't go to register the fact of their imprinting. And no one in their right mind would come to us willingly when they know we might consider their new-found mate to be the Chesapeake Ripper!"

"It's better than nothing!"

"It is nothing!" Jack bellowed, making Will shiver despite Hannibal's warm coat on him. "Can you even imagine who the hell the Ripper's chosen partner must be? If he fits with the Ripper, then he's a psycho, and we will get two crazy murderers in the next few months!"

"But—"

"Can you tell me something useful? Why did he leave the body here, so close to your house? Does
he know about you?"

"No! It must be a coincidence, he loves leaving his creations in the fores—"

"It's not a creation, it's a corpse, Will! And if you can't do anything to actually help, then maybe you shouldn't keep coming back here."

Will stared at him as if he'd been hit, and Hannibal stepped closer, tension rising in him again.

"I work well enough," Will said, but his voice began to tremble. "I try with him, Jack, I try, but he just—"

"You don't try enough! Look at yourself — you've arrived at the crime scene in your pajamas, for Christ's sake, you arrived the last despite receiving a call from Doctor Lecter in time, making my people wait for you in the cold, and as usual when it comes to the Ripper, you gave me nothing, no ground to stand on! I wanted to give you last chance, I really did, but you've just blown it. From this moment, consider yourself suspended."

"You can't do that!" Will shouted.

"Don't you dare tell me what I can or can't do. I should have listened to Kade — children have no place in the FBI, and as long as you remain so sickeningly unprofessional, I don't want to see your face here!"

Before Hannibal could realize what was happening, Will turned and threw himself into his arms, pressing to his chest with a distressed omegian sound. Hannibal automatically wrapped his hands around him, and to his shock, a loud, threatening snarl escaped his throat as he stared at Jack.

Jack's eyes grew round. His eyebrows rose, and rose, and rose, and when Hannibal continued to look at him, still clutching Will tightly, Jack cleared his throat and finally glanced away.

Hannibal knew a thousand questions awaited for him now, after this uncharacteristic display, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He was darkly satisfied with being the one who Will had turned to for comfort, the first one to be there for him.

It was something both of his sides agreed with.

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No one objected to Hannibal driving Will back home, not even Will himself. After his breakdown, he sat in the car silently, just staring at the forest from the window. Only when Hannibal parked near his house, Will turned to him, his face tired.

"I feel like I should apologize," he said dully. "We've practically just met, and I keep dragging you into my drama."

"I don't mind it. I'd say I got there by myself," Hannibal allowed a small smile to turn the corners of his lips up. "The way Jack behaves with you is abhorrent. It paints him in a rather negative
"I don't want to talk about it," Will cut him off and left the car, slamming the door after himself.

Hannibal sat in the driver's seat for a moment, trying to understand whether rudeness seemed more tolerable when it came from Will. Annoyance and strange fondness were battling for dominance, and the plan was formed before he could allow himself the time to change it.

"Will," he said, opening the door. His young and clueless omega looked at him grimly, and Hannibal had to fight the impulse to straighten his suit, or tie, or hair — anything to have Will look at him the way he had just one hour ago.

His silence must have stretched for too long, because Will started to frown.

"What... The coat." He shook his head. "Of course. Thank you for giving it to me."

"Not a problem," Hannibal walked to him slowly, and when the coat brushed against his fingers, he broke into an exaggerated coughing fit.

Will's blue eyes widened, and Hannibal barely hid the smug smirk.

"You are cold!" Will exclaimed in dismay. "Come in, I'll make you tea."

"That is not necessary. I can see that my company is unwelcome at the moment."

Guilt and remorse that filled Will's expression were like a soothing balm on his injured pride.

"I'm sorry, it's not... it's not unwelcome. I just feel..."

"You don't have to explain," Hannibal put on his coat, shivering as if he was freezing, knowing how profoundly his rejection of the offered comfort would affect Will's omegian side.

Without saying another word, he walked back to the car, and then deliberately hesitated.

"Although..." he began. "If you don't mind, I'd love to invite you for dinner tonight. You need distraction, and I would really appreciate some company."

Will looked unsure, but in the end he nodded, just like Hannibal had predicted.

"Okay," he said. "I'll come around seven, if that's all right with you."

"It is," Hannibal agreed, and let his gaze linger. "Until then."

***

When Will arrived, Hannibal immediately noticed a small brown package in his hand. He raised an eyebrow inquiringly, and Will fidgeted, refusing to look at him.

"Here," he blurted, pushing the package in Hannibal's hand. "It's herbs that will prevent the cold light."
from developing."

"Herbs," Hannibal repeated.

"Yes," Will risked glancing at him and then looked away quickly. "I collect them myself in spring and summer, sometimes in autumn. They are effective. If you want, I can make you tea with them."

Hannibal said nothing, still regarding the package. A strange feeling was spreading in his chest, warm and unfamiliar, and for once, it had nothing to do with instincts.

"I brought it to thank you," Will added, sounding worried. "It's nothing personal, but I really appreciated your help today. I don't know what would have happened if I didn't have it."

"Will..." Hannibal hesitated, strangely unsure. "Thank you," was all he said in the end. "Please, come in. I'll show you the kitchen and you'll make the tea for both of us."

Will nodded and started taking off his jacket. Hannibal stopped him, carefully lifting it off his shoulders by himself.

"It's not warm enough," he said in disapproval. What a tasteless, useless thing. "You need thicker coats in winter, or you'll be the one who gets sick."

"I don't really have other things," Will smiled at him. "Believe it or not, my salary is not that generous, considering I'm not working officially. I can barely pay for my house, and I don't feel that cold in the winter anyway."

"This is unacceptable," Hannibal insisted. Regardless of the plans he had, he wasn't going to let someone who was supposed to be his walk like this, especially in winter. "We'll have to buy something else as soon as possible."

Will stopped, his shoulders stiffened.

"This would be highly unprofessional, Doctor," he said, quiet but venomous. "Unmated alphas don't buy things for unmated omegas when they are not engaged in courtship. And I'd hate to make you uncomfortable."

Hannibal nearly growled at him. Such rudeness.

How could this person be suited for him? They were extremely different. Will had a beautiful mind, but what value did it offer Hannibal when what he reveled in, Will rejected?

Despite seeing his kitchen for the first time, Will quickly figured out where the kettle was and how to use it. He grabbed two cups without asking, probably unable to even imagine their cost, and started to fuss over them, adding some of the herbs there and placing other bits in a separate vessel.

He looked strangely at home and strangely confident, and Hannibal couldn't take his eyes off him, quietly fascinated.

Jack Crawford was wrong. Will could be a good omega — he simply didn't have an opportunity to develop into one, burdened by his inability to let the Chesapeake Ripper fade from his memory.

And now he never would.
The dinner carried the same relaxed domestic atmosphere as Hannibal had felt when watching Will in his kitchen. He'd prepared more exquisite dishes this time, and Will's ineloquent but genuine praise made his blood sing.

"I wanted to bring wine, too," Will said. They had already finished their tea, and only a foresty smell still reminded of it. "I even went to the shop, but then realized that whatever I bought would probably be wrong for the meal you prepare."

"I do select special kinds for every meal," Hannibal agreed. "The tea was wonderful, though. I've never tasted this particular combination of herbs before."

Will looked shy but pleased at the compliment. Then his face suddenly darkened, and Hannibal frowned.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just remembered an encounter I had in that shop. With one of Jack's agents," Will grimaced as if he'd tasted something sour.

"Which one is that?"

"Ralph Loffat. He always disliked me, but to meet him today of all days, after that disaster in the morning..." Sighing, Will pushed his plate away, his piece of multi-layered pomegranate cake left half-eaten. Hannibal stared at it for a moment, displeased, and then forced himself to look up.

Will didn't notice, obviously lost in thoughts. The fact that he chose to share them so freely, and with him, was something Hannibal hadn't expected, and thus appreciated all the more.

"He was going to some party in the neighborhood," Will continued, sounding detached. "Accused me of stalking him, even though he was the one who entered the shop after me."

"I've heard some of his remarks today," Hannibal noted casually. "Agent Loffat isn't the friendliest person, is he?"

"Rude," Will hissed, his eyes blazing with something dark suddenly. "I know what he says. What they all say about me. They can think what they want, it won't change the balance between us. I'll still be telling the truth, and they will still be mediocre and bland and blind."

There was a pause. Hannibal put down his fork carefully, wondering whose anger Will was channeling. His own? Or Hannibal's? Because he did feel simmering fury — had been feeling it from the morning, after hearing the insulting remarks of Loffat for himself.

If this anger belonged to him, then Will truly felt the Ripper in a strikingly strong way.

He felt him, even though he hadn't imprinted on him yet.

Why? The majority of the couples went through imprinting in the first three days, sometimes in the course of a week. Yet much more time had passed, and Will still hadn't experienced it. If he had, he wouldn't have been able to hide it, Hannibal was sure. It was difficult even for him at time, and Will was much, much weaker — not to mention an omega, which made it practically impossible for him to hide his emotions.

It bothered Hannibal.

And with every day, it bothered him more and more.
"What?" Will asked, pulling him back to the surface. "Too aggressive of me, Doctor Lecter? Too unomega?"

"Not in the slightest," Hannibal retorted, his voice calm, and he saw how Will palpably calmed in response to it. "In the past, omegas were considered fierce and ferocious creatures. If someone threatened them or their families, they were known to act more violently than even alphas. So if anything, whatever aggression you're experiencing makes you even more of omega."

Will smiled, then frowned, then smiled again, as if unsure of what to feel.

"Interesting," he said finally. "It's not what Alana usually says."

"Doctor Bloom," Hannibal nodded, though the tension coiled in him as a snake at the mention. "Jack said that you are acquainted. Was she your psychiatrist?"

"She tried," Will smiled a little sadly. "I made her attempts futile, though. I'm really bad at being a patient."

"There is no such thing as being a bad patient," Hannibal uttered. Rude, unpleasant patients — yes, but bad? What had actually transpired between Will and Alana for the therapy to fail?

"Well, I was."

"Did Alana say that?"

"No, of course not. She's too polite for that," Will sighed self-depreciatingly. "She didn't want Jack to let me work at all, but unlike Jack, she was only concerned about my well-being, not my level of professionalism."

"You like her," Hannibal noted, his tone calm, but the cold, deadly undercurrent beneath it was unmistakable.

He wondered if Will could feel it.

"I do," Will looked thoughtful for a moment. "Alana is wonderful. And she was the only person on my side. Until I met you."

Hannibal blinked, taken aback by the soft admission, taken aback even more by the way it affected him.

More warmth seeping through his veins.

Will's trust was an addictive thing. Addictive, and dangerous in its addictiveness, considering the inevitable fact that it was going to be broken sooner or later.

Sooner rather than later.

As always, his silence discouraged Will and made him visibly deflate.

"Sorry," he murmured, looking somewhere at his shoulder. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"But you are right, of course," Hannibal stood up and approached him slowly, seeing how Will's eyes widened. "I am on your side. And there is nothing you could do to make me uncomfortable."

Hannibal offered his hand, and when Will just stared at it, he asked, "May I?"
"You... what, you want to dance?" Will chuckled, but the sound was nervous. "With me? Now?"

"Please," Hannibal made sure to keep his voice quiet yet persistent at the same time.

Will hesitated for one more moment before accepting his hand.

The first real touch was electrifying, and they both shivered from the contact. Squeezing thin fingers in his hand, Hannibal led them both to the center of the room, closer to the record that had been playing quietly throughout the dinner. The music could be heard more distinctly here, and for some reason, Will seemed unnerved by this, throwing anxious glances around the room and at Hannibal.

"Dancing," he said, whispered. "Is it a part of the therapy as well?"

"It is what you want it to be." Hannibal carefully touched Will's shoulders and then lowered his touch, wrapped his hands around his waist loosely.

This moment of intimacy he had planned was having an unplanned impact on him. Will's smell seemed stronger in such close proximity, more intoxicating, and unlike in the forest, when pain and misery had clouded it, there was nothing bitter about it now. Involuntarily, Hannibal closed his eyes, breathing it in deeply, uncaring of how obvious his action was.

Will sighed, and when Hannibal's grip around him tightened, the last bits of frozen insecurity melted in him. He hugged Hannibal by his neck, nuzzling against his throat, making small shivers travel down his spine.

This possessive mutual scenting definitely hadn't been a part of the plan. But now, after having him so close, Hannibal wasn't sure he could stop. He wasn't sure he even wanted to.

He pressed Will even more tightly to his body and moved to the music slowly, wondering why such familiar movements felt so different now. He had been invited to numerous receptions where dancing was a natural part of the programme, and he danced with many people — betas, omegas, even alphas.

Now, though. Now was something else entirely.

Will moved in a perfect sync with him without looking up, his nose still pressed to the skin of Hannibal's throat. The desire curled between them, curled in the sleepy curves of Hannibal's mind, making his body tremble with the longing that was completely foreign to him.

At some point, Will finally pulled back to look at him, searching his eyes, and Hannibal was too lost in the sensations to project what needed to be projected. Whatever Will found in his gaze was enough, though, since he placed his head on Hannibal's chest again, his floral scent flourishing in something that could only be happiness.

Hannibal closed his eyes against his will.

They kept dancing.
He insisted on driving Will back home, and if his silence was too cold, Will was too tired to notice.

This wouldn't do. Whatever had possessed him to start this disastrous dance tonight, to hold this omega like he was something endlessly precious, to be unwilling to let go of him — it needed to be squashed. Immediately.

Hannibal checked the camera on the petrol station they were passing, then looked at the time.

Just according to the timetable.

Fifteen more minutes — and Will was already in his house, seeing him off with quiet thanks and with a look too complicated for Hannibal to decipher under these circumstances.

He was rapidly losing control of his own game. The instincts that had gripped him from the beginning were already barely tolerable, and now that they began to poison every other part of him, it was time to put a stop to this madness.

Will had gullibly mentioned the name of the shop where he had encountered Loffat, so Hannibal drove there. It was already late, the streets empty, so he inspected the area and stopped his attention at one of the houses where all the windows were still lit up.

A party in the neighborhood.

Chances were that it was still blooming.

Chances were that Loffat was still there, and that he could decide to go home at any moment.

Hannibal spent almost an hour in waiting, watching the house, imagining the unpleasant face of the rude agent and how well it would look severed from the body. He was considering his options when the door suddenly opened and drunk Loffat stumbled outside, muttering something under his breath. Another man followed him, trying to tell him something, but Loffat just waved his hand and moved to the golden colored car parked nearby.

Driving when drunk.

Another mortal offence. Even though rudeness to Will was already a crime worth punishing. "No, not to him," Hannibal corrected himself silently. General rudeness. Not to Will specifically.

He followed Loffat to the building four streets away, put on his gloves, and left the car noiselessly, waiting for the man to walk to the door.

Then he attacked, fast and brutal, smashing Loffat's head against the hard surface once, twice, thrice. The body went limp in his arms, so Hannibal snatched the keys from Loffat's pocket and quickly moved him to his tacky golden car.

It was time for them to go for a ride.
Hi - thank you all so very much for your amazing support, it's a source of constant happiness to me! Some steps forward & some steps back in this chapter, plus a somewhat violent beginning. More progress is coming soon :)}

This time, Hannibal stayed in control of himself for the entire time.

He waited until his catch regained consciousness before breaking its arms, mildly curious about the fact that its scent of horror and disbelief was currently stronger than that of pain.

"What are you doing!" Loffat shouted, trembling. "Are you crazy? Is it because of Graham? I didn't mean anything by it, okay, I was just pissed!"

The legs were next, and it did make Loffat wail, jerking helplessly and trying to crawl away.

"Fuck you," the hiss reminded Hannibal of some animal, similar to what Loffat was. "Freak-lover. You think you can get away with it? You think Crawford won't come looking?"

"Come to me?" Hannibal raised his eyebrows in amusement. "I sincerely doubt it."

"Everyone saw how you protected the freak! Lent him your coat, like some fucking old-fashioned, brainless alpha. Nearly challenged Crawford when he insulted him. You'll be the first suspect, asshole!"

"Not when you will turn up as the victim of the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal checked his tools and focused on Loffat again.

He saw the moment when the realization came. Loffat's eyes widened, the face paled, twisted in the mask of hopeless resignation.

And then the screams began.

Later, when Hannibal was standing near the body together with Jack and other FBI agents, he wondered about it.

He'd lost control two times before, but not during the murder of Loffat. Why?

The answer was obvious, yet Hannibal wasn't sure he liked it, or even if he was ready to accept it.

His alpha side took over when it sharply conflicted with the human part of his mind. If it hadn't happened now, then only because both sides of him were in agreement. Loffat deserved death — not because it was convenient, but because the scorn this creature had shown Will was unacceptable.

Nobody said it couldn't be both, though.
"It's terrible," one of the agents choked, looking away from the body. "Why did it have to happen to him — we've been at the similar crime scene just yesterday."

"It's not far from Graham's house again," Jack said. He sounded subdued, but his eyes were sharp.

"Far enough," Hannibal noted. "Or do you believe Will might be targeted?"

"Something like that," Jack glanced at the body, the expression on his face inscrutable. "Doctor, after they finish, can we go to your office? I'd like to talk privately."

"Of course," Hannibal inclined his head, then pretended to hesitate. "Are you going to call Will? If it's the Ripper again..."

"He's suspended, I'm not going to change my decision."

"He deserves to know that his colleague has been killed."

"And he will. I'll tell him myself. Later."

They spent more than an hour there, with Hannibal occasionally turning to admire his work, but mostly just watching Jack.

He had been asked to help with the investigation on Will's behalf. Now that Will was suspended, Hannibal had only vague ideas about why Jack had chosen to call him still. What was his purpose supposed to be now?

He didn't have to wonder for long. They left the scene after fifteen more minutes, and as soon as he opened the doors to his office, Jack said, "You probably want to know why I called you."

"This thought crossed my mind, yes."

"I have serious concerns about Will," Jack went to the window and stopped — avoiding looking at him, Hannibal noticed. "You talked to him. How stable do you think he is? Mentally, psychologically?"

"He is emotional and his nervous system is fragile, yet he is perfectly sane. Why?"

"Look, Doctor," clearly deciding something, Jack turned back to him. "I'll be frank — that display between the two of you worried me. I was aware of Will's interest in you, but until yesterday I thought it wasn't reciprocated."

"There is nothing romantic about it," Hannibal replied, and the lie tasted bitter on his tongue. "I feel protective of Will — he is an omega in a psychologically difficult situation. I feel compelled to help him."

"That's the thing, Will looks at it differently. Did you know that he's in love with Alana Bloom?"

Hannibal froze for a moment, but managed to school his expression quickly.

"No," he said shortly. "I did not know that."

He had his suspicions, of course. The way Will spoke about her, the personal history Jack had mentioned during their first meeting...

He didn't like it.
He didn't like it at all. The displeasure that coiled in his chest was numbing, but the numbness was rapidly melting into anger, biting and cruel.

Alana, then.

They'd see about that.

"He's been in love with her for months," Jack went on, oblivious to the monster awakening right in front of him. "I've been informed that he still pursues her, so when he started to demonstrate interest in you, I was taken aback. At first I thought Will's just attracted to psychiatrists, to people who have power to soothe his mind or something. But now... I believe there might be more malicious reasons for his interest."

"Malicious," Hannibal echoed. His skin was still crawling, the anger still hissing in veins, but he sounded calm, almost genuine. "Malicious how?"

"The Ripper disappeared for months. Then the body of that beta from forest appears, and Will tries to claim the Ripper's come back even with no evidence supporting it."

"That's why you contacted me," Hannibal nodded. "You thought Will might be so desperate that he'd try to see the Ripper everywhere."

"What if he went further? What if in his obsession with the Ripper, he actually became him?"

The pause was necessary, so Hannibal said nothing for a while. Jack arrived at the desired conclusion sooner than he'd expected, but with this latest revelation about Will...

It was for the better.

"Are you implying Will is responsible for this series of murders?" he asked slowly.

"I really, really don't want to think about that, but he's leaving me with no choice." Jack sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Will has been acting strange. Richard Thompson, the first victim of this cycle, was positioned very differently from the past victims of the Ripper. I've pointed it out, and Will tried to explain it by the murder being personal. The body of Bethany Bishop, the flowers seller, was done better, but it was found near his house. Will arrived last. In pajamas. Because he's that careless, or because his coat was soaked in blood?"

"Jack, that's too far-fetched," Hannibal tried half-heartedly. "Surely Will isn't capable of—"

"To be honest, I have no idea what he is capable of. Third victim, Ralph Loffat, our agent. He disliked Will, and Will knew that. They had conflicts before. I don't believe in coincidences, Hannibal, and too many things point in Will's direction. Then his sudden interest and trust in you, despite his feelings for Alana. He realized I wanted to see you as a part of my team, and he could have decided to play on it, to play on your instincts. Separately, these things wouldn't stand out, but as it is, I don't know what to think. That's why I asked you to come today. I need your input. Seeing all these bodies, including agent Loffat, do you think Will could have done it? Or have I gone crazy by trying to put the blame on the shoulders of a kid who's already had it rough?"

Hannibal remained silent for a while, weighting his options.

Things were progressing more rapidly than he'd planned. With this pace, Will would find himself in prison in several weeks. Should he go on now and risk Jack Crawford ruining the trust Will had shown him, or should he wait?
Then he thought about Alana and Will's infatuation with her, and his lips thinned.

No need to wait. Having Will in a cell would be more beneficial on all accounts.

"I wasn't sure if I should tell you," Hannibal began. "I had dinner with Will yesterday evening. He admitted to me that he had a confrontation with agent Loffat minutes before arriving at my house."

"What?" Jack tensed and stepped closer. "Will met with Loffat again, later in the evening?"

"Yes," Hannibal stood up, imitating the acceptable amount of agitation. "They ran into each other in a shop. Will seemed angry when he was telling me this. However, he calmed down soon, we had dinner. Then I drove him home."

"What time was it?"

"We were in Wolf Trap around eleven. When was agent Loffat murdered?"

"Around one in the morning."

The silence that hung between them was grim. Hannibal gave Jack time to realize that Will could have easily managed to kill Loffat in this period before clearing his throat.

"Jack, I understand I might be overstepping my boundaries," he said apologetically, "but may I ask you for the file on Will's father? I would like to see it."

Jack stared at him in shock.

"I'll send it to you," he said slowly. "Doctor, are you implying what I think you are implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. Will was just a child then, but I would still like to learn the details of that case. It might help me better understand him."

Jack nodded, but the wheels were clearly turning in his head.

It was all Hannibal could have asked for.

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He had a party planned for the next day. Canceling it now would have been appallingly rude, so Hannibal began preparing the ingredients, trying to ignore his unusual reluctance to do so.

He loved cooking for his guests, especially when the meat was so fresh, but his thoughts kept going back to Will, distracting him and not letting him focus.

If Jack told him about Hannibal's words, any connection they might have had would be ruined. Hannibal had chosen this risk willingly for the chance to reinforce Jack's doubts, but now his own doubts raised their small, ugly heads, and he despised himself for it.
When his doorbell rang, he frowned. There were hours before the planned arrival of guests, so who could possibly drop by uninvited?

Hannibal realized who it was even before he approached. The scent reached him immediately, and he allowed himself a second of blissful enjoyment before opening the door.

"Will," he said, and the joy he recognized in his own voice was startling. "Would you like to—"

Will stormed into the house without saying anything, which did nothing to diminish the ridiculous happiness that kept dancing in Hannibal's blood.

He followed Will, grimacing only slightly when a worn out jacket got thrown onto the small armchair in the hall.

"I think Jack suspects me of killing Loffat," Will blurted out, turning to face him. "He was found dead, targeted by the Ripper. But because we had a conflict, Jack seems to believe it's my fault."

"It is a strange coincidence that the Ripper would target someone this close to you," Hannibal said slowly, but when Will's face fell, he hastened to add, "Though there might be other explanation. First — are you, yourself, sure that agent Loffat was murdered by the Ripper?"

"Yeah," Will started circling the room. "Jack showed me the photos. Loffat had nails hammered into his eyes and ears, his mouth was sewed shut, all bones in his body broken. Then the way he was placed... It's him. The Ripper. He thought Loffat was nothing, a blind, deaf non-entity that didn't deserve to live, to even crawl. But Jack suspects me. He didn't say it directly, but I knew that's what he meant. You told him, didn't you?" The sudden change in Will's tone nearly made Hannibal wince. "He came to you with this, and you told him Loffat and I had a fight."

"I'm sorry, Will. I did tell Jack, but I don't believe you had anything to do with it." Telling the truth was surprisingly easy. Hannibal couldn't know what Will had read in his words, but his shoulders finally relaxed, and the darkness left his eyes.

"I guess I can't really blame Jack," Will said forlornly. "Something strange is going on. The body placed almost near my house could be a coincidence, but Loffat? It was done on purpose. I wish I could have seen the crime scene, I'd understand it better."

"Do you have any theories?" Hannibal asked curiously. Will looked at him and suddenly smiled, and it took Hannibal a moment to understand why.

He had crossed the distance between them by walking in slow circles around Will, getting closer and closer to him. It was typical courting behavior, and the fact that he'd engaged in it so mindlessly spoke volumes.

Will looked delighted, though. He wouldn't stop smiling, and his voice sounded cheerful even as he said, "I think the Ripper has learned about me and started to perceive me as a possible threat. It didn't happen until Loffat — I still think the flower seller's body was put not far from my house by accident. But between these two murders, something happened. The Ripper found out about me."

"And about your conflict with Loffat?" Hannibal let the dubious notes enter his voice, and Will shook his head.

"Maybe he knows Loffat," he said slowly. "We need to recreate his last day, the party he was supposed to visit. And I believe we should start looking for the Ripper's partner as well now."

This was unexpected. Hannibal didn't even try to mask his surprise.
"You think there are two murderers now?" he clarified, unsure whether to feel thrilled or disappointed.

Will was getting too close. He had already figured out that Ripper had imprinted on someone and was courting them. Coupled with the fact that Hannibal himself was showing all signs of courting Will, and the new realization that the Ripper had become aware of Will's existence, the noose was getting tighter. All Hannibal had to do was to make sure that Will remained oblivious until being arrested, and until the noose tightened around his own neck.

If Will thought there were two murderers now, though, then Hannibal wouldn't even have to try hard to confuse him.

"It's time for the imprinting to be mutual, don't you think?" Will looked serious again. "A lot of time has passed. And Jack is right — whoever the Ripper has imprinted on cannot be a good person. They are likely to be a murderer as well, and nothing is going to stop them from joining the Ripper in more ways than one. Hmm," Will's nose twitched. "Is something burning?"

Hannibal refused to believe it at first, but the smell was unmistakable. Infuriated, he rushed to the kitchen and stopped, willing himself to calm down. The mix of colorful vegetables on the stove turned black, way beyond the verge of being saved.

"That's a lot of food," Will's voice stated behind his back. "Are you expecting company?"

"Yes," Hannibal threw the ruined vegetables into the bin and critically assessed the fresh ones he still had left. "Some guests are coming later this evening."

"Oh! Sorry, I just barged in, I didn't even ask if you were busy. I'll be on my way."

"You aren't going anywhere," Hannibal snapped before he could stop himself.

Will's eyebrows began to rise. His dissatisfaction burned Hannibal, so he attempted to smooth his rudeness over by sending him a charming smile.

"I would like you to stay," he said, softly this time. "It'll be an honor to have you as a guest."

"I'm not even dressed right," Will protested. "And you know how I feel about people. I don't think it's a good idea."

"You are dressed just fine. And I'd appreciate your help in the kitchen — as you see, I have more dishes planned than I have time to cook them."

Will hesitated, looked at the ingredients, then at Hannibal. Finally he jerked his head.

"Fine," he said. "Where do we start?"

"Are you sure I'm chopping them right?" Will asked. Hannibal glanced at the mushrooms Will was
working with and nodded in approval.

"They have to be chopped coarsely," he explained. "The taste of porcini mushrooms is very rich and earthy, so this is the best way to serve them. How are the vegetables?"

"Starting to brown."

"Add parsley and basil, give them thirty more seconds, then season them and set them aside."

"Smells delicious," Will stared at the meat Hannibal was treating wistfully, but then focused on his own task. "What is thing I'm cooking going to be?"

"Pork and fennel sausage ragu — with mushrooms, of course."

"Are you sure you want me to cook this entire dish?"

"It's an easy dish, and you are doing well. Don't worry." Their elbows touched, and Will threw a quick glance at him.

It was the truth. To Hannibal's surprise, Will was doing much better than he'd expected — his technique could hardly be called artful, but he worked quickly and effectively. In fact, there was something about his fast, lively movements that brought life to Hannibal's pristine kitchen, and Hannibal liked it, even if he didn't fully understand why.

Soon different cuts of meat were being fried, boiled, and roasted, the pasta waited to be put in the hot water, Will was finishing the tomato sauce, and all Hannibal had to do was make the last salad.

"Where did you learn to cook like that?" Will wondered. He was beautifully flushed from the kitchen steams, his sleeves were rolled, and his relentlessness was utterly breathtaking.

Hannibal considered his question.

"I spent months watching the work of my aunt's cook," he uttered. "Eventually, I had to move out. All restaurants I tried were inadequate, so I started to cook for myself. It wasn't ideal at first, but with time, I perfected my technique."

"I can see that," Will nodded at the row of dishes ready to be served. "I was a part of your cooking process this time, yet I still can't believe you actually did all that."


"Maybe," he allowed. "I didn't expect to love cooking so much. I never do when I cook for myself."

"Well, I'm glad that I helped you change your perceptions."

"You did." For a moment, Will forgot about the sauce and just looked at him. "And not only about cooking."

The silence between them was strangely intimate, a rare instance when Hannibal found himself at the loss for words.

Sensing his confusion, Will resumed cooking.

"Did you live with your aunt, then?" he asked. He probably hoped to change the topic to a more comfortable one, but choosing anything less safe wasn't possible.
"Yes," Hannibal's words were clipped. "Since I was eight."

Will must have immediately identified his emotions because he fell silent, letting the conversation die.

Maybe it was his tactfulness, the understanding and warmth Hannibal constantly felt from him — or the loneliness that Hannibal refused to notice, but which had made a place for itself in his house a long time ago. His lips moved before he could stop himself, "My parents were murdered when I was young. My sister died the same day."

Will paused, and annoyance at himself swept over Hannibal in an instant.

He didn't need sympathy. He didn't need additional questions. What force had made his tongue loosen like that? Blaming instincts was not an option — instincts were a primitive thing, they didn't have the power to make him want to share the most important parts of himself with Will.

To Hannibal's astonishment, Will said nothing. But he raised his hand and touched Hannibal's face — slowly, uncertainly. This touch communicated more than any words ever could.

Desire, tenderness, hunger — they all came in waves. Hannibal couldn't see what his face was reflecting, but Will could, and whatever he saw there was enough to make him cross the last bit of distance between them and brush his lips against Hannibal's.

It was probably the most innocent kiss he had ever received, yet the force of the tremor that ran through his body in response was shocking. Unthinking, Hannibal slid his hands up Will's neck and cradled his face, bringing their lips back together.

The kiss lingered, exploring and soft. Will's hands delved into Hannibal's hair, destroying all neatness and order, but he never cared about anything less. For a moment, he felt content — content in a way he had not been in a very long time. His grip gained urgency, and Hannibal tilted Will's head back so he could kiss him better, pressing his tongue against the soft lips demandingly.

Will let him in, then molded himself closer to him, clenching Hannibal's hair in his fists. The weak stab of pain from this was delicious, and Hannibal almost growled, overwhelmed to the point where his control quickly began to turn into a forgotten shadow.

He had no idea how it could have ended, but the doorbell rang, and both he and Will froze.

"Is this one of your guests?" Will whispered hoarsely. His blue eyes were glazed over, and Hannibal thought he probably had the same look.

"Perhaps," he murmured. His hands were still caressing Will's face, his neck and shoulders, unable to let go.

"You should open the door," Will told him. "Go. Distract them, maybe, and I'll set the table."

"You don't know how," the amount of affection in Hannibal's voice was disturbing.

Will huffed.

"Then you go set the table, I'll meet your guest."

Hannibal leaned in to place a soft kiss on Will's eyelid, and Will laughed, a sound so carefree, so genuine that there could not be a more perfect moment for imprinting. Hannibal pushed back a
little, staring at him, but nothing happened. Will was glowing, but there was no gasp, no sudden new light in his eyes.

The doorbell rang again, and Will rubbed his cheek against Hannibal's hand, leaving his scent on it.

"You'd better hurry," he said. "Or your guest will leave."

Reluctantly, Hannibal nodded.

"Go," he said. "Charm him or her and make them wait for two minutes. I'll manage to prepare everything in that time."

"You said it yourself. Two minutes." Sending him the last teasing smile, Will disappeared from the kitchen, and Hannibal exhaled, closing his eyes for a moment.

One minute to get himself under control.

One minute to set the table.

***

For the first time in forever, the most notable thing about Hannibal's party was not his numerous meals, but an omega. Will.

His Will.

Acquaintances and colleagues — everyone tried to keep the masks of polite interest, but curious glances were being thrown, occasional whispers exchanged. The energy and joy that Will had been emanating all afternoon were gone now, and he left the table as soon as he could, hiding in a corner and pretending to look at the painting.

"Hannibal, I never expected to see the day. For you to finally become interested in omega, and a male one — I'm not sure I'm not dreaming," Evelyn Komeda looked at Will with an openly assessing gaze.

"I believe Will came to Hannibal for an advice and then agreed to stay for a party. Isn't it right, Hannibal?" Alana stared at him, and Hannibal met her eyes coldly.

A remarkable woman, Alana Bloom. His student, a one-time lover. Almost the only person who he considered a friend of some sort.

Hannibal hoped she wouldn't become an obstacle. There was no place for her in between him and Will, and he was confident that whatever infatuation with her Will might still harbor, it would shrivel and die soon enough. With or without imprinting.

"That's right," he said aloud, and smiled dangerously when Alana sighed in relief. "Persuading Will to stay wasn't easy, but you know how persuasive I can be."
Alana stiffened, her sharp mind clearly trying to understand if Hannibal meant what she thought he meant, while Evelyn narrowed her eyes at him knowingly.

"Do you know Hannibal's guest, Alana?" Donald Sutcliffe leaned toward them, barely hiding his annoyance. "It's not every day that you see someone like him attending this kind of soiree."

"Will is consulting the FBI," Alana said defensively. "He has some problems with his current case, so it's good for him to find a distraction. Even though I doubt he's actually enjoying it," she glanced in Will's direction and then moved closer to Hannibal. "This is not really his scene, you know," she whispered. "Are you sure it's a good idea to have him here? It's stressful."

"Hardly more stressful than what he is subjected to by Jack," Hannibal noted, squeezing his glass of wine hard. "I wasn't aware you know Will. You never told me about him."

"I feel protective of him, I guess," Alana hid behind the veil of her dark hair for a second. "Will is fragile. I recommended you to Jack because I thought you would understand it. I didn't think you would run mind-games on him."

"I'm not," Hannibal smiled thinly. "Will should socialize more instead of locking himself in the house in the middle of nowhere."

"Yes, I agree, but you are an unmated alpha and he is an unmated omega. All of Baltimore’s elite are here today, and they will all come to one conclusion."

"I can't control what other people choose to think, but I assure you, nothing improper is going on."

"Good," Alana stood up, looking relieved and determined. "Just make sure Will knows that."

Hannibal watched her approach Will and pull him into conversation. Will gave her a radiant smile, the one Hannibal liked to think belonged to him, and then they talked, easily and without any trace of discomfort, as if they'd known each other for ages, or in a very intimate way.

More people came to talk to him, and Hannibal paid attention to each of them. Still, his eyes kept making small, barely noticeable flickers toward Will and Alana, and his fingers kept twitching, itching to wrap themselves around Alana's slim neck.

"Don't you worry, that boy is all yours," Evelyn murmured, smirking at him indulgently. Amusement was glistening in her eyes, and Hannibal wasn't sure how to feel about it. He wasn't used to being teased in this way, on the subject like this. "He's been staring at you during the entire dinner," Evelyn added. "Especially when he thought no one was watching. He looks at you as if you hung the moon, Hannibal, so Miss Bloom is not your competition."

"Very astute, as always," Hannibal said, but the words meant nothing. Will was interested in him, but he was also interested in Alana. It was the first time he was seeing them interact, and the mutual attraction between them was palpable.

Could it be that Alana was hindering the imprinting? Or rather, Will's feelings for her? Unpleasant thought.

But the only one that made sense.

The rest of the evening passed quietly, but the anger kept burning through Hannibal, not letting him get a grip on his thoughts. He barely remembered saying good-bye to his guests, closing his door, turning and seeing Will standing near the table, with a slightly hesitant look on his face.
"I can stay to help you clean up, if you don't mind," he offered. Hannibal nodded, although it did nothing to soothe the tension inside him.

Cleaning dishes with Will, however, was strangely domestic, and despite his anger, Hannibal couldn't help but enjoy it.

"It was interesting, watching you like this, with this kind of people," Will remarked quietly. "You have a lot of friends."

"They are not my friends. Merely acquaintances," Hannibal turned off the water. "I'm glad you stayed, even if you didn't have a good time."

"You were there. It made it bearable."

Will blushed immediately after saying it, and Hannibal considered him for a moment. Then his lips stretched in a smile, and if there was a chill in his voice, Will clearly didn't notice it, "Please wait for me in the living room. I'll make us tea."

Nodding, Will left the kitchen, and Hannibal put the pot of water on the stove. He spent several moments deciding which kind of tea to pick. His hand hovered over the jar with the tea Will had brought for him, touched the glass almost tenderly, and then pushed the jar away.

He chose chamomile flowers instead, brewed them in the pot quickly, and then mixed the tea with several sleeping pills.

Will accepted the drink gratefully, and they spent some minutes in comfortable silence.

"Why do you organize dinners for people you don't even like?" Will asked.

"I don't need to like them to enjoy communication with them," Hannibal watched how Will continued to sip tea. "And cooking for others has always been my pleasure."

"Social antisocial?" Will finished his tea and curled on the sofa. "I see the attraction, I guess. They all are completely enamoured with you, but you... you were just watching them. So haughtily. Like they are insects who amuse you."

It was disturbingly accurate, and a shiver ran up his spine. Hannibal said nothing, so Will continued, "They all seemed surprised to see me there. I know they kept bothering you with it, and you smiled at them and joked, but it wasn't real. You weren't real."

"How can you tell?"

"I don't know," Will yawned, and his eyes began to close. "I feel you. Even if I don't know you yet."

A minute later Will was sleeping, and Hannibal remained in his place, staring at him. Then he approached, carefully shifted Will to a more comfortable position, and put a blanket over him. Allowing himself a second of weakness, Hannibal brushed the dark curls from the pale face and then pressed his nose to the skin of Will's neck, breathing him in.

The scent of flowers — but not the bouquet typical of omegas. Something unusual, something unique.

Hannibal inhaled again, deeply, and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate and not to lose himself in the addictive warmth and smell.
The realization came in a second.

The mint of Sarracenia. The citrus of Nepenthes. The honey of Darlingtonia Californica. Other notes, some of which were harder to recognize, but their source remained unmistakable.

Will smelled of carnivorous plants. The best and most pleasant parts of them.

His little omega smelled of deadly, predatory flowers.

The dark thrill that ran through Hannibal in a hot wave at the realization was intoxicating. He buried his nose even deeper in Will's skin, breathing and unwilling to move. Burning tension began to escalate in his blood, going straight to his brain, and when he finally stumbled away, he felt high. Drunk on the essence that was Will, sweet and dangerous.

Shaking his head to clear it, Hannibal went to his basement, to a row of freezers, and picked the pieces of the latest victims he had prepared in advance.

Then he drove to Will's house, chasing away all bothersome thoughts and wishes.

The madness might stalk him, but he knew too much about stalking himself to fall for it. He knew how to run, he knew how to delude.

His or not, Will was going to prison, and for that, Hannibal needed to plant the evidence.
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so much for your comments & kudos & bookmarks, it means so many things to me - more than I can ever say! Will's more naive view of his relationship with Hannibal in this chapter, and something that will start the chain of very important events.

When Will woke up, it was still early. The sun — whatever of it managed to get through the thick, red curtains, was barely there, but he was already feeling restless.

Hannibal's house looked like some mysterious, gothic mansion at this time of the day. It seemed immense, with long stairs that disappeared in the darkness, tall, silent ceilings, and the walls decorated with strange paintings. Will wandered around the room, staring at each, touching the ones he felt connection with carefully.

He wanted to leave some of his scent on them, in this living room, where Hannibal's stupid guests would sit, exchanging thinly veiled barbs and wallowing in their superiority. Looking at him and dismissing him, thinking he's some brainless, trophy omega Hannibal had secured for himself.

It was humiliating. Hannibal probably didn't realize how much, but it didn't matter — his intent behind the invitation did.

Will hesitated briefly, but then made a decision and quietly went upstairs. He had no idea where Hannibal could be sleeping, but the scent was leading him — strong and alluring, and somehow achingly familiar.

He found him at the first try. Hannibal's room was as elegant as every other part of the house — a combination of black, blue, and cream, with peculiar pieces of interior and more strange paintings and photos. It seemed enormous for one man, who was currently sleeping in bed with the calmest expression Will had ever seen on him.

He stood frozen for a while, in quiet admiration of him, drawn to him to the extent that was hardly believable. His thoughts were all scattered, and Will wasn't sure what he was doing as he closed the door and moved toward kitchen, as he opened the fridge and looked at what was inside.

He was sprinkling Parmesan over the top of the omelette pan when he realized that the strange impulse he'd been feeling was purely omegan.

Omegan. Something Will hadn't felt in many, many years.

He was cooking breakfast for the man that the omegan part of him believed belonged to him. It was convinced of it — convinced that Hannibal was Will's, and that making breakfast for him was a perfect chance to show how much he approved of the courtship.

Embarrassed, Will stared at the pan, but then continued to cook.

Maybe it was too forward of him. Too inappropriate. They had shared a kiss — it wasn't exactly a solid reason to cook breakfast and... what, serve it in bed?
Then again, who cared? He had denied himself for so long, why would he do it now, when he was almost sure that his interest was reciprocated?

Hannibal was courting him. Not explicitly yet, not in the way it had been done in the past, with gifts and traditional dates, but Will was thrilled with what he was getting. Hannibal was old-fashioned and controlled in his affection, so his almost unconscious courting displays made Will's heart beat faster.

On the other hand, there was still a possibility that despite attraction, Hannibal wasn't interested in him. Instincts and personal desires could be two different things.

Hannibal wasn't a young, inexperienced alpha, though. Someone like him, with his manners and his behavior, could only be in perfect control of himself, and surely if any part of him wanted to court Will, then the feelings he had were stronger than just attraction.

Will hoped for it, and the force of this hope surprised him.

He finished the omelette, made a quick salad, brewed tea and went back upstairs. As he was walking, doubts returned with new vigor, almost making him change his mind several times.

The breakfast he'd prepared was below the standards Hannibal was used to. Who said he would be happy to wake up to the omelette with salad? Did he even eat in bed?

Taking a deep breath, Will entered the bedroom, and stopped as he saw Hannibal blinking in his direction sleepily. His eyes widened when he stared at Will, and then he closed and opened them again, as if unsure whether or not he was awake.

His confusion was so charming that it somehow made Will feel more confident.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully. "I got you something."

Hannibal seemed speechless. Different emotions kept flickering on his face, changing so quickly that it was impossible to catch and identify them all. He watched how Will put the tray on his bedside table and smiled hesitantly.

"Did you cook breakfast?" he asked, his voice hoarse from sleep. "For me?"

"Yes. I don't know what you usually eat at this time, so..." Will shrugged. "It's just an omelette."

"I don't eat in bed," Hannibal told him, but the way it sounded only made Will grin.

"Maybe you should get used to it," he said. He had no idea where all this temporarily confidence was coming from, but he appreciated it, especially when he saw the intense look Hannibal sent him.

"Why didn't you bring a portion for yourself?"

"I should be going — I have to check on Winston, my dog, he doesn't like it when I leave him for a long time..."

"You will eat with me first," Hannibal decided. "Bring a second plate, and I'll take a shower. Then we can eat here, if you really insist on it."

"I really do," Will assured him.
He didn't know how he got from carrying a second plate to sharing the meal with Hannibal to being kissed by him, deeply and openly, gasping and clutching at his back. Some time after the breakfast, he had started talking about leaving again, and in response Hannibal had jerked him closer and then toppled him onto the bed, sealing his lips with a kiss. It was unexpected and sudden, and Will hadn't realized he was dying for it until he had it.

They kissed, and kissed, and kissed, until they were both breathless and dizzy. Hannibal pulled back, staring at him intently, his lips red and curled, in a smile or in a snarl — Will didn't know. He began to feel awkward very soon, still pressed to the bed by the hard body, and Hannibal was still looking at him, still without saying a word.

Anxiety stirred up, so Will tried to think of something, anything to say.

"You have parsley between your teeth," he blurted out, and immediately wanted to die of mortification.

Hannibal looked stunned. He licked his lips, shook his head, and when Will started to wonder if he had ruined things after all, Hannibal pressed his face to his shoulder and laughed. It reminded Will of his own laughter — rusty and strange from disuse. At the same time, the sound was so honest and open that Will smiled softly at it, relieved that his stupid remark hadn't spoiled anything — on the contrary, even rewarded him with such beautiful, rare gift.

He closed his eyes again, relaxed, and let Hannibal laugh.

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Back at home, Will looked at the files on the Ripper he had left, feeling guilty for having allowed himself to forget about it even for a moment.

It was disturbing — the way he so easily focused on Hannibal and forgot all about the meaning of his life. Especially now, when the Ripper had learned about him.

Shivering, Will glanced at the windows, suddenly sure that someone was standing there, staring at him.

There was no one, yet the uncertainty remained.

Loffat could be killed only for two reasons. Either the Ripper had found him rude — and God knew, Loffat had been rude... or he was trying to communicate something to Will personally. A warning? Don't look for me, because I know you and I have the power to set you up? A mockery — I can kill anyone, including FBI agents? I can do what you may only dream of doing, remove your enemies while you are too weak and pathetic to deal with them yourself?

Will stroked the photo of the flowers seller's body absentmindedly, admiring and disgusted simultaneously.

What was the Ripper doing now? What was he thinking about?
Will took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and felt how every cell of him reached out to the Ripper.

He found him almost immediately. Found the familiar electric connection, the hissing darkness that threatened to engulf him. Then the emotions came. Confusion, Longing, Determination. Vague murderous impulses that were mostly buried under the blanket of those three dominant feelings.

The Ripper was still concerned about his imprinting. He wasn't sure what to do about his partner, and his mind kept focusing on it, not letting Will catch anything important that would help with the actual investigation.

The creepy feeling returned, warning him that someone was watching him, and when Will turned to the window again, his heart almost stopped when he saw a silhouette there. In the next moment, he recognized Jack in it, but the relief didn't come. Tensing even more, Will slowly approached and unlocked the door, letting the trouble in.

"Working?" Jack asked, seeing the open files, and without waiting for his answer, added, "Good. I brought you some more work."

Anxiety spiraled up full force.

"Did the Ripper kill again?" Will breathed out, and Jack sent him a strange look.

"No," he said. "I brought you something new. You are still suspended from the Ripper's case, so focus on this for now."

"Jack..."

"Look, Will," Jack put his arm on Will's shoulder in a seemingly comforting gesture, and Will had to force himself to breathe steadily to subdue the rising panic. "I may be too harsh with you at times, but you understand it's for the greater good. You need some time away from the Ripper and I brought a perfect distraction for you."

"So you are not accusing me of Loffat's murder any longer?" it was almost impossible to hide the anger and bitterness in his voice. A muscle twitched in Jack's jaw, but when he spoke, he sounded uncharacteristically pleasant.

"There is still investigation and we still check all options. Loffat was a friend of many agents in the Bureau, they are all heartbroken and seek justice. If anyone can understand it, it's you. After all, you lost your father in similar circumstances."

Will narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out the implication.

"Yes," he said finally. "My father was killed by the Ripper just like Loffat."

"And you were heartbroken. Weren't you?"

"Of course I was!" This time he didn't even attempt to hide his agitation. "You know this already, why are you asking?"

"Just wondering," Jack shrugged, and Will saw clearer than ever how fake his relaxed posture was. "Your father was killed at night, you called the police in the morning. Why?"

"What... what are you saying?" Will backed away. The walls began to close on him, and his safe home suddenly turned into a suffocating pit with no exits. "What are you saying, Jack?" Hysteria
and tears came too close to the surface, and fighting them was futile.

"Hey, hey, calm down," Jack moved to touch him again, and Will recoiled. "Let's talk about this new murderer instead, okay?"

"If you imply that I hated my father and deliberately aided the Ripper in killing him, then you can get out of my house right now."

"Will, I'm not implying anything. I just had a discussion with Doctor Lecter and some of things he said made me—"

"Don't you dare say a word to me about Hannibal," Will hissed. "You can try to alienate me from him all you want, but it won't result in anything."

"Will," Jack's face grew stern. "I hoped you realized that the relationship between the two of you could only ever be professional. Alana..."

"Alana means nothing to me!"

Will regretted his words as soon as they slipped out.

He didn't plan for it to sound like that, so viciously and angry... but he hated it. He hated that Jack tried to undermine what he and Hannibal started to build, that he thought Will was so despicable that no one would want to court him. He hated hearing those terrible words about his father. He hated being reminded of Alana, as if his feelings for her were more than half-hearted crush.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he obviously catalogued his words, but thankfully, his next phrase was less heated.

"Let's just forget about it for a minute, okay? That's not why I came here today."

"Never say anything like that to me again," Will warned. He hadn't ever stood up to Jack like this before, but he felt strong and enraged enough to do it now.

Jack nodded, though Will noted how he didn't confirm anything verbally. Equally silent, he watched how Jack pulled more files out and offered them to him.

"Seven victims between August and December. All of them strangled, mutilated after death, and put into music cases."

"Which instruments?"

"Different. Violin, cello, guitar. The vocal chords are tempered with, sometimes taken from the body. Think about it, will you?"

Will did.

He thought about it this day, and during a part of the next one, going back to the files again and again, analyzing photos and available information. He had some ideas — too many of them, in fact, and his profile kept gaining clarity.

Realizing he wanted, needed, to talk to Hannibal, Will didn't waste time on deliberation. He was too excited to wait, so he went straight to his office and barged in without knocking, the impatient words rolling on his tongue.

Only when Hannibal and a short, portly man in the patient-chair stared at him, Will figured that his
plan probably had a flaw. Several of them.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to intrude, I'll come back later."

"Will," to Will's surprise, Hannibal seemed overjoyed to see him despite the circumstances. "Please, wait for me in the waiting room. Fifteen minutes."

"I—" Will fell silent, seeing the glare Hannibal's patient was sending him. "Okay," he said and closed the door. There, feeling hot from embarrassment, he sat on the sofa and shut his eyes with a quiet groan.

Awful. How could he humiliate himself like that? Why couldn't he ever be normal? First breaking into Hannibal's bedroom like that, then barging into his office as if he owned it.

There was a reason why most people disliked him. He forgot all about normalcy and acceptable behavior at times, crossed boundaries that people didn't usually cross.

Hannibal didn't seem to mind, though. Even now, remembering how he looked at him, Will felt a pleasant rush of warmth wash over his body.

Still. Regardless of how Hannibal viewed him, it was rude. The Chesapeake Ripper would have killed him for it.

Disturbed by the thought, Will stood up and started walking in circles, willing the time to pass more quickly.

The other door opened suddenly, and Alana stepped in. She froze at the sight of Will, and her eyes grew round.

"Will!" she exclaimed. "What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for Hannibal," Will regretted that he hadn't taken his glasses. He'd been using them less and less, and very rarely for conversations with Alana, but now... things were awkward. And he felt terrible for saying what he had to Jack, even if Alana couldn't know about it.

"Of course," she pursed her lips. "Another consultation?"

Saying that it was none of her business would have been a mistake, yet the words kept twirling on the tip of Will's tongue, begging to be spoken.

"Something like that," he said, forcing himself to smile.

He wasn't sure where the hostility he was feeling was coming from. When he'd stopped perceiving Alana as a possible partner and started to view her as a threat to his relationship with Hannibal.

"And you?" he asked to fill the pause. Alana immediately looked flustered.

"I wanted to speak to him about something. Something personal."

"Oh," Will narrowed his eyes. Alana uncharacteristically fidgeted under his gaze, and then touched his shoulder casually.

"I'll visit Hannibal later," she said. "Just tell him I was here."

"Sure," Will watched her go, unsure of what to think about it, but glad that she was gone. He didn't want to share his time with Hannibal — even if technically, it wasn't really his time.
When he finally entered the office, he was bursting with impatience. Hannibal was watching him with soft eyes, a mysterious smile playing on his lips, and it widened when Will wrinkled his nose at the patient-chair in distaste.

"Sorry that I disturbed you during your appointment," Will apologized. "It won't happen again."

"I am always pleased to see you," Hannibal assured him. "And you have my personal permission to disturb me whenever you want."

"I don't think your patients would like it. That man looked ready to eviscerate me."

"Franklyn is harmless, and while it may be considered discourteous, I'm too glad to see you to protest. What is it?" Hannibal peeked at the files curiously.

"It's the new case, Jack wants me to help them with it. Did you see anything about it in the news papers?" Will threw the files onto Hannibal's lap and noticed how Hannibal sighed, as if he was supposed to be annoyed at Will's brashness but couldn't summon the strength for it.

"The murders are simplistic in nature, nothing really original in strangling. The focus on vocal chords, though, how the killer pushes the bodies into music cases, the post-mortem mutilations... he's trying to be like the Ripper."

Hannibal looked briefly surprised.

"The Ripper?" he asked. "Why would he do that? And are you sure the killer is male?"

"Yes," Will stopped near the familiar statue of the stag and touched it carefully. "As for why he would do that... he's a fan. He's both admiring him and feeling envious. Two killers with unique methods of displays who target Baltimore? It can't be a coincidence."

"Why vocal chords, then? He's a musician?"

"Yes!" forgetting the stag, Will faced Hannibal again. "Or he's obsessed with music. Obsessed to the point that he must be working in a place connected to it. Maybe opera, maybe one of the music shops. He must have killed before these murders, but never like this."

"It makes sense," Hannibal sounded thoughtful. "Have you told Jack?"

"Not yet. I think they must be aware that the killer is a musician, though, right? I mean, it's obvious. Just as the Ripper's part."

"It might be obvious to you, but not to everyone else," Hannibal uttered, and Will turned away to hide a smile on his face. "If you are unsure, you should call Jack and find out."

"No, I don't want to call him yet. Not until I can back my words with something more solid. He will hate it if I try to push the Ripper into yet another case, so I have to proceed very, very carefully."

Only silence answered him. As it went on, Will started to turn to Hannibal, and startled when he saw him standing right in front of him.

"I didn't hear you approach," he said with a nervous laugh. Hannibal tilted his head in a strangely eerie way, with a smile that was suddenly cold as ice.

"Did you see Alana?" he asked. Will frowned, his mind trying to analyze the undercurrent of emotions he sensed in Hannibal's voice.
"I did," he said slowly. "She came into your office. I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you — she asked me to say that she has something to discuss with you and that she'll come back later."

Tension left Hannibal's body — a barely perceptible loosening of his muscles, a little less darkness in his eyes. He didn't stop smiling, but his smile definitely grew warmer.

Or rather, less cold.

"I'll make sure to call her," Hannibal caressed his shoulder for a moment before stepping away. "Now. Would you like to have something to drink? I have thirty more minutes before my next appointment."

The weird scene kept playing in Will's mind as he was on his way home. Why would Hannibal mention Alana, how could he know? The smell? But they'd seen each other for a minute, not longer, and... and Alana had touched his shoulder.

Oh.

So when Hannibal did the same, he was consciously eliminating her touch and her scent. How did he even manage to smell it after such a brief contact? And was his absurd jealousy flattering or annoying?

Will didn't really have to think about it. His chest felt warm, and he wanted to smile.

Alphas who engaged in the process of courting were always more prone to jealous outbursts, but seeing it from a man of such level as Hannibal — it was more than just flattering. Will couldn't get enough. He'd never been a tease, but now the omegan part of him kept growing restless due to its excitement, urging him to go and try something else, deliberately this time, to provoke this jealousy. Maybe it would end with something more than they had already shared. Something different.

His cheeks got hot, and Will couldn't help but laugh shortly at the transformations he was feeling within him. He was turning into some mindless creature, a stereotypical omega, but he was in a far too excellent mood to worry about it.

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The evening at Wolf Trap was as dark as the middle of the night. Will was re-reading the files, rubbing Winston's head, studying the names of the victims and checking each one on his computer.

Theoretically, the killer could be not from Baltimore — he could kill here and leave later. But four of the victims had been visiting Baltimore Opera House, and they were only those who posted their photos from various performances on social media platforms. Who knew how many of others frequented it as well. No, the killer was from Baltimore, and he must have picked his victims at the Opera House, meaning that he was either a frequent guest or a member of the staff.
Winston let out a dissatisfied bark, and Will focused his attention on him.

"You want to go for a walk?" he murmured. "Fine. I could use some time outside."

An idea occurred to him suddenly, and before he could actually think about it, he grabbed his phone and dialed Hannibal.

"Hey, it's me," he said as soon as the familiar voice answered. "I'm going to go on a walk with my dog, would you like to come with us?"

In the silence that followed Will recognized confusion and surprise, and a feeling of uncertainty collected itself into a ball, settling in his stomach.

Stupid. It took more than an hour to drive here from the city, and it would be late at night when Hannibal would get back.

Since when had he started to act before thinking in this utterly humiliating way?

"Interesting suggestion," Hannibal said finally. "I can be there in an hour and a half, would that be all right?"

The shock was so profound that Will went speechless for a moment. He had called Hannibal, but he didn't really expect a positive answer. If anything, the phone call was probably an excuse to hear his voice. How could it be real?

"Of course," he blurted out. "Sure. I'd like that."

"All right," even without seeing him, Will knew Hannibal was smiling. "I will see you soon."

True to his word, Hannibal arrived precisely ninety minutes later. His ridiculously expensive black car parked near the house, and Will greeted him on the porch, to Winston's excited yelps. As soon as Hannibal stepped out from the car, Winston jumped on him, wiggling his tail and trying to reach his face with his tongue.

Amused, Will watched how Hannibal’s nose twitched at the dirt on his coat, but how he still patted the dog's fur.

"He saw you just once, and briefly, but looking at how he acts, I'd say you are his new best friend," Will noted, and a shadow flickered across Hannibal's face.

"Yes, quite," he agreed. "He's a very friendly dog. Where do you usually go to walk him?"

"In the forest. We have our secret path — it's hidden from the view, so I feel safe there."

Hannibal considered it, nodding, and Will stepped closer and kissed him on the lips, grateful and happy. His eyes were closed, but he felt a ghost of Hannibal's touch on his waist, then on his shoulders... and then it disappeared. The kiss broke, and when Will glanced up, Hannibal looked collected as always.

"Shall we?" he asked.

The forest was dark. Even the snow looked dark, and it was freezing, but Will never enjoyed walking Winston more.
Maybe because it was the first time he had company.

Watching Hannibal was fascinating. He moved slowly, observing the trees, sometimes touching them, either to leave his scent on them or to remind himself of something. His expression was contemplative, and for a while Will didn't risk distracting him.

His patience paid off. Hannibal stopped near one of the trees, tracing the frozen bark with his fingers, before glancing at Will.

"I used to spend a lot of time in the forest before," he said thoughtfully. "When I was a child, it seemed like another world to me."

"It still is," Will raised his head to stare at the sky. "Beautiful, severe, and timeless."

When he looked at Hannibal again, he saw an already familiar strange smile on his lips.

"These are the same exact words I said to my sister once," he murmured. "When we got lost in the woods. The way you read my thoughts sometimes is striking."

"I don't think I can read any of your thoughts," Will said truthfully. "It's easier with other people. You are a mystery to me."

Hannibal's smile widened.

"Not for long," he promised. For some reason, it sounded ominous, but maybe it was because of the darkness and deadness around them.

"How did you get out of the forest?" Will asked when they resumed walking. He wasn't sure if Hannibal would want to answer, but he did without hesitation.

"For the first two days, we waited to be saved. Then I realized the help wasn't coming, so I used the information the nature was giving me. The moss, the sunrise and sunset. The smells."

"How old were you?"

"Six."

"You must have been a very smart child."

"I was," Hannibal's face went blank. "And then I wasn't."

Mystery or not, continuing with this topic felt dangerous, so Will refrained from asking him to elaborate. He just took Hannibal's hand in his and squeezed it, hoping to convey his support and compassion.

The blank look on Hannibal's face vanished, melting into that of tenderness. He brought Will's hand to his lips and kissed it, and then kissed him, pushing him against the tree, both of them ignoring Winston's protesting whine. Hot tongue brushed against Will's, and Will moaned, feeling suddenly feverish. Mindlessly, he pressed closer to Hannibal, only able to think about his lips, about his hands wrapped so tightly around him, about Hannibal's body molded against his.

This kiss was more violent than the one they had shared near the house, wilder and more primitive in nature. There was no trace of Hannibal's cool demeanour left in it. Even if not for his hardness pressing against Will, demonstrating his desire for him, his scent still screamed of it. Will's head began to swim in response to it, to the pheromones burning the air between them, to the hunger he
felt in Hannibal, and which was awakening that of his own.

A soft growl escaped Hannibal's chest. His hold on Will tightened, became painful, as if he was afraid to let go. Will nuzzled into his throat, breathing in the calming scent and almost purring from delight. They stood like that for a while, basking in each other’s embrace and creating each other’s warmth. When Hannibal looked down at him, his eyes were dulled by the darkness of their surroundings, so black that Will felt a dark thrill run through him.

He knew nothing would happen tonight. He knew they were going to get back to the house where Hannibal would politely decline tea, get into his car and drive away. It was the way he behaved — Will couldn't but notice how Hannibal berated himself for any explicit display of emotions, and he doubted today would be different.

Here, standing wrapped so securely in Hannibal's arms, on the path of the forest that belonged to him, Will felt safe as never before.

And so he allowed himself to dream.

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Working on the killer's profile the next day was almost impossible. Will thought about Hannibal, the Ripper, and Hannibal again, and when hours had passed and he was still stuck on re-reading the first page, he realized it was fruitless.

He missed Hannibal. Less than eleven hours since they had met, and yet there was already a gaping hole in his chest that longed to be filled with Hannibal's presence.

Disturbing him again so soon would be undoubtedly seen as needy, but on the other hand, Hannibal didn't seem to mind. The intense flash of desire Will had sensed from him was enough to squash the last bits of his doubts, and his yesterday's bravery had resulted in two unforgettable hours they had spent together.

Determined, Will put on his coat, grabbed the files, and left his house.

As he approached the building, his blood was practically sizzling from anticipation, but before Will reached the stairs, the door opened, and the portly beta from the day before, Franklyn, came outside. He bristled the moment he saw Will, and stopped as if to guard the door from him.

Amused and annoyed, Will still tried to maintain a civil mask.

"Is Hannibal in?" he asked politely. Franklyn pursed his lips in disapproval, his eyes running over Will in an obvious attempt to find a flaw.

"Doctor Lector is busy," he snapped finally. "And who are you? You are not his patient, or you would know how much Doctor Lecter hates being interrupted."
"No," Will drawled. "No, I'm definitely not a patient."

The implication was so clear that it surprised even him. Where had all these boldness and defensiveness been hiding before?

He didn't feel threatened by this weird little beta, not in the slightest, but he still got a great deal of gleeful satisfaction from watching how Franklyn's face tightened in helpless anger. To his credit, he got over it pretty quickly, and his voice was smug when he said, "Of course, Doctor Lecter is very picky when it comes to choosing his patients. He doesn't accept just anyone. You are not his friend either, are you?"

"Not a friend, no," once again, Will sounded more mocking than he expected from himself. This time Franklyn seemed to miss it, though, because he nodded seriously.

"I thought so," he proclaimed even more smugly. "If you were, I would know. I have never seen you in the opera with him, and surely Doctor Lecter would have invited you."

"Does he invite all of his friends to the opera?"

"Well, no," Franklyn looked flustered for a moment. "All of his friends go there by themselves, they don't need an invitation," he hastened to add. "Tobias and I see him there all the time. Doctor Lecter values only cultured people, and all cultured people love music. Tobias even has his own music shop — he often talks to—"

"Who is Tobias?" Will interrupted him. He felt hair stand up on the back of his neck, the sudden unexplainable tension rising inside. Coincidence? Or divine intervention? How likely was it that a stranger would start telling him about some owner of the music shop who frequented opera?

Franklyn seemed thrilled at his question.

"Tobias is my best friend," he said proudly. "We met in—"

"What kind of shop does he own?"


"Here, in Baltimore?"

"Yes."

Chordophone String Shop.

Still standing, Will opened the file with his own notes and started turning the pages, his hands shaking slightly from the sudden rush of adrenaline.

Here it was, Chordophone String Shop and the address, along with the name of the owner. Tobias Budge. Will had marked him as a possible suspect, him and twenty-five other known men from Baltimore who fit his profile. He didn't have any particular reason to check Tobias Budge first, but this strange conversation with Hannibal's patient had to mean something. Will never relied on fate much, but there were signs that were impossible to ignore.

Making a decision, he hid the file and quickly moved down the street, looking for cabs. Franklyn said something, but Will was too engulfed by his new thoughts to pay attention to him.
When the car stopped near Tobias Budge's shop, Will called Jack, and as he'd hoped, he was directed to the voicemail.

"Hi," he said rapidly. "I think I know who our killer might be. I talked to one of Hannibal's patients and he shared some interesting information with me. It's just a hunch, but I still want to check it. He has a music shop here, in Baltimore, he's one of those people who fit the profile. Just wanted to let you know. I'll call again soon."

Will hesitated, then hung up and turned off his phone.

If Jack knew the address, he could decide to storm the shop and ruin things. He had done that more than once before. Without having the address immediately, Jack would have to call Hannibal first, to find out what patient Will might have been talking about, and it would give him more than enough time to deal with Tobias on his own.

Jack wanted him to prove himself, to show that he was still capable of thinking rationally, of being effective.

He would prove it.

And then he would be able to get back to the Ripper.
Thank you all so much for your tremendous ongoing support! Some violence and a lot of possessiveness this chapter, with Hannibal being drunk on his feelings and instincts. And - we're approaching the end of one of four parts I mentally divided this story into.

When his phone rang for the first time with Jack Crawford's name flashing across the screen, Hannibal rejected the call and continued his session with Emily. As the phone rang again immediately after that, though, he muttered an apology and went to the window to talk.

"Doctor Lecter, I'm sorry for disturbing you, but I need your assistance as soon as possible," Jack fired off. Hannibal's lips curled in an amused smirk. He'd allowed Jack to call him by his name since their first meeting, yet Jack obviously felt too uncomfortable to use that privilege.

"Yes, of course," he said aloud. "However, I'm quite busy at the moment. If I could call you back in twenty minutes..."

"Will might be in trouble."

Tension flooded him instantly. Hannibal's voice was clipped as he ordered, "Speak."

"He called me half an hour ago, said he's been talking to one of your patients and he directed him to some music shop owner. Will mentioned how the man fit the killer's profile — maybe you know about him, it's the one who leaves the bodies in—"

"I know, yes, go on," Hannibal snapped. Jack faltered for a second, and then continued.

"Will left to visit him, said he'd call me again soon, but his phone isn't answering. I need to know the name of the man or the address of the shop. Since it was one of your patients that gave him information, maybe you could remember—"

"Chordophone String Shop, the owner goes by the name Tobias Budge."

"Great!" the relief in Jack's words was palpable. "Thank you. Do you know anything about him that could—"

"I have to go now, Jack. Best of luck," Hannibal hung up and crossed the room in three steps, putting on his coat.

"I'm sorry, Emily, but I must cut our appointment short today," he said, distracted. "I will call you to re-arrange it soon."

"But Doctor, what— Did something happen? Something personal?" The alarm in her voice was purely for her own sake, and Hannibal barely forced himself to suppress a snarl.

"Yes," was all he said. "I'll call you tomorrow."

When they were both behind the door, Hannibal locked it and moved to his car. His hand with the
keys was shaking slightly, and he scowled at the sight of it.

Will was a smart boy. He wouldn't confront a possibly dangerous murderer so directly, without warning anyone properly.

'Will?' Even his inner voice sounded mocking. 'Our Will wouldn't do that?'

Of course. Sweet, naive, vulnerable Will, desperate to be understood, desperate to impress Jack Crawford, regardless of his protests to the contrary.

His Will would jump into the hellfire if it meant that his opinion was going to count and that he would be allowed to get back to working on the Ripper.

Clenching his teeth so hard it hurt, Hannibal stomped on the gas pedal and tried not to think.

***

Franklyn spoke of Tobias Budge often enough that Hannibal knew more about him than he ever wanted. From their occasional meetings in the opera, he'd drawn his own conclusions, but Tobias never interested him enough to try and initiate contact with him.

He'd had suspicions, naturally. Just as he'd known that Will would get to him sooner or later. But now? All alone, without warning anyone — without warning him? Anger and fear battled for dominance with various degrees of success, and if anger was familiar to him, the fear was entirely foreign.

Hannibal didn't experience fear. Not for himself, and never for someone else. But it was fear gnawing at his insides now, fear that was chilling him to the very bones.

Will was most likely fine. It was just a conversation, no reason to think the worst. No reason to expect...

Almost growling, Hannibal forcefully pushed the bothersome thoughts away.

He didn't need it right now. He just had to get to Will.

Hannibal entered the shop holding his car keys, with what he hoped would pass for a calm, relaxed expression.

It vanished the moment he was greeted by Tobias covered in blood.

A big part of it belonged to him.

Another part clearly belonged to Will.

Whatever plan had been brewing in Hannibal's head evaporated like smoke. He bared his teeth in a snarl, and this time a vicious growl did slip out. Tobias reacted to it instinctively — his own growl shook the room, and in the next moment Hannibal jumped on him, throwing him against the wall
and then on the floor. Tobias flew off like a rag doll, hitting the hard surface and groaning in pain. There was a huge bleeding wound on his side — Will, his Will must have left it, — and without letting Tobias regain his footing, Hannibal attacked again. A white hot shock of anger kept spasmimg through him, possessive and furious and volatile, and he hissed, "Where is he?"

"Who?" Tobias coughed and spat blood. "A pretty male omega? Is this what it takes to draw your attention?"

Hannibal's fingers slipped into the wound, twisting it from inside, and he felt a dark thrill at the scream that resulted from it.

"Where is he?" he growled again. Tobias' fist smashed into his face, and Hannibal jerked away, tasting blood. He blocked the second blow, but got kicked into stomach instead, and for a short moment all breath left him.

"I killed him," Tobias crowed, grinning like a madman and trying to stand up. "I killed your omega and I gutted him as the worthless trash like him deserves. The way he screamed in the end, you should have heard it."

Hannibal's vision went red. Livid flames, hot and searing, devoured every nerve ending, and with a bellow, he sank his teeth into Tobias' bloody, sweaty cheek, ripping a chunk out of it.

Howling, Tobias pushed him with the sudden burst of desperate energy, and Hannibal crashed into the wall before he had a chance to steady himself. His eyes never left the staggering form as hatred and helpless fury kept choking him.

Focusing on Tobias' vulnerable neck, Hannibal jerked forward and pierced the soft hollow with his car keys, hearing shocked gurgles that started tearing from it.

A shadow flickered somewhere behind Tobias, and then Will appeared behind him, looking ethereal with his blood-stained skin and unusually cold expression.

Hannibal froze, sucking in a breath. This time, his vision blackened for a moment, and the thudding of his pulse filled his ears.

Will. Alive.

Will.

Tobias began to fall on the floor when Will wrapped his hands around his head and jerked it to the right with a surprising strength. There was a crunch, and Tobias fell, his eyes looking unseeingly at the musical instruments hanging on the wall.

Hannibal stared at Will greedily, drinking in the icy blankness on his face. Then the mask shattered and Will stared back at him, suddenly scared and shaken.

A second, and they were in each other's arms, with Hannibal rubbing his nose against Will's neck, scenting him to make sure that he's safe, alive, that he's here with him. Will, in turn, kept fussing over him like a worried omega, checking his injuries, and the joy Hannibal experienced from this realization was powerful to the point of being overwhelming.

His little mate was embracing his potential more and more. Soon... maybe soon they could...

The jumbled, half-coherent thoughts ceased when the door to the shop opened abruptly and several men burst in, including Jack. Hannibal's first instinct was to cradle Will to his chest and growl at
the intruders threateningly, warning them to stay away.

"Oh," Jack said flatly, staring at them. "I see you got here before us."

Will twisted in his arms to look at the agents, and then tried to pull away. Hannibal's grip tightened around him for a second, but loosened when Will touched his cheek soothingly, rubbing his scent into it in a typical gesture of reassurance.

Soon the shop was filled with more agents and paramedics. Will was taken to the other side of the room, with Jack looming over him, and Hannibal's eyes kept flickering in their direction. Finally, unable to take in any longer, he pushed the medic who was bothering him away and went to join them.

"How could you even do that?" Jack was saying in frustration. "We could have taken him alive. You could die, you and Hannibal both could be dead right now!"

"I know," Will rubbed his forehead tiredly. "I know. But I thought—"

"You didn't think, that's the problem! You never think, you just—"

"Keep your voice down," Hannibal hissed. "And don't speak to him like that."

Two shocked stares bore into him, but Hannibal focused solely on Jack.

"Will accomplished what none of your other agents did," he said coldly. "If you had managed to stay objective, Will would have trusted you enough to tell you where he was going."

Jack's eyes narrowed.

"I could say the same thing about you, Doctor," he drawled.

"You are his direct supervisor," Hannibal's voice turned icy. "The responsibility is on you, do not push it on Will's shoulders. You gave him this outrageous task so he could prove himself, am I correct?"

"Yes, but I didn't say that he had to—"

"He proved himself. He caught your murderer."

"He killed him!" Jack started to raise his voice again. "You killed him together, it can hardly be called catching him. How can we find out whether or not he's guilty now?"

"I imagine this shop and his apartment contain enough evidence. Now, I am taking Will home. And from now on, watch how you speak to him. I would hate for your superiors to learn about your unprofessional conduct."

Jack's face darkened and he made a step toward him.

"I think you are forgetting yourself, Doctor Lecter," he uttered. "You—"

"Leave him alone," Will snapped suddenly, and all attention went back to him. Jack, in particular, looked stunned, and Hannibal had to fight to suppress a smile.

"Will—"

"Hannibal is right. I don't like the way you talk to me, the way you make me feel, or these tests you
keep devising. You either trust me or you don't."

"You were the one who came to me in the first place, in your pursuit of the Ripper!"

"I am not the only one pursuing him," Will reminded him. "You need me as much as I need you. If you want to work with me, really work with me, let me know. Or we'll have to work separately and see who catches him first. Hannibal?" Will glanced at him, and Hannibal nodded shortly.

"Come," he said.

The ride to Wolf Trap was mostly silent. The adrenaline that had kept Will going had left now, and he looked tired and lost boy. Hannibal glanced at him again and again, unable to get rid of the last traces of panic in his bloodstream.

"You should have told me," he said, echoing Jack. "I would have come with you."

"I wanted to do it by myself. It was important to me."

"Why?"

"You know why," Will didn't look at him. "I'm sorry I let you down."

"You didn't. You killed him, after all."

A surprised laugh came from Will, and this time he did look at him.

"I'm not sure which of us killed him. You stabbed him in the throat."

"And you broke his neck."

They shared a moment of amusement, but it faded soon.

"I wasn't certain it was him," Will murmured. "Your patient, Franklyn, mentioned him, and it struck me as unusual coincidence. I decided to check by myself, so no one would interrupt me and so I could figure everything out before calling the FBI. I wanted Jack to see that I can work effectively. I wanted—" Will stopped talking for a second. "I wanted you to see it," he finished, quieter.

Hannibal focused on the road, because only this could distract him from the unpleasant emotions. Then, changing his mind abruptly, he said, "When I saw him covered in your blood, I thought it was over. I thought you were dead."

Will didn't reply, and Hannibal was grateful for that. He did not understand what he was feeling, exactly, couldn't define the terror that he still remembered so well.

The thought of losing Will was unbearable. That was all he was willing to admit.

When he reached Will's house, they both left the car, and Will made tea for them, still silent. The dog, Winston, occupied Hannibal's feet, and he tolerated it because Will wouldn't appreciate him moving away in distaste.

"I looked at him and I knew," Will said suddenly. "And he knew that I knew. It was in his eyes."

"You have a unique gift," Hannibal noted. "Dangerous, but beautiful."
"Or I'm just shitty at keeping a straight face," snorting, Will stared at the cup morosely. "We started to fight. I grabbed a knife, the only weapon I had, and slashed his side, but he got to me, too. I managed to close myself in one of the rooms because I realized I wouldn't win. Shameful, isn't it?"

"Clever," Hannibal interjected grimly. "He had strength and experience on his side, as well as the place he was comfortable in. You need a gun."

The change was probably abrupt, because Will looked up in surprise.

"A gun?" he repeated. "Why? Tobias Budge was an exception. I don't usually get into situations like that, I don't even investigate other cases often. My only goal is the Ripper, and if he gets to me... well, the gun probably won't help."

"You need it," Hannibal repeated. "I will make sure you have it. Jack may be hesitant to give it to you, but I know other people. I'll arrange something."

Will cast him a long, thoughtful look. Then he sighed, and that sigh was accompanied by a burst of toxic fear, souring his lovely scent.

"What?" Hannibal stood up involuntarily, ignoring Winston's whine, feeling how his protective instincts automatically kicked in. "What is it?"

"I'm scared," Will spoke softly, and animalistic anger whirled up Hannibal once again.

"Of whom?" he almost growled, but Will's next answer made him freeze.

"Of the Ripper."

Conflicted, Hannibal stood in silence, trying to understand what to do. An alpha part of him shriveled in anguish at the thought that his own mate was afraid of him, while a more rational part was at the loss for words.

"Why?" he asked finally, hoarsely, and Will wrapped his arms around himself, as if hoping to chase away the sticky presence of fear.

"I think we killed his mate today," he whispered. "Tobias was courting him with his body-gifts, no matter how awkward they were. The Ripper has imprinted not a long time ago, maybe even when Tobias began to kill. If he was his partner, and the Ripper learns that I killed him... he will come for me. I thought I was ready, but I don't know now. I hoped... now that I met you, I hoped for some kind of..."

"Tobias couldn't have been his partner, Will," Hannibal tried to speak gently, even though his heart kept beating wildly. "He was an alpha, and as you said, the Ripper is an alpha, too. Imprinting works only between alpha and omega."

"But we don't know much about it. We don't know anything at all, it happens so rarely — what if it can happen between anyone? Or maybe the Ripper is an omega, maybe I was mistaken, maybe—"

Without letting him finish, Hannibal pulled Will by the hand and pressed him against his chest, burying his face in the curly hair.

"Don't worry," he murmured. "Whatever the truth is, I will protect you. I will not let anything like that happen to you. I promise."
The smell of fear evaporated, replaced by that of contentment. Will hid his face in Hannibal's neck, breathing in deeply, and a wave of strange devotion threatened to destroy him.

Hannibal ached for him. His plans were in disarray, his thoughts in turmoil, but at this moment, with Will in his arms, he could almost imagine their future together.

He knew it wouldn't happen, for one reason or another.

But he still allowed himself to think.

***

The gun was delivered the next day. It was black, small, and shiny, a beautiful model that hid how deadly it was, perfect for someone like his Will.

Hannibal examined the gun under different angles, and nearly dropped it when a strange shadow fell over it, covering the hard surface with blood. He blinked, and the blood was gone — the weapon was shiny and new again, no traces of red anywhere.

Disturbed, Hannibal carefully put the gun back into the box, wondering if a strange vision had been evoked by his bad memories or if it was something akin to premonition. He would never kill anyone with a gun, not ever again, and dying from it also wasn't a part of his plan.

Someone knocked on the door, and he moved before he noticed it, his heart fluttering in the most sickening way.

When it was Alana who greeted him, Hannibal barely managed to keep the mask of polite interest on.

"What a surprise," he said warmly. "Please, come in."

"Thank you," Alana gave him her coat and walked to the living room, a trace of palpable anxiety following her. "I'm sorry I came without invitation, but I'd like to talk to you about something. Do you have a moment?"

"For you — always."

Alana laughed, a rosy flush filling her face.

"Charming, as always," she said dryly. "I understand that I am being unprofessional by coming here with what I have in mind, but I need your advice. I don't know who else to turn to."

"I am always prepared to listen," Hannibal assured her, his interest piqued. It left him immediately when Alana added, "I want to talk about Will."

Well, that should have been expected, Hannibal mused. Although he still hoped for something less troubling.
"He is not officially my patient, so I can discuss him with you," was all he said, and Alana nodded.

"I hoped for it," she uttered. Stretching her legs, she took a deep breath. "As soon as Will joined Jack's team, I was asked to monitor him, and the moment we saw each other, we just... clicked. I knew it was wrong, I'm not stupid. He's much younger than me, and so traumatized — this terrible story with the Ripper and his father, the orphanage where he had to hide he was an omega, his unhealthy fixation with dark things... he's bad for me, I knew it. But I was still so..."

"Attracted to him?" Hannibal offered, marveling at how calm he sounded.

"Yes," Alana chuckled bitterly. "Attraction, fascination, whatever you call it. I felt a pull whenever we met, and when he tried to ask me out, to court me, I said no. But feelings didn't disappear."

"Of course they didn't." A sense of deadly certainty began to envelop him, and Hannibal did nothing to fight it. Alana, oblivious to his thoughts, rubbed her eyes in frustration, and he noticed how her hands were trembling.

"Will is important to me," she said slowly. "More important than I tried to make myself believe. But when I began to realize it, his interest started to fade. He met you around that time, he was clearly infatuated with you, and I just... I was heartbroken, I guess," Alana tried to smile, but it was more of a grimace. "I know you would never encourage anything like that — and I apologize for my behavior at your party, but Will, he desperately needs a figure of influence. When I refused him, he tried to look for someone else, and he found you. You could never return his interest — I know he's not your type, hardly anyone is," resentment that sounded in Alana's last phrase was brief, but her hurt remained. "I don't know what to do, Hannibal," she murmured, more softly this time. "I think I'm in love with him. And I know he's not indifferent, either, not yet. What should I do?"

"Close your eyes," Hannibal offered gently. "Close your eyes, and imagine a future that you would like to have."

Alana obeyed, and for several moments, her face was blank. Then she smiled — wide and relieved, and when she looked at him again, her eyes were shining.

"I see myself with him," she whispered. "I see him getting more stable by my side. I see him being devoted and loving, a wonderful mate, a caring father. I want this. I want this, Hannibal. I want this future."

"Then you shall have it," Hannibal's lips stretched in a fake smile, and he noted with detached curiosity how an insightful psychiatrist like Alana completely missed the coldness of it. "Do you have a plan, or would you like my advice on it?"

"No," Alana jumped up suddenly, almost glowing. "Thank you, Hannibal. I have already made a decision, but having you confirm that it's right, it means a lot to me. Truly. I'm going to go to Will right now. I'll tell him that I was wrong to refuse him, and if he'd like to try, we... sorry," she laughed again, a much happier sound. "You don't need to hear all that."

"It pleases me to see you happy," Hannibal said. "I will commit this sight to my memory for many years to come. One suggestion, if I may."

"Yes, sure," Alana stared at him expectedly, still flushed and pretty.

"You should go home and change first. I mean no disrespect, but you look as if you've run a marathon."
"Oh, you're right. What is even happening to me today?" Alana shook her head, amused. "Thank you again. I hope I'll see you soon, maybe with some good news this time."

"Of course," Hannibal put her coat back on her and opened the door. "I have no doubt that we will see each other soon."

Flashing him one last smile, Alana hurried to her car, and Hannibal watched her until she disappeared.

Then he began to dress.

***

Hannibal took a cab to the Biddle Street and walked several streets further, watching people and their vehicles, waiting for the right one. Finally, he saw a huge dark Geländewagen and a careless owner who shut the door and went to one of the shops. He didn't disappear fully yet, and Hannibal was already picking the lock, checking the time on his gloved hand.

Soon he was on the way to Wolf Trap. Fifty miles from Will's home, he moved off the road and turned the headlights off. Leaned against the driver's seat and started to wait.

Time passed slowly, but Hannibal was used to waiting. There was some unique beauty in it, a stillness that was startling, as if the time itself stopped, resting before jumping forward with a new vigor.

The jump happened when the headlights of Alana's distinctive car lit up a part of the road. Hannibal watched emotionlessly as she approached, and then, when the distance between them shortened, he pressed on the gas pedal and crashed into Alana's car, pushing it off the road.

Everything happened in an instant. Alana's Nissan stopped only when it crashed for the second time, now into one of the trees, and Hannibal stepped out of his car.

Alana was in her Nissan, pressing her hand against her bloodied forehead over and over again. Hannibal opened the broken back door and got inside, seeing how Alana jumped and tried to whirl around to look at him.

"Hannibal!" she exclaimed, and the relief in her voice was overwhelming. "Oh, thank God. I don't know what happened, I think someone crashed into me. I can't feel my foot, it's probably stuck — what... what are you wearing?" her words were suddenly uncertain, but still no sign of real suspicion in them.

"I am truly sorry," Hannibal said. Grabbing Alana's hair, he jerked her head back and cut her throat in a quick, neat motion. As Alana let out a wet, wheezing sound, Hannibal put the knife on the seat and stared at her weak attempts to stop the blood. Their eyes met in the rear-view mirror, and Hannibal didn't look away, absorbing the terror and shock in Alana's gaze.

"W... why?" she choked, her body spasming.
"He is mine," Hannibal replied, and enjoyed the flash of recognition and understanding before they too were engulfed by horror. Then Alana froze. Her hand fell, and the wheezing stopped, even though the blood was still flowing.

Hannibal looked at her for a while, analyzing himself to determine what he was feeling. Satisfaction, mainly. Confidence that his only possible rival was no longer a threat. Hope that now, Will was going to experience imprinting, with nothing and no one to distract him.

Regret was there, too, but minimal, so when Hannibal exited the car, he was calm. Without taking off his protective suit, he drove the Geländewagen to the main road, changed his clothes there, caught a car with a cheery driver who was too drunk to notice Alana's ruined car, and paid him to get back to Wolf Trap. He took the seat in the back and spent the entire ride with his face hidden in the dark shadows. Doubtful that this driver would be ever questioned, but additional precautions couldn't hurt.

Standing in front of Will's door, Hannibal experienced a pang of sudden anxiety. He didn't know what he expected, what this visit was supposed to accomplish, but something in him insisted on getting to Will as soon as possible. To see him, to hear his voice, to touch him, to show that he was the worthiest mate for him, that he could protect him and destroy anyone who would dare to threaten their union.

He didn't know how long he stood frozen on the porch, battling with himself, but the door suddenly opened and Will was there, together with his excited dog.

"Hannibal!" he exclaimed joyfully. "I wasn't expecting you. Did you... hey, are you feeling well?" Will frowned, and Hannibal ached to smooth this small frown with his touch. Somehow, he managed to croak, "I'm fine. Just tired."

"Where is your car, how did you get here?"

"I wasn't in the state to drive, so I caught a passing car."

"It could have been dangerous," Will chided him, ushering him inside. "I am glad you are here, though. You look flushed, do you have a fever?" His hand touched Hannibal's forehead, and Hannibal wrapped his hands around Will's waist automatically, pulling him closer and inhaling his scent. Will angled his body toward him, and desire rippled through Hannibal — destructive, all-consuming, irresistible.

Clenching his fist around Will's curls in a way he'd done to Alana just an hour earlier, Hannibal jerked him closer and brought their mouths together forcefully. As their tongues touched, Will moaned and squeezed the back of his neck in an almost painful grip, rubbing against him shamelessly. The heat from his body was searing both of them, and without thinking clearly, Hannibal crashed them against the wall, pressing on Will's chin to make him open his mouth wider.

At one point, Will tried to climb on him, wrapping his legs around Hannibal's waist, and the last boundary was crossed. Lifting him off the floor, Hannibal moved in the direction of Will's bedroom and somehow managed to close the door behind them, getting rid of the overexcited Winston.

Only when Will was lying under him on the bed, Hannibal finally broke the kiss and stared at him in wonder.

He had never seen anything more beautiful than this, than his omega, breathing quickly underneath
him, with his cheeks inflamed, with desire and fear dancing in his blue eyes, with his lovely controversial scent ruining the last bits of Hannibal's self-control.

'Look at me,' Hannibal thought almost desperately. 'You have to imprint on me. I am the one for you, why cannot your mind recognize it?'

But there was nothing. Will wanted him, it was obvious, but nothing else happened, and Hannibal was overcome by the absurd need to howl with frustration.

Apparently getting restless, Will tugged at his hair with annoyed sound, raising his hips, and all dark thoughts vanished. Hannibal kissed him again, sliding his hands beneath Will's back and taking his sweater off. Will's hands reached for his clothes as well, and soon their naked bodies clasped together, absorbing each other's heat. The scent of arousal was so strong that Hannibal barely remembered that Will wasn't in heat, and thus required a more thorough preparation.

When he slipped into Will's body, he did it slowly yet without stopping, making Will take his length in one long push. Will cried out, and a note of insecurity and pain in his voice shadowed Hannibal's euphoric state. He stopped, trying to breathe slowly, while his body and mind kept being at war.

He wanted to give Will all pleasure in the world, pleasure that he needed and was obviously not used to, but at the same time, he longed to satisfy the lustful beast in his chest, the one that urged him to forget everything and fuck Will with abandon. Maybe, maybe it would help him to finally get over these poisonous, terrifying feelings he refused to name.

But Will was looking at him, wanting and scared at the same time, and a strange sound was coming from him even though he didn’t speak — something almost like…

Purring.

Will was purring. He was granting Hannibal a sound that was considered to be one of the most unique ones because of the rarity of it. Omegas were the only creatures capable of purring, and only in the circumstances when they felt safe and cherished.

The emotions came flooding to the surface, stronger and more intense than anything Hannibal had ever experienced.

He wanted to protect him. He wanted to court him in earnest, to shower him with exquisite gifts, not merely with those inadequate bodies. He wanted to mate him and show him the world, to take him to Italy and France and Lithuania, for them to be strong and together, terrifying the world and enjoying the treasures it could offer.

When Hannibal moved again, he was gentler, and Will's body opened for him, so warm and accepting. The evidence of his arousal was pressed to Hannibal's stomach, and Hannibal rubbed against it, kissing Will's ears, eyes, cheeks and chin, brushing his lips against Will's beautiful neck.

How he wanted to bite into it, leaving his mark, mark that would forever tie them together. But it wouldn't have taken without Will's heat, so all Hannibal did was nip at it with his teeth gently, not to mark, but to please.

He wanted to remember this moment, to prolong it, but soon, too soon, a shivering and consuming release racked Hannibal's body with violent aftershocks. Will, who wrapped himself tightly around him, wended his fingers in Hannibal's hair and followed him with a deep, purring moan. At the last moment, he leaned forward, and his sharp teeth closed around Hannibal's shoulder, leaving their
bright mark on it.

Astounded, Hannibal pulled back to look at him, and Will sent him an insolent, cheeky grin.

"You are a horror," Hannibal murmured, in a nauseatingly fond way. Will tilted his head, looking sated and happy.

"Yours," he said softly, and Hannibal's heart jumped.

"Mine," he whispered.

That night, they stayed together, unwilling to let go of each other even for a minute.

Their idyl was broken only in the morning, with the loud knocking on the door.
Hannibal: Changing Priorities

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the long wait - my job started again and it was tough to adjust. I really hope to get back to weekly updates though! Thank you all so much for your amazing support, it's so inspiring!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal didn't hear it at first. He wasn't sleeping, but his focus was solely on Will, on his sleeping, lovely, oblivious omega who trusted him enough to let him stay by his side at night. Despite his issues, despite his mistrust to everyone else, he let Hannibal in, and it was the best gift he could ever dream of.

He leaned closer, knowing that his face must be unforgivably soft, when Will suddenly jerked from sleep and sat up, blinking dazedly.

"Someone's knocking," he murmured, and it was only then that Hannibal realized they indeed had company.

Disturbed that in his admiration of Will, he had completely missed the intruders, Hannibal also straightened, watching gloomily how Will began to rapidly dress.

"Were you expecting someone?" he asked.

"No," Will finished dressing and glanced at him, then did a double-take and blushed, as if just remembering what had happened between them.

Completely charmed, Hannibal smiled at him.

"Go," he murmured. "Get rid of them, whoever they are, and come back here."

Still red from embarrassment, Will nodded and left.

Hannibal waited, and soon raised voices reached him.

"I ask you again, Will, where were you last night?"

"I told you, where else could I be? Home! Here, with my dog! What happened, why did you bring all these people here?"

"Alana Bloom was murdered. Yesterday."

In the silence that followed, Hannibal sat frozen, his mind quickly processing the information.

Well. This was not something he had predicted.

Killing Alana, he'd had no intention to pin it on Will. Such opportunity hadn't occurred to him at all, and now, apparently, Jack was here with his entourage, ready to destroy Will under the growing
amount of evidence.

And if they arrested him now and searched his house, the game would be over.

"Alana... Alana is dead?" Will's voice was shaking. "...no. No, she can't be. What happened?"

"I want you to tell me," Jack sounded grim. "What happened, Will?"

More silence. Then Will laughed, a choked, horrible sound.

"Me?" he asked. "Seriously? You are trying to say I killed... killed Alana? This is absurd. What possible reason could I have?"

"She rejected you before. She must have rejected you again, and your patience snapped. You sounded aggressive when we talked about her several days ago, you have been acting unstable lately, and every day, more people around you keep dying! Alana's throat was cut, it happened not far from here. What was she doing in Wolf Trap, Will? Did you ask her to come and then you argued? Did she say something you didn't like, and as she got into her car, you decided to follow her?"

"How could I follow her? On foot?" Will hissed.

It was a reasonable question, but Jack ignored it.

"I ask you one more time what happened," he said coldly. "If you can't tell me, and if you don't have any alibi, then I will have to ask you to come with us."

A tense, hopeless silence fell on the house then, and it kept getting longer, and longer, and Hannibal was still sitting on the bed, still frozen in indecision.

He could end it now. It was the moment he had been planning — Will arrested, suffering for the sins he hadn't committed, trying to understand who could have set him up and inevitably coming to a conclusion that Hannibal was the most likely option. Ideally, Hannibal had hoped that Will would be imprinted by then, and he looked forward to seeing how Will's beautiful mind would break under the force of realization that his own mate had done it to him.

This possibility still seemed intriguing, and yet...

And yet, Will was his. Will was light itself. Will was everything. Hannibal didn't know what he felt for him, but the mere thought of letting him go, now or ever, filled him with irrational fear and cold fury.

*Close your eyes*, he had said to Alana. *Close your eyes, and imagine a future that you would like to have.*

Hannibal closed his own eyes... and opened them again.

He didn't have to imagine.

He knew what he would see.

Standing up, Hannibal wrapped himself into a sheet that still smelled like him and Will and calmly walked out of the room.

All eyes immediately went to him. Will's face was empty, the light gone from it, as if he had already lost hope and didn't even see Hannibal in front of him.
Hannibal let himself bask in a surge of tenderness that flooded him at this sight, and then fixed his gaze on Jack.

Jack looked shocked. He stared at him as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, his eyes flickering between Hannibal and Will again and again.

"Good morning, Jack," Hannibal drawled. "I believe you asked Will a question. Well, I am ready to give you an answer instead of him. Yes, he does have an alibi. He has me. I was with him all night and all previous evening. Evidently, he couldn't have done anything to Alana... unless you suspect both of us?"

More silence. Jack was still staring with an expression of utter disbelief while the first signs of life started to appear on Will's face. He blinked, looking at Hannibal with the same stunned expression Jack had, and then a timid hope blossomed in his eyes, a desperate longing to believe that Hannibal could save him from this.

He could.

He would.

"Is it true?" Jack pushed out finally, turning back to Will. "Were you and Doctor Lecter... together?"

One of the agents snorted in derision, and when Jack glared at her, she just shrugged.

"Come on," she said. "The entire house stinks like them."

"Yes, well... yes," Jack cleared his throat. Then his glare went to Hannibal. "This is beyond unprofessional, Doctor. I expected better of you."

"I could say the same," Hannibal's voice turned colder. "You come here, to the house of an omega, to a person who helped you solve your puzzles more than once, inform him of the death of his friend, and you do it like this? By accusing him of her murder? Have some decency."

Flushing angrily, Jack made a step toward him, and Will immediately blocked his path, letting out a warning sound. Jack stopped, bewildered, and Hannibal breathed in Will's dangerous scent, delighted at this gesture of protection.

Will was a fierce omega when he wanted to be. Amazingly so. Who knew how far his protective instincts could go when pushed?

"Stay away from Hannibal," Will said. "And until you have any evidence against me, stay away from me too. I don't know what happened to Alana. I can't wrap my mind around the fact that she's dead, but I had nothing to do with it. Now please, just go. I can't even look at you."

"Will—"

"Go! Leave, right now!"

To Jack's credit, he looked genuinely apologetic. He opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind and nodded curtly at his assistants.

In a minute, Will's house was empty. However, Will exhaled only after the cars disappeared in the distance. His shoulders sagged, and he leaned on Hannibal, quietly pressing his face against his shoulder.
"It's all right," Hannibal murmured, embracing him and nuzzling his hair.

A half-sob escaped Will's lips.

"No, it's not," he answered dully. "Everything is terrible and you know it. Alana is dead. She was killed near my house, she was probably coming to see me when the Ripper attacked her."

It took a moment for Will's words to sink in.

"The Ripper?" Hannibal repeated. "You think it's him?"

"It's always him!" Will tried to move back but Hannibal held him back. "It's always him," Will said again, and this time, he sounded on the verge of hysterics. "Who else? I still don't know how he learned about me, but he's set on destroying everything I have managed to build. Alana is probably his revenge for Tobias," shuddering, Will curled against Hannibal even more, as if trying to meld into him. "Tobias must have been his mate and now he is angry with me, Hannibal, he is angry. If he was playing before, he isn't now. He must have seen Alana and decided that she is... that we... oh my God," Will raised his head, and his eyes were wild. "He probably thought that I was in love with her, that we were together. He wanted to hurt me."

"Will..."

"He wanted to get to me through her, and the most horrible... the most horrible is, I'm glad," Will laughed, but it was such a hollow sound that Hannibal frowned. "I'm glad he thought I cared about Alana. I'm glad he didn't think of you." The feeling that rose up within Hannibal was sudden and intense, so powerful that he almost choked. Swallowing hard, he patted Will's curls, staring at him intently.

Feeling needed and cared for — it was addictive. He couldn’t get enough. Will's devotion was the most desirable thing, and the more he gave it, the greedier Hannibal felt.

He had been right to kill Alana. She was an obstacle — anyone who threatened him and Will was. Will's turmoil was an unfortunate side effect, but Hannibal would take care of it. And of everything else.

"I'm not afraid of the Ripper," Hannibal said gently, but Will just laughed again in that horrible way of his.

"No one is," he whispered. "Until the Ripper comes and kills them."

"Are you worried about him hurting you?"

"I don't know," Will took a shuddering breath, glancing around but clearly not seeing anything. "I can't... think. I can't think, Hannibal. Everything is falling apart. Alana. Jack with his suspicions. My father, who remains unavenged every minute that bastard walks freely. When I moved into this house, I was happy to be as far from others as possible, but now people just keep dying near it and I'm... I'm scared. I don't know what to do. What can I do?"

"I know what," Hannibal leaned over and buried his face in Will's neck, unable to help himself. He didn't want to think about the implications of Will's words, about the fact that it was he who terrified him. The Ripper had no place here, between them. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Will sighed and returned the caress, breathing in Hannibal's smell. He obviously found it soothing because his body relaxed slightly, and he inhaled again, deeper.
Overjoyed, Hannibal let him. The fiercely possessive side of him was satisfied with how his scent seemed to affect Will. Even though Will had not imprinted on him yet, they were still a match in all other ways.

It had to mean something.

"You will move in with me," Hannibal said, and was rewarded with Will's astonished look.

He was confident in what the answer would be — after all, Will was in a highly vulnerable state right now, he sought protection and comfort, even if he wouldn't want to admit it.

Still, as the pause went on, Hannibal began to worry. Will continued to look at him attentively, as if he was seeing every hidden part of him, and the speculative intensity of his gaze sent shivers down Hannibal's spine.

"You want me to live with you?" Will asked finally. "Knowing that I am being stalked by a psychopath? Knowing that I could have killed Alana?"

"You couldn't have killed Alana," Hannibal scowled, and Will smiled thinly.

"I could have," he said. "You weren't there with me in the evening, contrary to what you told Jack. You came later. You can't know what I had been doing before."

"But I do know." Will's attempt to appear darker than he was, was artificial, yet Hannibal still found it thrilling. "You were studying the files on the Ripper and playing with your dog." When Will's eyes got round in astonishment, he couldn't but smile. "You always do," he murmured softly. "And my offer still stands."

Laughing helplessly, Will went back into his embrace and Hannibal readily accepted him.

"I can't believe that you are real," Will whispered. "Good things don't happen to me. They are usually bad and getting worse."

"They won't get worse," Hannibal swore. "Not this time."

"Yes," Will said, clumsily but sincerely. "Yes, I will move in with you. I would love to."

Hannibal had expected this answer, but he still felt a powerful relief surge through him. Triumphant, he squeezed Will tighter, already envisioning and planning.

Certain accommodations would have to be made now due to the change in his plans, including for Will's dog, but it would be worth it.

In the end, everything in the world would be worth it.

They chose not to wait. Will went to his bedroom to begin to pack things and Hannibal stayed
behind, pretending that he had to make a call to cancel his early appointments. As soon as Will disappeared behind the door, he moved to the table in the living room and took every third fishing lure from there. Then he walked to the lonely painting of a very strange fish hanging on the wall and carefully removed a strip of transparent paper from below, the one to which several dark and blond hairs were glued. Pocketing it, Hannibal glanced at Winston who was watching him curiously, trusting and oblivious as his owner.

"You will have to get used to a finer cuisine," he told him, but the dog just tilted his head inquisitively. "After all, the way you and Will have been feeding yourselves is abysmal. This routine will have to change."

Winston waved his tail once, but quickly lost interest in Hannibal since Will emerged from the bedroom with a small bag in his hands.

"I'm almost done," he said. "Just a few more things from here."

"This is all you're bringing?" Hannibal stared at the bag. "You do realize this move is permanent, not for several days?"

Will smiled at him as if he'd said the sweetest thing.

"I don't own much," he noted. "And I need even less. If you are really sure about it, then we could bring everything to your house in one go."

"Including Winston?"

"Oh." Will's face fell and he lowered his head for a moment. "I... did not think about it. I understand if you don't want to have a dog live with you, but—"

"I did not mean that," Hannibal interrupted him. "I did not even consider leaving your dog behind. Of course Winston is welcome in my house."

It wasn't entirely true, but Hannibal would accept six more dogs if it meant that he was going to be rewarded with such a brilliant, sunny smile again. Will looked happy — despite the fresh news about Alana, despite Jack's suspicions, he looked happy. It meant that Hannibal's importance to him prevailed over everything and everyone else, and this knowledge was empowering.

Barely hiding his satisfied smile, Hannibal asked, "Is there anything else you would like to bring?"

"The painting." Will stared at the ludicrous fish that had been supposed to become his death sentence longingly. "I drew it many years ago, with my father."

Hannibal ignored the coldness that rushed through him, trying to whisper things to him that he did not want to hear.

"Then we bring it with us," he said simply.

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No closest cab agreed to come to the Wolf Trap and take them with Winston, so Hannibal had to come to the street where he'd left his car yesterday and then return to Will's house.

When they finally got to Baltimore, it was nearly two o'clock, and contrary to his wishes, Hannibal couldn't cancel the rest of his appointments. Therefore, he left Will, his bag, his painting, and the overly excited Winston in his house, promising to be back at seven. Will looked lost and unsure again, and Hannibal kissed him with all he had, hoping that when he came back, he wouldn't find that Will had gotten enough and left.

_Maybe I should have stayed_, he thought as he drove to his office, restless. _Maybe I should have waited until he felt more comfortable._

Hannibal stopped at the nearest dump station, emptied his pockets, and set the things he had taken from Will's house on fire. Then he watched them burn silently, seeing his initial plans blacken and crumble in the place of the feathers that Will had lovingly turned into parts of the lures.

He didn't know what he was doing. Everything had happened too quickly — meeting Will, imprinting on him, setting a goal, and losing it in the process of the instinctual, unintentional courtship.

It was easy to let himself enjoy Will's company while knowing that it had an end date. But now that ending things had become intolerable, he had to devise a new plan, one where building a future with Will was possible.

New goals must be set. The first one — working on changing Will's attitude toward the Ripper. Of course, there were few chances of Will realizing who the Ripper was, but Hannibal didn't want to risk. If it was possible to lessen Will's hatred even a little bit, then he would pour all of his efforts into doing it. Something would need to happen because at this point, Will would never accept him fully, and it might become problematic in the future since Hannibal never intended to let him go.

Giving the last cold look to the burning evidence, Hannibal turned and went back to his car, his mind busy with re-planning and re-structuring.

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The hours dragged slowly. Hannibal tried to listen to his patients, but his thoughts kept going to his house, to Will who was supposed to be there.

It seemed impossible that two days ago, he'd had confrontation with Tobias Budge, that one day ago he'd killed Alana, and that today, Will had moved in with him. The house no longer belonged only to him, and for some reason, Hannibal couldn't wrap his mind around it.

He was living with an omega and his dog now.


Franklyn was the last patient, and Hannibal's blood boiled at the mere sight of him.
This creature had nearly cost him Will. His incessant rambling had led Will to Tobias for slaughter, and if Jack hadn't called, Hannibal would have never gotten there on time.

"Hi, Doctor Lecter," Franklyn mumbled, taking his seat. His eyes were puffy, and Hannibal barely suppressed a grimace. Trying to sound casual, he asked, "Did something happen, Franklyn? You seem upset."

"You haven't heard?" Franklyn's eyes widened. "Tobias, my friend, he is dead. He was that murderer that the newspapers were looking for and one of the FBI agents killed him."

"Oh, that," Hannibal leaned against the back of his chair, regarding Franklyn coolly. "Yes, I have heard about it."

"This is awful!" Franklyn's lower lip began to tremble, his eyes watered. "I can't believe he didn't tell me. I can't believe he was a bad person and I failed to see it."

"We don't always know others as well as we think we do," Hannibal remarked. The anger was still poisoning him, but he knew it wasn't the right time to act on it. "Or we choose not to notice things that point in the direction we don't like."

"So, you think the signs were there and I ignored them?" Franklyn sniffled. "It's even worse. Maybe it's naïve, but I'm still hoping that it was some kind of mistake. If only I could find that agent and ask him what happened—"

This was the perfect opportunity to strike in a way that wouldn't raise suspicions, and Hannibal grabbed it.

"You already know him," he uttered, enjoying the flash of confusion on Franklyn's face. "It's the young man you had a conversation with the other day. The omega. You gave him Tobias' address and he went right to his shop."

"What?!" Franklyn's alarm was loud enough to wake the dead, but Hannibal reveled in it too much to shut him up. "The omega killed Tobias? That strange, bad-smelling, insolent person who came to your office without invitation?"

"Yes," Hannibal replied, his voice transformed from the hostility that flooded him. Bad-smelling? Will? How dared this little worm lie and insult his mate to his face? "His name is Will Graham and the FBI find his talent invaluable. He was investigating the murders and all music stores owners were under suspicion. The fact that you mentioned Tobias made him decide to check his shop first, and when Tobias attacked him, Will killed him."

The sight of horrified Franklyn was endlessly pleasing.

"So... I'm... I'm responsible for Tobias' death?" he asked shrilly. "It's my fault?"

"You shouldn't blame yourself too much," Hannibal soothed. "You couldn't have known that you are sending the death itself to your friend. And look at it from the brighter side — you unknowingly assisted Will in the capture of a wanted killer. You deserve commendation for that."

Franklyn sputtered, looking as if he was going to faint. All his emotions were embarrassingly clear — horror at being a part of his friend's murder, disgust at the knowledge that he'd helped Will, and self-hatred from the fact that at least a part of him felt good about being useful to the FBI.

"I'm sorry," he breathed out finally, jumping up from his seat. "I need to— If I could—"
"Of course," Hannibal said smoothly. "We can cut our appointment short for today, I see that you are unwell."

"No, I, I just meant that—"

Without letting Franklyn finish, Hannibal pushed him toward the door slightly, making sure that his touch seemed caring rather than forceful.

"I'll see you next week," he said, and Franklyn nodded after a pause, even though he didn't move and kept staring at him beseechingly.

With gleeful satisfaction, Hannibal closed the door in his face. It was beyond unprofessional, but he knew that Franklyn would never realize it. Darkly, he wondered if maybe Franklyn's weak psyche would break today and he would never have to see him again in his office.

Thanks to the unexpectedly cut appointment, it was half past five only, so it looked like he was going to get home sooner.

Excited and strangely worried, Hannibal put on his coat and closed his office with clumsy fingers. Then he rushed to his car, feeling as drunk on emotions as he had yesterday, but they all came to a halt when he saw Jack standing next to it.

His hackles raised, Hannibal approached and nodded at him, not trying to hide his displeasure.

"Can I do anything for you, agent Crawford?" he asked.

"Yes," Jack stared at him grimly. "I don't appreciate when people make fools of me, Doctor Lecter. When I came to you, I hoped for your assistance, but it seems to me that you decided to focus on the wrong aspect of the problem."

"Problem," Hannibal echoed. "Are you referring to Will? Because I assure you, nothing about him and me is problematic."

"Your relationship is outrageous," Jack hissed, clenching his fists angrily. "He's your patient—"

"No, he's not."

"...he's young and vulnerable—"

"No, he's not."

"... he was in love with Alana and you just manipulated him in order to—"

"No, he wasn't," Hannibal interrupted sharply. "Will may have liked her, but he was never in love with her. Besides, his feelings are his business. Our relationship has nothing to do with his relationship with Alana, or with you, for that matter. As I've already told you, we spent yesterday's evening and night together. He couldn't have done anything to her."

"I'm not worried about that," Jack sounded frustrated. "Believe it or not, but I care about Will. But you? You've just told me several days ago that there is nothing romantic about you and him. You suspected him of murdering his own father, for God's sake, and now you decided to fuck him?"

"Watch your language," Hannibal hissed. Jack might have seemed amusing at first, but now his crudeness was starting to become bothersome. "If anything, my initial suspicions should prove that regardless of my feelings for Will, I maintain objectivity. He did not kill Alana. It was the Ripper."
"The Ripper?"

"Will thinks so." Hannibal pretended to hesitate. "Will thinks that Tobias Budge was the Ripper's mate, and that now he is danger because he killed him."

Jack was floored. He even took a step back, clearly trying to process the information.

"Why wasn't I informed before?" he asked. "If Budge was the person the Ripper has imprinted on... wait, Budge was an alpha. Are such things even possible or does it mean that the Ripper is an omega?"

"I don't know what it means, agent Crawford," Hannibal said coldly. "I believe it is your job to figure it out."

"If Will is in danger—"

"Will is living with me from now on," Hannibal announced, feeling a ridiculous amount of satisfaction from speaking these words aloud. Jack laughed incredulously.

"He is living with you," he repeated. "Well, you two sure move fast. Still, if Budge had any importance to the Ripper, then you and Will both are in danger. You both killed him."

Hannibal bristled in response to Jack's insinuation.

"I can protect myself and my omega," he said icily. "Now excuse me, but I need to get home. If we require your assistance, agent Crawford, we will inform you."

Under the force of his gaze, Jack moved away from his car reluctantly, and Hannibal got inside, checking the time.

He would still manage to arrive early.

***

The lights were on.

It was the first thing Hannibal noticed when he approached his house. The windows were lit up, and something warm glowed in his chest as he imagined Will there, waiting for him.

For a moment, Hannibal stopped in front of the door, hesitating.

He felt strange. As if he knew that as soon as he stepped inside, nothing would stay the same. Sharing his life with someone so profoundly — did he really want it?

Could he do it? Was he ready for it?

The answer was, undeniably, yes, if the person who was going to share his life was Will.
More confident, Hannibal opened the door, and was immediately greeted by Winston's loud yelps. The annoying dog jumped right on him, pressing his paws against his coat, and Hannibal growled at him in a warning.

Musical laughter filled the hall, and when he looked up, he saw Will leaning against the wall, watching him with amusement. He was dressed in simple domestic clothes, and Hannibal's breath caught when he looked at him, so at home here.

His mate. His Will.

Smiling widely, stupidly, so much that his lips hurt, Hannibal closed the door and moved to meet his partner.

Chapter End Notes

So, the next several chapters will be mostly purely romantic)) A calm before the storm. If you have any wishes as to what kind of romantic moments/situations you would like to see, please feel free to share them and I will try to include them! It's time for the romance to bloom full force. Until everything falls apart ;)}
Long, undisturbed sleep was too unique and gratifying, so Will clung to it almost desperately, hoping to prolong it. To his dimmed surprise, no interruptions came, so he slept, and slept, and slept, until he was sick with it.

Yawning, Will opened his eyes and immediately saw Hannibal. Fully dressed, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at him with a soft smile and holding a wrapped package on his lap.

"Good morning," he said. Will blinked, trying to understand where he was, and then the memories came.

"Good morning," he murmured back, with a smile of his own. Hannibal's attention was dark and heavy due to its intensity, but Will basked in it as if it were sunlight, absorbing the warmth and affection he felt in it. "How long have you been sitting here?"

"Long enough," Hannibal tilted his head, still not taking his eyes off him. "It is nearly ten o'clock. I take it you slept well?"

"Yes," Will stretched, content with how comfortable Hannibal's bed felt. "Why are you dressed, are you going somewhere?"

"I have patients," Hannibal reminded him. "But I wanted to wait for you to wake before I leave. I've brought a gift for you."

"Oh," Will glanced at the package, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. "Is this some kind of tradition? Should alpha and omega exchange gifts when moving in together or something?"

Hannibal laughed, covering his mouth and looking surprised with his own reaction.

"No," he said finally, still smiling. "No. I realize I am old-fashioned, but I assure you, I don't have a list of traditions to follow. This is just something I have promised to get for you, so you would feel safe."

Curious and happy that he'd made Hannibal laugh again, even if it was with his stupidity, Will reached for the package, unwrapped it, and inhaled sharply.

A gun. Small and black, strangely elegant, so shiny that for a moment, Will had a ridiculous thought that it was wet with blood. Shaking his head to clear it, he lifted the gun carefully and checked it from different angles.

"Thank you," he murmured, unsure of what else to say. "I forgot about it already."

"I didn't," Hannibal looked at him gravely. "What happened in the last several weeks unnerved
you, and it is natural. I believe the gun will help you feel more at ease."

"I don't think the Ripper can be stopped with a gun," Will admitted truthfully.

"Why? He is just a man. If he ever tries to hurt you, you will use it, and everything will be over."

The solemn insistency in Hannibal's voice caused more warmth to rush to his chest. Will sighed, putting the gun away and snuggling closer to his overprotective, idealistic partner.

Hannibal seemed surprised and tense for a moment, as if he didn't expect it, but then he relaxed and wrapped his hands around Will, pulling him closer.

It was interesting, monitoring and analyzing Hannibal's reactions to everything. He acted so confidently all the time, like there was nothing in the world that could surprise him, but then he seemed taken aback by the smallest things. Sometimes, Will thought that intimacy was as foreign to Hannibal as it was to him, though it seemed impossible when Hannibal was talking to other people, so cool and composed, at ease, completely unattainable.

He was a mystery, one that Will couldn't wait to learn more about.

"The Ripper feels more as some evil God than just a man to me," Will uttered. Hannibal's steady caresses gave him confidence to say what he had only thought about before. "He's too intelligent, too violent, too careful... too lucky. He's been killing for years and no one has any idea of who he could be. He subdues even strong alphas, the cameras never catch him... I don't think the gun could stop him. I think he would slip in unnoticed, wait for a perfect moment to strike, and then attack before I could even comprehend what's happening. I could have seemed amusing to him, but now that I killed Tobias, I became his enemy. That is, if my theory is right."

"You are not alone any more," Hannibal whispered to him, and the honesty of that whisper burned Will's skin. "I'm with you, and I will stay with you regardless of what is going to happen."

"I'm worried about you," Will whispered back, clutching Hannibal's hand more tightly. "I'm worried that he will hurt you."

He'd said it before, but now, at this moment, the fear suddenly returned full force, choking him and filling him with certainty that the moment he let go of Hannibal, he would be lost, joining his father and Alana.

Will wouldn't survive it. Of this, he was certain.

"My dear," Hannibal said, and while it should have sounded patronizing or trivial, the overwhelming gentleness of it made Will's heart skip a beat. "Nothing will happen to me. And to you. You will have to trust me on this."

Will didn't find the strength to answer, but he let out a contented purr when Hannibal leaned over him and kissed his hair.

"I have to go," he said reluctantly. "I've left a set of keys for you downstairs, in the hall. I will be back at five — will you be here?"

"Where else would I go?" Will rubbed his cheek against Hannibal's hand, hoping that his scent will stick to it to warn off patients like Franklyn. "I don't even know if I have a job. Jack is still paying me, but with his attitude, I'm starting to think that I'll have to look for something else. He's too suspicious to let me near the Ripper again."
"Take your time," Hannibal said. "And please, don't worry about the money."

"I wouldn't worry about it if I had it," Will chuckled mirthlessly. If he was indeed fired, unofficial as his job had been, then he would have to start accepting less than pleasant offers. He had worked as shop assistant and janitor before to survive — the orphanage didn't exactly provide its dwellers with good education, and since he had no money to enter the university, his options had been more than limited. It was this or using the omega card, but since it meant sacrificing the opportunity to join the FBI, Will had chosen the former.

He was lucky to meet Jack, he knew it. Jack had given him a chance where no one would, and losing it now would have been completely unbearable if Hannibal wasn't by his side.

"Alphas provide for their omegas," Hannibal stated, and Will rolled his eyes.

"Old-fashioned," he grumbled. Smiling, Hannibal touched his face briefly before straightening.

"By the way," he said, "your dog is not thrilled with its new home."

"Oh God, Winston!" Will sat up again. "Did he—"

"Yes," Hannibal wrinkled his nose as if just thinking about it was distasteful. "I locked him in the bathroom."

"I'll take care of it," Will promised, not sure whether he should laugh or feel mortified. "I'm sorry. I got used to him leaving the house whenever he wanted, I didn't even think—"

"It's all right," Hannibal assured him, but the expression on his face spoke volumes. "We will think of something."

He was so wonderful, so special, so Will's, that the emotions once again threatened to overwhelm him. When Hannibal reached the door, Will blurted out, "I will miss you."

Hannibal stopped and turned to him, and the look of surprise on his face was quickly masked by a strange blankness. However, when he smiled, his smile was soft, just as his words, "I will miss you, too."

At first, Will went to see Winston. Hannibal had apparently cleaned everything by himself and brought food and water to the bathroom, so another wave of mortification flooded him.

How embarrassing. He had just moved in and he was already causing problems. Hannibal hadn't been happy with Winston to begin with, and now because of Will's recklessness, he must already regret his decision.

"Sorry," Will whispered forlornly when Winston waved his tail and bumped into him in joy. "I will do several things and we will go for a walk, okay?"

Closing the door, he went to take a shower himself, marveling at how big and regal Hannibal's house seemed. Even the bathroom was made from white marble, more fitting for a prince than for anyone else, and Will was too uncomfortable to truly enjoy the experience.

Hannibal had left breakfast for him in the kitchen, and it was so caring that Will forgot about his bad mood, smiling, almost bursting with feelings.
Afterward, he freed Winston and they both went in the search for the nearest park.

He found one quickly, but people who were there at this time made him frown.

Omegas, mainly, all with their dogs. Winston wasn't the only not purebred dog here, but Will was the only scruffy-looking omega. When several women sent him scathing, disgusted looks, he realized what kind of hell he had accidentally walked in here.

These were probably the wives of rich alphas, all polished and trendy, and his presence was disrupting their royal routine.

Annoyed, Will approached one of the benches and sat down on it, taking out his phone. After all, what better place was there for making this particular call?

"Will?" Jack sounded surprised. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"I know," Will said through gritted teeth. "I wasn't expecting to call you either, but I need to know if I still have a job."

"What?"

Taking a deep breath, Will repeated, "Do I still have a job? Or are you firing me because I'm a suspect now?"

Only silence answered him, and when he was ready to hang up, Jack finally spoke.

"You do have a job. I will contact you soon with the details. As for being a suspect... nothing is decided for now, but Doctor Lecter has given you an alibi and I have reasons to believe him. So, I have no intention of arresting you."

_For now_, sounded in the pause, but Will felt too pathetically relieved to let it affect him.

"Fine," he said curtly. "I'll be waiting."

He hung up and took another deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment.

So, he wasn't jobless. It was already something. And if he and Hannibal lasted...

"I'm sorry, may I sit here?" some woman asked. Without waiting for his answer, she lowered herself onto Will's bench and glanced at his clothes with clear censure. "What is your name?"

"Will."

"Will," she repeated, like even the sound of his name offended her. "Who are you with?"

"My dog," Will answered slowly, staring at her as if she was an idiot. The woman picked up on it and tensed, the mask of disapproval becoming even more apparent.

"Naturally," she said. "But I meant your partner."

"Why do you think I have one?"

The woman frowned.

"Your parents, then?" she said thoughtfully. "This is the first time I see you here—"
"Imagine that."

"—and, you are an omega, sort of, so it is rather surprising. We all know each other here," she made a vague gesture. "It is always interesting to meet new people, I'm sure you understand."

"I'm afraid I don't," Will snapped, at the end of his rope now. The woman's lips thinned, though she still attempted to give him a fake smile.

"Of course you don't," she agreed. "You are rather... uncommon. You probably wonder who I am — my name is—"

"Sorry, not interested," Will whistled to get Winston's attention, got up, and left, feeling the annoying stranger's outrage with his back.

What a horrible encounter. He would have to find another park, somewhere far away from this neighborhood.

Will was satisfied with himself, but as soon as he approached the house, his satisfaction evaporated.

God. He had set Hannibal up with his behavior. If these omegas lived nearby, then Hannibal probably knew them, they were probably frequent guests at his parties. And if they ever saw them together, they would make the connection, and Hannibal would be embarrassed. Again.

Upset, Will entered the house and locked it, wondering if things could get worse.

Two times of being a failure.

And it was only the first morning.

***

After several hours, Will felt much better. After the park, the house began to feel like a sanctuary, and he had spent several hours exploring every room and shamelessly leaving his scent in each one. It was embarrassing, really, how needy he felt, how he tried to persuade himself of the permanence of his place in Hannibal's life. He had finished unpacking his things and hung his painting on the wall in the dinning room. Perhaps it was a strange choice, but for some reason, he felt like it was the best option.

He only hoped that Hannibal wouldn't mind.

Before Hannibal's arrival, Will decided to cook dinner. As much as he lacked passion for cooking when he was doing it for himself, cooking for Hannibal was turning out to be an unexpected pleasure. Here, in the kitchen, he felt truly at home, and even countless appliances stopped seeming so intimidating.

When Hannibal finally came, the dinner was ready. Without waiting for him to take his coat off, Will threw himself in Hannibal's arms and kissed him, uncaring if he looked like a stereotypical,
"How were your patients?" he murmured when they finally broke apart, Hannibal's eyes dazed and slightly unfocused.

"Irritating, as always," he replied, trying to angle his head so his nose would be at Will's throat. When Will slipped away, Hannibal blinked and growled in annoyance.

"Dinner first," Will told him. "Nothing exquisite, but I hope you will like it."

"You don't have to repeat it," Hannibal said, staring at him. "The mere fact of you cooking for me is enough."

"I can't believe you actually said it," laughter escaped him on its own. "You are ridiculous."

Hannibal looked like he had received the best compliment of his life, and Will laughed again, feeling almost delirious with happiness.

How had he ever survived without this?

During dinner, they talked about their day briefly, but Will avoided telling Hannibal about the park. He wasn't sure who Hannibal would find rude, that woman or Will himself, and disappointing him so soon was out of question.

"Did Jack say if he's going to need your assistance tomorrow? Particularly, in the evening?" Hannibal asked, pushing the empty plate away and taking a glass of wine instead.

"No, he just said that he will contact me soon. Why?" Will glanced at him curiously.

"There is a wonderful performance in the Opera House tomorrow. I would like us to go there together."

"Opera," Will repeated, dumbfounded. His appetite vanished, and he stared at his plate mournfully. "Do you really want me to go with you?"

"Yes," even without looking at him, Will knew that Hannibal was staring again, gauging his reaction.

Going together to the Opera House. Where all these people would be present, probably half of those terrible polished omegas from the park. Where everyone would look at him and Hannibal and see how badly they fit together.

"Will," Hannibal stood up and walked to him, sinking to his knees. Astonished, Will faltered, and Hannibal used it to take his face into his hands, gently but firmly, probably making sure that he wasn't going to bolt. "I understand that you might have problems with social interaction, but you can't hide forever. It will be difficult at first, but you will get used to it."

"Why would I get used to it?" Will wondered. "You are a public person, and I am not. I don't like people and they don't like me."

"I like you," Hannibal interrupted him. "And you are my mate, so I believe you will have to start appearing by my side sooner or later."

The shock paralyzed him for a moment. Hannibal frowned, studying his face, clearly not
understanding the reason for his silence, so Will shook his head and forced out, "Since when am I your mate?"

Hannibal froze, a shadow flickering across his face. Chuckling, Will leaned over and kissed his nose, feeling overjoyed again.

"It's nice, knowing that you think of me that way," he murmured. "But we really have only moved in together. You know that to become mates, both people either imprint on each other or, which happens more frequently, seal their bond with a claiming bite during a heat or a rut. So, calling me your mate is a bit premature, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Hannibal countered. He looked calm again, and Will couldn't help but be impressed with how quickly Hannibal could adapt to his own mistakes. "I do not give my affection easily, Will. In all my life, I have never felt interest in calling anyone my partner. You are the first one, the only one, so I believe mating is just a matter of time."

Floored from such honesty, Will said nothing. Hannibal, probably sensing his weakness, kissed him on the lips, and when he pulled away, his eyes were glistening with something downright predatory.

"So, will you come with me?" he asked.

"Yes," Will said helplessly.

How could he resist?

***

Of course, it was easier said than done. Hannibal had gone to work, and Will was left with knowledge that this evening, he was going to become a target for censure and unflattering looks. Whatever Hannibal said, he was probably expecting Will to be at his best today, and he didn't even have a suit, for God's sake.

Hannibal had once again left breakfast for him and a deliciously-looking snack for Winston. Will allowed himself to enjoy it for a moment, to bask in this evidence of Hannibal's strange devotion to him and to the dog that he didn't even like.

In the end, it only strengthened his desire to correspond to Hannibal's status today, so if they attracted attention, it was only a good kind of it.

Checking his available balance, Will walked Winston, left him in the house, and took a bus to the center.

He had no idea which shop to choose, so he wandered into the first one that didn't look too intimidating. There were different kinds of suits there, and two smiling shop assistants offered their suggestions.
It is stupid, to pay so much for some suit, Will thought, studying his reflection. All suits looked the same to him, but eventually, he stopped his choice on a dark blue one. The assistants approved of it, although he was sure they would approve even if he dressed himself in yellow and purple, so Will paid an obscene amount of money and left the shop with a certainty that he had done something stupid. The suit was expensive by his standards, but Hannibal would hardly think so. Maybe what he had bought was awful?

Alternating between joy and worry, Will looked at the time and then spontaneously changed his route. Hannibal's office was not far from here, and the longing to see him had suddenly became completely unbearable.

At the sight of a familiar building, Will's heart began to beat frantically, and he stormed into Hannibal's office without thinking, the words of greeting on his tongue. Then he froze, realizing belatedly that he had once again entered in the rudest manner possible, without even knocking.

But what was even more mortifying was the fact that Hannibal was with a female patient, and her face was sickeningly familiar.

The obnoxious woman from the park.

Could the world really be so small?

"Will," the way Hannibal's face lit up was the only comfort in this horrible situation. The woman stiffened and sent him a wounded look, and the force of jealousy that suddenly pierced through Will was surprising.

For some reason, he hadn't thought of Hannibal treating omega patients. He'd imagined his patients being betas or occasional alphas, but omegas — it was too much. It was impossible to understand how Hannibal could have spent so many years unmated when he faced numerous truly beautiful omegas every day.

The woman glared at him and rubbed her hand against the armchair, obviously leaving her scent on it.

Bristling, Will turned to Hannibal and tried to smile.

"I need to talk to you for several minutes. Right now."

"Of course," Hannibal stood up immediately. "Emily, I apologize. I will be right back."

Will had no idea what he was doing. He had lost control over the situation when he barged in like some idiot, so all he could do now was follow his basic instincts.

When Hannibal closed the door, Will grabbed him by the neck and kissed him, boldly and openly, his tongue slipping into Hannibal's mouth and exploring his. Hannibal breathed out right into his mouth and buried his fingers in Will's hair, tugging and caressing it simultaneously.

When the kiss broke, Will pressed his teeth to Hannibal's neck and bit it slightly, not enough to hurt, but enough to leave his mark. When he pulled back, he saw that Hannibal was staring at him with incredibly soft eyes, looking dazed and smitten, as if Will's clumsy attempt at ownership was charming instead of embarrassing.

"You are a horror and a delight," he murmured, and Will nuzzled his neck again, almost purring. "I am happy you came to see me."
"I wanted to tell you that I bought a suit for today," Will pulled back again. "I'm sorry I came without invitation and interrupted your appointment once again. I promise it won't—"

"Hush," Hannibal kissed the corner of his mouth lightly. "My appointments can wait."

This time Will did purr and tilted his head, mindlessly demonstrating his neck. Hannibal inhaled and pulled him closer possessively, his grip strong and desirable.

For a second, Will thought about having sex right here, right now, with this Emily being just behind the closed door. But it would be beyond rude, and Hannibal would never agree even despite his strange lenient attitude.

"I have to go," Will said reluctantly. "Come home soon, okay?"

"It's just a few more hours," Hannibal promised. "I'll see you very soon."

Will went to the door, knowing that Hannibal was following him with his gaze, and the satisfaction from it was burning brightly in his chest.

Omega or not, Emily would understand exactly whose mate Hannibal was after this.

Maybe opera wasn't that bad of an idea if it meant that everyone would see.

Then again, Emily was just one person. Could he handle the evening where everyone would be like her?

Well, Will mused, *they would find out tonight.*

***

Hannibal was torn about the suit, that much was obvious. He seemed to like the color and how it looked on Will, but the overall quality of the fabric had left him dissatisfied.

Will wasn't sure how to feel about it. His confidence was fading with every hour, and after Hannibal's dual reaction, it soon reached the true low. When they arrived to the Opera House, Will felt sick with nerves, and even Hannibal's comforting presence didn't help.

"Relax," Hannibal whispered, stroking his back soothingly. "You look wonderful. The suit is passable and honestly, much better than I had expected. Next time, we will meet with my tailor, but this will do for now."

"Next time," Will echoed grimly. "Are you sure there will be next time?"

"Of course," Hannibal frowned. "I hope this experience won't be completely distasteful to you and you will want to come back."

*I doubt it,* Will thought, but didn't dare to voice his thoughts. He wasn't going to like this visit, he knew it, but what scared him most was the very real fact that this event could change Hannibal's mind about him.
Faced with Emily alone, Will could fight. She didn't think highly of him and he didn't give a shit. But Emily was just a patient. Surely some of Hannibal's friends would be here today, and their disapproval could cost him everything.

Why hadn't he chosen a more expensive suit? Passable wasn't exactly a compliment.

Why had he agreed to go in the first place?

His turmoil intensified when they took off their coats and went upstairs. There were alphas, betas, omegas in beautiful suits or dresses everywhere, all whispering to each other and moving restlessly. Fortunately, the performance was about to start and he and Hannibal had the entire balcony for themselves, so they didn't spend much time socializing.

Will tried to hide the relief he felt and squeezed Hannibal's fingers in his, sending him a small smile.

When the light darkened, he relaxed fully and focused on a woman on stage. She slowly walked forward, lowered her head... and then she began to sing.

Will had never been a fan of opera, but he couldn't help but feel fascinated. It was everything — the rich atmosphere, the deep voice of a singer, Hannibal who sat near him, staring not at the woman directly, but somewhere above her head, with the expression of an almost painful pleasure. Watching him was even more fascinating, so Will could barely force himself to look away. Everything blended, and when the first act reached its end, he stood up, feeling his head spin.

"Did you enjoy it?" Hannibal asked hoarsely. Will opened his mouth to answer, but then closed it again, thinking.

"It was intense," he said finally. He wasn't sure if it was enough, but Hannibal nodded with a satisfied look, as if it was exactly what he had hoped to hear.

Will was still plunged in his impressions when a grating voice exclaimed, "Doctor Lecter!"

Knowing who he was going to see, he hesitated for a moment, but then took a deep breath and turned. Hannibal took his hand casually, and if they weren't in front of everyone, Will would have sent him a grateful look.

Emily was standing next to them, dressed in bright yellow dress, surrounded by two men and three other women. They all stared at Hannibal as if he was their personal God, and Will barely held off the impulse to snarl.

Surely Hannibal wasn't the only good-looking alpha here. Why was everyone so attracted to him specifically? Was it the quiet but endless power he emanated? Or the predatory danger that his seemingly relaxed position was hiding? Will hadn't gotten enough glimpses of it, but a part of him felt that it was always there, waiting.

It would have been entirely intoxicating, but not when their relationship was threatened.

"Good evening, Emily," Hannibal bowed his head, and Will gritted his teeth, glaring at the floor. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you!" Emily might have been a more serious competitor than Franklyn, but she was gushing in a very similar way. "Did you like the performance?"

"Immensely," Hannibal squeezed Will's fingers again. "Please, let me introduce my partner, Will
"Your... partner?" Emily drawled in a fake surprise, like she hadn't realized it back in the afternoon.

"My pleasure," Will said, smiling at her just as fakely.

"It is indeed a surprise, Doctor Lecter," ignoring him, Emily stared at Hannibal as if he had somehow betrayed her. "I thought you said you weren't planning on building a relationship with him?"

Will tensed, but Hannibal raised their intertwined hands and kissed his knuckles sensually.

"It seems you have misunderstood me," he said, and while his voice remained pleasant, there was an underlying dangerous note in it. "When I said I wasn't planning on bonding with anyone, I hadn't met Will yet. Ironically, it happened that same day, shortly after our conversation."

Two ugly red spots appeared on Emily's face. Murmuring an apology, she moved to another group of people, and Hannibal kissed his knuckles again, looking at him with so much affection that Will tried to relax.

Unfortunately, it was hopeless. Other people came in Emily's place, and apart from polite greeting, they refused to even look at Will. One man in particular sneered at him openly, saying, "Well, Hannibal, I guess I can see the appeal. He is certainly... young."

Will flushed, and starting from then, his misery didn't allow him to check what Hannibal was thinking. He just kept staring elsewhere, willing for this evening to pass, and only then did he realize that with his silence, he was proving everyone else's opinion of him — that he was a brainless toy good for one thing only. Worse, it didn't reflect badly just on him, it damaged Hannibal's image as well. Instead of seeming mysterious and intriguing, he was probably starting to appear shallow and primitive for having chosen a partner like him, and the thought of it killed the last bit of Will's hope.

"I'm sorry, I need some fresh air," he said, and without waiting for an answer, hastened toward the stairs. On his way out he saw Emily whose eyes were glued to Hannibal, and the open adoration in them made him stop.

Feeling his stare, Emily turned to him, and Will snarled at her like he had wanted to all this time.

Emily recoiled, cowering involuntarily as an omega who admitted another omega's superiority and dominance, and then she bared her own teeth angrily, obviously frustrated with her initial reaction.

Satisfied with this small victory, Will continued to move down the stairs, and he startled when someone grabbed his shoulder. However, even before he could turn, his body relaxed, recognizing the touch.

"Are you all right?" Hannibal asked softly.

"No," Will answered, refusing to look at him. There was a pause, and then Hannibal said hesitantly, "Do you want to— "

"Yes. I'm leaving," Will finally gathered his courage and turned to face him. "You should stay, it is your world."

"You said you liked the performance."
"I liked the performance, not people who you socialize with. If it wasn't clear before that I'm a shitty omega, it sure as hell is now."

"Will—"

"There is no point in denying it!" Will exclaimed, suddenly uncaring if someone could hear them. The situation couldn't get worse anyway. "I'm graceless, I don't understand half of what they are saying, I don't feel as thrilled with opera as they do — I couldn't even pick a normal suit! I am a wrong omega for you, and I will never be able to correspond to your status. So, maybe we should just—"

Hannibal suddenly jerked him to his chest and forcefully pressed Will's face to his neck. Will breathed in, confused, and then breathed in again. Again, and again, and again, until the anxiety and the shock started to wane, and calmness flooded him instead. Strangely, it brought a new kind of pain, and to his shame, Will felt how his eyes watered.

"It doesn't change anything," he said dully. "No one in their right mind would say that you and I fit together."

"I am saying it," Hannibal replied. "And I assure you, my mind is very clear. This evening was far from perfect, but it wasn't nearly as disastrous as you imagine it to be. It is a new environment for you, and it's understandable. In the future, these occasions will stop seeming terrible to you, and perhaps you will start to enjoy them. If not, I'm not going to force you to come with me again. You can stay at home or go somewhere else, and I will always, always return to you. And if you try to run, I will always bring you back."

The icy promise in Hannibal's words was like a glass of soothing water. Will wrapped his hands around Hannibal's neck tightly, still breathing into it, and he sighed in contentment when Hannibal hugged him back, with so much strength that breathing became difficult.

Will never wanted to let go, or to be let go.

***

Something woke him. Some strange, unnamed sensation of coldness and emptiness, and Will sat up, squinting and trying to recognize the shapes in the dark. After a moment, he understood what was wrong.

It was the middle of the night, and Hannibal wasn't in bed with him.
When the girl stopped struggling and went slack in his arms, Hannibal kept holding her for a few more minutes, making sure that she was indeed dead before letting her go.

As he moved away, the corpse fell onto the ground, with no sign of grace that this young omega had liked to exhibit — at least in the company of her friends.

He regarded her impassively, considering the ways he could position her in for the FBI to find. The old, cheap piece of wiping rag around her neck in combination with her expensive clothes was enough to reflect what he wanted to convey, but it did not present the whole picture.

Grabbing the corpse by the hair with his gloved hand, Hannibal dragged it toward the closest bin and dumped it nearby.

It wasn’t a particularly artful display, nothing that would normally make the police or the FBI suspect the work of the Chesapeake Ripper, but considering the choice of victim and the way she was seemingly purposelessly killed… yes, this would attract the attention of all the right people. And, most importantly, the attention of Will.

Will would never know that this girl, once haughty and lively, was a daughter of a very influential man, one that had deemed it acceptable to make belittling remarks about him throughout the evening. Sadly, there had been quite a number of men like that at the opera. Men and women alike.

Hannibal would gladly take scalpel to all of them, but there were limits that he had to stick to.

He could not risk punishing George Morhov directly, but he would take his daughter instead. And send a message to his Will in the process.

Satisfied, Hannibal turned and moved toward darkness.

Toward home.
The house was silent. Hannibal closed the door, removed his coat, and then stopped in indecision.

On the second thought, perhaps it was not a good idea to go in the search of Miss Morhov tonight. It had been easy to establish her location through her social media platforms, but he could have done it any other day. Leaving Will in bed wasn’t a wise decision, especially at this point, when he so obviously needed reassurance.

Still, it was too late to change anything, so all he could do now was take a shower and get back to bed as soon as possible.

Quietly, Hannibal walked upstairs, and nearly jumped when a dark form suddenly threw itself at him. Only after a second he realized that it was Winston, and he rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Stupid dog. Instead of protecting Will, he was greeting him cheerfully, trying to reach Hannibal’s face with his tongue, probably expecting treats as the reward.

Shaking his head, Hannibal approached the guest bathroom. Then stopped, hesitating, and with a curse, went to the kitchen, sullenly bringing out home-made sausages.

It was almost four when he finally crept into the room, having washed all possible smells of death off his skin. Will was sleeping, and Hannibal was hit with a surge of affection so powerful, it nearly stopped his breathing.

He stood there for a while, and experienced the second shock for today when Will’s voice said, “Get back to bed. It’s gone cold.”

Finding words was suddenly difficult.

“You are awake?” Hannibal asked slowly, buying himself some time while his mind hectically tried to come up with excuse.

Why had he been so confident that Will would remain asleep? The least he could have done was think of what he would say in this kind of situation.

Will sent him a smile, although it seemed dimmed in the darkness.

“I got too used to sleeping next to you already,” he said softly. “I feel when you are not there.”

Just like that, his confidence returned, and Hannibal finally crawled into bed.

“I’m sorry if I worried you,” he said calmly, reaching out to touch Will’s face. “Sometimes, when I need to think, I go out.”

“I understand,” Will sighed, and the unhappiness that emanated from him made Hannibal frown. “You had a lot to think of after today.”

“Not at all,” Hannibal whispered. The tenderness he felt was almost painful, and when he pulled Will closer, his hands were trembling for some reason. “I am happy that you are here. I am— I—”

Awkward words born out of awkward, unfamiliar emotions were boiling in him, bursting out against his will. Understanding that he was being a fool, Hannibal clenched his teeth tightly, refusing to speak again.

Will didn’t say anything, just sent him a mysterious look and then snuggled closer to him.
“Good night,” he murmured.

Hannibal breathed in his smell, tightened his grip around him, and wished for this moment, and for this night, to never end.

***

When he woke up in the morning, the bed was empty. Frowning, Hannibal touched the pillow that still held the traces of Will’s warmth, and then noticed a piece of paper on it. His curiosity flared, and he carefully brought it closer to his eyes.

Hunger can be vicious,
But it’s not a crime.
Feelings are capricious,
They pay brain no mind.
Standing among others,
My annoyance thrives.
When I see you there, though,
I just feel alive.
Thanks for being here,
And for choosing me,
Regardless of the reasons.
I finally feel free.

P.S. I’m sorry for yesterday. I acted stupidly and I probably embarrassed you. I promise it won’t happen again. I will try to make you not regret anything in the future.

Will

Hannibal reached the end and then re-read the words slowly, knowing that his face was blank out of his inability to decide what to feel. He caressed the piece of paper thoughtfully, imagining Will sitting next to him, biting his lip in concentration, writing his feelings down. The poem was awkward, far from what he could call an art of literature, but he couldn’t stop devouring it over and over again, trying to drink every emotion of Will in.
Uncertainty. Wonder. A sense of embarrassment, evidently. But above it all, gratefulness that made Hannibal’s chest hurt.

He wasn’t sure he wanted Will to be grateful to him. Not knowing everything that he did.

If Will learned the truth… he would not just hate him.

The truth would destroy him.

Troubled, Hannibal carefully folded the poem, went to his wardrobe, and hid it in the pocket of the suit he was going to wear today.

He needed it close.

***

“I don’t want to talk about me today,” Emily said decisively. “I want to talk about you.”

Hannibal had to breathe in deeply to avoid showing how irritated he felt.

“Isn’t the goal of your therapy to understand yourself better?” he asked. “We are here to discuss you, not me.”

“But there are some things about you that worry me, and considering that you are my psychiatrist, this is just unacceptable. You told me that you are not planning to make a family — you told me that just recently! And now you brought that omega with you, and you introduced him to everyone, and he’s just not the… he is not of our—”

“Emily,” Hannibal interrupted her, staring at her unblinkingly. “My relationship will not be a subject of discussions during our sessions.”

“I understand!” Emily’s indignant blush was spreading across her skin. “I understand, but… this is not fair. Surely there are worthier omegas for you out there. He doesn’t have any manners — he snarled at me!”

Hannibal blinked, taken aback.

“Snarled at you?” he repeated.

“Yes!” Emily’s indignant blush was spreading across her skin. “Don’t you agree that this is rude?”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal agreed, secretly reveling in the new-found knowledge. Will must have taken Emily for a threat to do something like that, and wasn’t his possessiveness the most fascinating thing? “But it is equally rude to try to paint an omega in a negative light in front of his alpha.”

Emily fell silent, but hurt kept brimming in her eyes.

“It is not fair,” she repeated, her voice breaking. “It is not fair that you chose him.”
This embarrassing display was making Hannibal’s skin crawl, his fingers itching with desire to wrap themselves around Emily’s neck and break it. However, two dead omegas in a day, especially with one of them being his patient, would certainly draw attention to him, so after a brief pause, Hannibal stretched his lips in an empty smile.

“Please sit down, Emily,” he said softly. “And we can discuss the reasons for your irrational reaction.”

Looking miserable, Emily obeyed, staring at her painted nails.

Someday, Hannibal promised himself.

***

Will’s call came right after he had finished his last session. Hannibal smiled at his phone, feeling warmth emanating from his pocket, where Will’s short note was lying.

“Good afternoon, Will,” he purred.

“Uhm, hi,” Will sounded awkward, as if he wasn’t sure how to speak to him. They hadn’t seen each other since Will’s little present since Will had gone out with Winston — perhaps deliberately, to avoid him. “There’s been another murder. Jack thinks it’s the Ripper, and from what he told me, I agree. Could you come, too? I just… it’s not important, especially if you are busy, but I would like you to be there.”

“Of course,” Hannibal assured him. Elation was making him smile widely and openly, now that no one could see him. “I am on my way.”

Will chuckled.

“On your way where?” he asked. “I haven’t told you the address yet.”

Hannibal’s smile froze. The fear sent a sudden wave of adrenaline through his veins, but he tried to sound normal as he said, “You can tell me while I’m walking to my car.”

The danger passed. Will continued speaking to him, but Hannibal could hardly hear him through the white noise filling his ears.

Close. He had come close to making a mistake again — too close. And what a stupid mistake it was.

He was losing his touch. He was losing his control. He was rapidly approaching the point where seeing him for who he was would be pathetically easy, and then…

And then nothing.

Shuddering, Hannibal murmured the words of good bye to Will and hung up, staring at his car unseeingly.
He had to get himself under control, and fast. Such mistakes were unforgivable and they couldn’t occur in the future, not ever again.

Will couldn’t know — and he wouldn’t.

Whatever the cost.

***

The crime scene was overcrowded. There were journalists, policemen, medical teams, and the representatives of the FBI, including grim-faced Jack. Will was there already, standing near the dumpster, studying the corpse with his eyes.

As always feeling the rush of myriad emotions at the sight of him, Hannibal approached, satisfied when he was let in without any questions.

“Is this the victim?” he asked, letting doubt color his voice. “It doesn’t look like the Ripper’s typical display.”

“Just look attentively at who that is,” Jack said darkly. Hannibal breathed in loudly and then took a step back, wearing a mask of shock.

“Omega,” he murmured.

“Yes,” Jack’s lips tightened. “Who would do something like that other than that bastard?”

“Technically, there are instances when omegas are murdered…” Hannibal began, but he was interrupted by Will.

“Not like this,” he said. “She wasn’t raped, she wasn’t taken anywhere or sold. Of course her family was prohibited from arriving here, but they confirmed that she was fine yesterday — she was partying with her friends. The murderer cornered her and strangled her. That’s it.”

“This case is going to send the government itself after us,” Jack noted. “Omega dead, killed like this, thrown in the dumpster.”

“It’s the Ripper,” Will whispered, his eyes glazed over, and Hannibal couldn’t help but admire the way he looked at this moment. “He’s sending a message.”

“To whom?”

“I’m… not sure,” Will closed his eyes. “He wanted to show how meaningless he thinks omegas are. In general. How despite her beauty, her status, she was worth nothing more than being strangled with this old rag and thrown in the dumpster.”

“But why?” Jack demanded, and Hannibal assessed him with narrowed gaze, willing him to shut up. “Why would he want to send this kind of message now? And what kind of alpha would be able to do something like this to an omega, for such a non-existent reason?”
“I don’t know,” Will looked up and stared into Hannibal’s eyes. “He is proving himself to someone. Proving his devotion. Perhaps to his mate. I thought it was Tobias, but now… it almost seems like…”

“Like what?” Jack snapped impatiently.

Will’s eyes lingered on Hannibal, then moved back to the girl.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I stopped understanding him. I have no idea what motivates him at this point, but he’s an alpha. That’s the only thing I’m currently sure of.”

“And I’m not sure of it at all,” Jack drummed his fingers against one of the dumpsters, agitated. “Alphas cannot hurt an omega like that. Sexually assaulting them and choking them in a fit of passion? Maybe. But strangling an omega in cold blood, showing such disdain? I don’t know if it’s even possible physically.”

“Well, it must be, because he’s an alpha and he did it,” Will snapped. “I’m sorry, Jack, there is really nothing more I can do. All bets are off now that he’s imprinted on someone. He’s acting chaotically, with no cold precision he loved to demonstrate before, no clear scheme. I can’t predict him.”

“But you feel him, don’t you?” Jack pressed. “Tell me. What is he feeling now?”

“He’s happy,” Will pressed his hands to his forehead, as if he was getting a headache. “He’s happy and he’s scared at the same time.”

“Scared?” Jack jumped at the chance. “Why? Does it mean he has made a mistake and now he knows we are going to get him?”

“I’m not a medium!” Hannibal stepped forward when Will’s voice rose. “I can’t tell you why he’s feeling that, I just know that he is. Hannibal—”

At the sound of his name, Hannibal immediately stepped between Will and Jack, though in a way so it wouldn’t seem openly aggressive.

“Jack, I would like to examine the body myself,” he said aloud, and Jack nodded.

“I’m glad that you offered, Doctor. We have our team there, but they all seem too stricken — even betas, so your help would be appreciated.”

Hannibal accepted the gloves and kneeled near dead Ms. Morhov, feeling Will’s eyes on him.

It was a performance, not an actual examination, but Hannibal knew he must look effective enough for others not to bother him. After a while, he stood up, shaking his head ruefully.

“I can’t add anything substantial,” he said. “Strangulation, no traces of sexual assault. No visible prints, neither on the body itself nor around it. But of course your team should take another look, Jack.”

“Of course,” Jack agreed, although he sounded resigned. “Thank you. Will, if you get anything else, call me. Immediately. I’ll send you the photos if you need them.”

“Okay,” Will murmured, his attention clearly elsewhere.

The journalists rushed to them as soon as they stepped outside the tape, and Hannibal sent him a
withering gaze, urging them to stay away.

“Would you like to go somewhere?” he asked when they approached his car. Will still seemed distracted, but when their eyes met, his expression softened.

“Just home,” he said. “Maybe we could order something in?”

“Order something in?” Hannibal knew that his horror at the suggestion must be palpable. “Nonsense. I will cook us whatever you would like to have.”

“Okay,” a smile touched Will’s lips. “But I will help you.”

Eating somewhere outside of the dining room was despicable. Eating on the floor, on the carpet, in front of the fireplace? Before, Hannibal would have never even considered such indecency, and yet…

And yet, the fire was crackling in the fireplace, its warm flickers bathing Will in soft, orange glow, and this sight was so breathtakingly beautiful that Hannibal would gladly agree to eat without the plate, just for the opportunity to keep seeing it.

“I had to hide that I’m an omega in the orphanage,” Will was saying. His eyes were distant again, and Hannibal wanted to reach out, to bring him back from the past. Bring him back home, to him. “It was difficult. I was always trying to get the suppressants, mostly by stealing because few people were ready to sell them to someone like me.”

“Why?” Hannibal wondered. “Life couldn’t be good there. If your status had been discovered, you would have been taken to a much better, safer place.”

“I know,” Will looked at him, and the sadness and frustration in his eyes made Hannibal frown. “But then I wouldn’t be able to do anything about my plan. You know what they do with omegas. They would have never let me join the FBI, and it was my goal for years. I could never have access to the Ripper without them, and catching the Ripper was my only reason for living. Eventually, I got what I wanted, but it was hell. I can imagine how pleased he would be to know that.”

Now deeply uncomfortable, Hannibal cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He knew that Will would never understand the sincerity of his words, but saying them was the least he could do.

“Don’t be,” Will sighed, curling against him and stretching his legs closer to the fireplace. “It was nothing compared to the fact that I lost my father. He gave me everything. Everything. I didn’t just lose a parent — I lost my friend. My only ally. And the thing that’s driving me absolutely crazy is the reason why he could have become the Ripper’s victim.”

Rudeness, Hannibal thought darkly.
“Rudeness,” Will echoed. “My father was rude. He was not the crudest man, and he was always gentle with me, but with other people, considering our life circumstances… I guess he could be too harsh sometimes. I don’t know how they met each other — we lived in a shithole, so someone like the Ripper could have only been there by accident. Maybe he was traveling, maybe he was on a business trip. Did my father stomp on his foot without apologizing? Did he ruin his undoubtedly expensive suit? I want to know, but it also terrifies me. Because if I learn that it was something insignificant, something stupid, I might go crazy,” Will choked out a laugh, and Hannibal watched him silently, thinking, ‘Fish. He tried to sell me deficient fish, claiming it was fresh when it obviously wasn’t.’

He had no doubt that these words would cost him Will forever if he ever heard them.

So they would stay buried. Forever.

“Today, in your poem, you said that you finally feel free,” the words fell from his lips as if they wanted to be spoken themselves. “So, could you ever forgive him? Could you ever forgive the Ripper and move on?”

Will’s eyes flew wide open. He stared at him, looking pale and vulnerable, but also as if he was genuinely considering his question.

Tension was rising, and Hannibal couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, waiting for his answer. Finally, Will’s mouth opened, and he whispered, “No. I know you mean well, that you have my best interests at heart, but no. I could never forgive him. And I won’t stop until one of us stops another.”

The disappointment and dread were so profound, Hannibal closed his eyes for a second, unable to keep looking at Will. Bitterness, resignation, and fear choked him, but with the last bits of efforts, he ruthlessly pushed them down and glanced at Will again. Out of their own volition, his hands gripped Will’s neck, and Hannibal crushed their lips together, kissing him desperately and deeply, trying to ignore the vision of a clock that was suddenly haunting his mind, but hearing it tick.

His hands were trembling again.

He did not care.

He was going to take everything while he still could.
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much! Unfortunately, I am still sick, but it was amazing to wake up to many wonderful comments. Thank you, and I hope you'll enjoy the new chapter - we are finally *there* ;)

“I didn’t think I could ever feel like that,” Morhov was looking at Hannibal’s chair dully, his eyes red and puffy. “Like everything is falling apart and I just don’t have the power to go on. Things that interested me before seem empty now, they offer me no relief. All my thoughts are about my daughter — I want to see her, to hear her voice, but I know it will never happen. I’m sorry—”

Sniffling, Morhov hide his face in his handkerchief, and Hannibal stared at him blankly, wondering if he should feel anything but cruel irony.

Mr. Morhov had deemed it acceptable to insult his partner, and now, having lost his daughter, he had dared to come to him for therapy. It would be beyond amusing to let him know that he sought help from his daughter’s murderer, but such risk wouldn’t be wise at this point.

Shifting his face to a more sympathetic mask, Hannibal said, “Losing a loved one is always difficult. Grieving, on the other hand, is natural, and with time, the wound will heal.”

“I don’t think I can believe in that,” Morhov choked out, his lips trembling. “How can I ever stop thinking about some sick bastard hunting my daughter, strangling her, and throwing her away like garbage? Something like this was never supposed to happen!”

Boring, predictable, typical. If there was one thing that could be entertaining here, it was attempting to drive Morhov to suicide. In such vulnerable state, he wouldn’t fight long, and of course no one would suspect anything.

However, before Hannibal could start, Morhov suddenly asked, “Have you ever lost someone dear to you?”

Immediately annoyed, Hannibal shook his head.

“We are here to discuss you, not me, Mr. Morhov,” he remarked. How many times did he have to repeat it to different patients?

“I just can’t imagine it,” Morhov gave him a shaky smile. “I have always admired you very deeply. Envied you, even. Looking at you, it seems like you are having a perfect life. The only thing you ever lacked was a mate, and now you have finally gotten together with that young omega, so your life is complete.”

Before, Hannibal would feel contempt at these most primitive human feelings, but this time, something in Morhov’s words unnerved him.

It almost sounded as if Morhov looked forward to his life falling apart, to him losing the most important person in his life too. Again. And his mention of Will instantly raised dark thoughts that kept plaguing Hannibal’s mind every day as it was.
“Seeing someone else suffer might indeed lessen the weight of your loss, but not for long,” Hannibal’s voice was colder than normal, but he didn’t care. “The best thing you could do is learn something from it. Do you know why I am not worried about my omega?”

“Why?” for a second, Morhov seemed too fascinated by the chance to know something personal about him to remember about his daughter. Hannibal’s lips twisted in a semblance of smile.

“Because I have never appreciated stereotypes, and neither did he. As you have mentioned during the evening at the opera, Will’s manners do no resemble those of typical omegas. That is true — he is strong and he can take care of himself. Were he to be attacked, it is a question who would be hurt worse.”

It took some time, but finally, Morhov seemed to have realized what it meant. Blanching, he closed his eyes, and sat like that for several minutes.

“It doesn’t mean that your daughter’s death is in any way your fault,” Hannibal assured, although the malicious notes in his voice made his statement almost mocking. “She was a very young woman, and we know nothing about her murderer.”

“She wanted to have fighting lessons when she was young,” Morhov whispered. “I told her omegas don’t do that, that it’s only for alphas or male betas. She forgot this idea soon enough, but maybe if… maybe if I had allowed…”

Hannibal tilted his head mournfully.

“I am sorry, George,” he said, and Morhov’s face lost the last of its colors.

The situation was absurd — even if his daughter had been a skilled fighter, it was doubtful she could have done anything against Hannibal, but it was the thought that counted. Morhov was on the verge of hyperventilating, clearly blaming himself, and it was all Hannibal could hope for-for one visit.

More than satisfied, he glanced at the clock.

Soon, he would join Will.

***

Recently, coming back home started to be Hannibal’s favorite part of the day. Knowing that a genuine, foolish smile was spread all over his face, Hannibal closed the door with his leg, holding a new bottle of expensive wine that Will seemed to favor most and a huge bouquet of daily flowers.

No one greeted him, which meant that Will had gone out with Winston. Sighing against his disappointment, Hannibal placed the flowers into a vase, put the bottle into fridge to cool down, and went to change.
Today, Alana’s parents were supposed to arrive for some conversation with Jack. They had buried her in their hometown, and after a mourning period, had decided to take part in the investigation of her death. Jack had asked Will to be present, and even though Hannibal hated the idea as he suspected Jack of wanting to put pressure on Will again for Alana’s death, he didn’t risk stopping him. Will was filled with dark determination and insisted on going. He hadn’t called all day, so whatever happened, it must have been unpleasant.

Contemplating, Hannibal went into shower, and as he was readying to leave, a shadow flickered behind the glass.

Stiffening, he pretended to linger, but a second later, the scent reached him, and he immediately relaxed.

“Will,” he murmured. “I didn’t hear how you came in.”

“Means I’m getting better,” Will sounded playful, so any worry Hannibal had evaporated.

Turning off the water, he opened the door and was met by a sight of Will holding the towel ready for him.

“Here,” he said simply, smiling that sweet, slightly unsure smile of his. Hannibal accepted the towel, felt that it was already warm, meaning that Will had prepared it for him in advance, and a sizzling pleasure rushed through him. He suddenly and stupidly felt weightless, touched to a surprising extent by this very omegian display of affection and care. Smiling himself, helplessly, Hannibal leaned closer to nuzzle Will’s neck, and Will purred, tucking his head under his chin.

His thoughts were chaotic, tumbling over each other, but one thing Hannibal understood clearly.

He wanted to do something for Will. Something, anything — he couldn’t give him the truth, and he couldn’t present the Ripper to him. He was doing everything he could to be a good mate already, so what was left?

“Don’t plan anything for tomorrow,” he blurted out, and was instantly irritated at how out of breath he sounded.

“Why?” Will snuggled closer to him, still scenting him thoroughly. “Are we going somewhere?”

“Yes. You will see for yourself tomorrow.” Hannibal pressed his lips to Will’s hair, inhaling deeply.

Unfocused plans were already forming in his mind. A small part of him tried to protest, claiming that money wouldn’t ever be able to buy him Will’s regard, no matter how much of it he was ready to throw around, but Hannibal shook it off.

No. It didn’t matter. Physical gifts were the only option he could think of, so…

So be it.
When he brought Will to the car showroom, he only got a suspicious stare in response.

“What are we doing here?” Will asked carefully.

“Buying a car for you,” knowing that the first reaction would hardly be positive, Hannibal pretended to look at the presented vehicles. “I don’t like you traveling the way you do. I want you to always be able to go where you want to instead of relying on cabs or, God forbid, Jack. And I also want to make you a present,” he finished somewhat awkwardly, finally looking up.

Will was staring at him with a flush on his cheeks, his pupils strangely dilated, and the scent radiating off him had something that made Hannibal straighten and breathe in sharply.

Will’s smell, deceptively-flowery and dangerous, had gained a new quality. It wasn’t there in the morning. Hannibal was sure he would have felt it — every component that constituted Will’s scent suddenly intensified, combining some feverish sweetness and sharp notes warning of the potential danger.

Enamored, Hannibal made a step forward unconsciously, and Will’s lips parted. Another hot wave of his scent hit Hannibal, and he let out a quiet growl, wanting to take and possess right here, at this very moment.

“May I help you with something, gentlemen?” a cheerful voice asked, and for a second, it distracted Hannibal from the overwhelming pull. Reluctantly, he tore his eyes away from Will and saw a tall woman with a wary yet friendly smile on her face.

“Yes,” he answered belatedly. “We are looking for a car for my partner. Is there anything you could recommend?”

Hannibal would never accept anyone’s recommendations in the matter that concerned Will, but it could buy him some time, which would help him get himself under control.

“So do you agree?” he murmured into Will’s ear when the woman turned her back on them.

“Yes,” Will said slowly, his cheeks still flushed. “I probably shouldn’t, and I don’t really need a car, but something... I… I don’t know. It just makes me happy.”

‘You like to be cared for,’ Hannibal thought, tilting his head. ‘After being starved for affection for so many years, you like knowing someone worries about you and cherishes you. And your omegian side revels in getting expensive gifts because for a long time, you didn’t receive the attention omegas need, regardless of their feelings about this.’

They were taken to see several cars, and soon Hannibal dismissed their helper and focused on everything himself. Will was nearby, exploring different vehicles with curiosity that Hannibal hadn’t expected from him. Finally, he stopped his attention on the small, but powerful-looking car of a dark green color, and Hannibal nodded in approval.

“This is a good model,” he said. “You will be comfortable driving it. But maybe you would consider a more expensive car? Like this one,” Hannibal pointed at the black and silver Bugatti Veyron, and Will snorted.

“Why would I want to drive a car like this in Baltimore?” he asked. “It’s too… flashy. I wouldn’t think it’s your type, especially looking at your own car.”
“It’s not,” Hannibal agreed. “But with the kind of society we interact with, it would bring a lot of benefits.”

Will stared at the car, not saying anything for a while, and then he groaned, shaking his head.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he murmured. “Who needs gifts, expensive or not? I don’t even care about them all that much, and I’m not that good of a driver, but when I think about you buying it, something’s… happening to me. I think I— Oh!” Will’s eyes suddenly widened, and his blush became deeper. “Damn,” he breathed out. “My heat is here. Normally, it shouldn’t happen until several months from now, but your presence must have triggered it early.”

“Oh,” Hannibal echoed, feeling his own eyes widen.

For some reason, he hadn’t expected it, even though Will’s strange behavior from the moment they had stepped into the showroom spoke volumes, as well as his intensifying scent.

The heat. Something that had the power to bind them to each other forever. Imprinting wasn’t necessary — romantic due to its rarity, but not essential for creating s bond.

Omegas, just as alphas, were the hostages of their instincts at times, even the strongest of them. Right now, every gift would push Will closer to the full-blown heat, and the more expensive it would be, the more thrilled the omegan part of him would get.

Very satisfied, Hannibal motioned for the assistant to come closer and watched how Will explored the interior of the car.

With his hobbies, he couldn’t afford to drive something this eye-catching. His own car was expensive, but subtly elegant — not to mention that bringing attention to himself in this way was never Hannibal’s idea of entertainment. Seeing his omega in a car like this, though, knowing what gazes and conversations it would provoke… his alpha part liked it. Flashy or not, the car was beautiful, and with time, Hannibal was sure it would help bring more confidence to Will.

To the assistant’s utter joy, they made a purchase, and when Will’s hand brushed against Hannibal, he could feel his skin burning.

Perhaps Will would get upset with this car in the future. Perhaps he would even regret it, but Hannibal would never agree to miss this chance now.

Especially if it would hasten Will’s heat.

***

Jack’s call came in the worst time possible. They had just sorted everything out with the insurance and agreed that the car would be delivered in the evening when Hannibal’s phone started to ring, and after a short conversation, he and Will were forced to turn to Jack’s office.

“What does he want?” Will asked, shivering. “Why did he call you and not me?” His scent had
been steadily intensifying, and Hannibal was finding it difficult to focus on the road.

“I am not sure,” he answered. “He just mentioned that he would like to speak with me, and that you could also come.”

“How generous!” Will scowled. “What, does he think after yesterday’s disaster, he can complain to you about me?”

“You still didn’t tell me what happened exactly,” Hannibal reminded him. A wave of dizziness hit him, and he shook his head, knowing that only opening the window could save him.

While he was busy with his struggle, Will said, “Alana’s parents hated me. As soon as I walked in, they stared at me like I was an enemy. And with Jack’s so-called subtle approach, they soon decided that I might be the one who has killed her.”

“What? Why?” Hannibal’s hands tightened around the wheel. Was Jack stubborn enough to still cling to the idea of Will’s guilt? It was infuriating. Even more so when Hannibal remembered that he had been the one to push Jack into that direction.

He should have never told him anything.

“Jack thinks so. He wanted to provoke me, to play on my possible guilt and see how I would react staring into the faces of Alana’s parents. Naturally, it didn’t go well.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Hannibal hissed, feeling the flickers of rage color his vision red. “He has no right to do that! I warned him.”

“You warned him?” Will repeated, and then a joyful smile flourished on his face, making Hannibal’s breathing quicken. “For me? Thank you. But you know Jack, he never listens to anyone.”

Maybe going to Jack now wasn’t a good idea. In this state, all Hannibal wanted was to tear his body into bloody rags, his control too shaken by Will’s rapidly approaching heat to hold his instincts down.

But Will seemed calmed now, still glowing from such silliness as Hannibal warning Jack about staying away from him, so Hannibal tried to focus on that and calm down.

He had a lot of problematic individuals to deal with—with time.

***

Jack looked sour to see him with Will. He started some meaningless conversation, frowning every time Hannibal failed to respond in favor of staring at Will.

He was trapped by his scent. All he wanted was to bury his face and his teeth in Will’s neck, getting drunk on the intoxicating smell and binding Will to him forever.
“Will, I would like to talk to Doctor Lecter privately,” Jack said finally. Will stood up, annoyed, and squeezed Hannibal’s shoulder briefly.

“I’ll be waiting in your car,” he murmured. “Don’t be away for too long.”

Letting him wander alone to the car, on the brink of his heat, in the building full of alphas sent his protective instincts into overdrive, but omega or not, Hannibal doubted that Will would be thrilled with such extent of overprotectiveness.

Grimly, he watched him go and then turned to Jack.

“What is it?” he asked, not trying to mask his irritation.

“Doesn’t he smell even weirder than before?” Jack wondered, not taking his eyes off the door.

“Even I find it difficult to sit next to him.”

Hannibal growled, and Jack raised his hands defensively.

“Not like that!” he snapped. “Jesus. Believe me when I tell you that Will is far from my type. I also have a wife that I am deeply loyal to. No, when I say it’s hard to be next to him, I mean that I want to run. From an omega. Something about his smell is abnormal, and today it feels even more strongly than before. It makes my skin crawl, it’s like he smells… dangerous. Sweet, but this sweetness is too sharp or something, almost poisonous. Have you noticed?”

“I fail to see why it would be important,” Hannibal’s voice was freezing. “It is a highly private matter, Jack, and I find you discussing it so openly rude.”

“But it is important,” Jack insisted. “I only started thinking about it recently, when you drew my attention to the fact that Will might be hiding something.”

“This was not what I meant to—”

“You probably remember how I told you people dislike Will,” Jack continued as if Hannibal hadn’t spoken. “I admit that I faced the same problem, and now I think it’s because of how he smells. He unnerves people and makes them try to protect themselves.”

“This is the worst excuse for rudeness I have ever heard,” Hannibal said through gritted teeth. “People have no reason to dislike Will other than for their own insecurities or envy.”

“It makes sense, though, doesn’t it?” Jack stood up. “If Will is indeed a killer, then his smell is the first thing that betrays him. It’s rare for omegas to commit crimes, especially such violent ones, but the Ripper has been acting strange lately, as Will himself said. He changed his style, and isn’t it surprising that Will has changed his own style at the same time? I realize you haven’t known him for that long, but before, Will never acted like that at the crime scenes. His words were always precise and he was always focused, never spending so much time without giving me something useful.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Hannibal demanded. The situation was quickly slipping out of control, and he wasn’t sure what he could still do. “Will is a traumatized young man who has lived with the purpose of catching the Ripper for years. It is understandable that the more time passes, the more disappointed he gets because of his inability to catch him, and your disapproval and pressure only deteriorate his emotional state further!”

Jack appeared unmoved.

“I understand that you are protective of him, Doctor,” he said. “Believe me, I do. But I think there
is something wrong with him, even though I don’t know the extent of it. Just keep an eye on him, okay? You don’t have to listen to me or to believe me, but just do it. Watch him, and let me know if you start having suspicions for yourself.”

“Undoubtedly,” Hannibal hissed, too furious to risk saying anything else. “Have a good day, Jack.”

He stormed out of the office, wanting to break something, and for a moment, pressed his forehead across a cold, tall column.

Will was in danger. Because of him. Jack didn’t have anything, and he would hardly be able to find any evidence, considering there couldn’t be any. Still, the situation was unpleasant, and even though Will tried to hide it, he still needed Jack’s approval. He was upset at these accusations, and Hannibal couldn’t stand seeing him hurt.

Breathing slowly, he moved to the car, urging himself to stay calm. However, as soon as he opened the door and was hit by Will’s new scent, all fury evaporated, and desire was all that was left.

Hannibal had no idea how they would get back home.

***

By the time they arrived, it was already dark. Hannibal didn’t remember getting out of his car — all he could see was Will, wrapped around him, half-delirious, jerking fruitlessly at his tie and letting out small dissatisfied growls when his efforts didn’t lead anywhere.

With one hand, Hannibal managed to close the door, and then their lips met, hot and urgent. Moaning, he picked Will up, grunting at the heaviness of winter clothes, and moved toward the bedroom, uncaring of the fact that his boots must be leaving terrible traces all over the floor.

He and Will fell on the bed in a tangled mass, their coats and boots restricting them from having easy access.

For the first time in forever, Hannibal felt completely useless. His rational mind had left him almost entirely, replaced by animalistic instincts and responses, so he clawed at Will’s coat, frustrated that it remained in place.

Will, surprisingly, seemed the saner of them. He managed to get them both out of the coats and even dragged Hannibal’s boots off him, purring all the time like an overgrown feline.

Their first mating was fierce and feral, without a drop of tenderness. Hannibal’s back was covered with scratches, and Will’s skin was also far from unmarred. For a while, they stayed in each other’s embrace, with Will stubbornly nuzzling his neck over and over again.

“Your scent is very familiar,” he murmured. “I can’t remember where I smelled it.”

A fleeting worry crossed Hannibal’s mind, but disappeared. He always wore his scentless suit, he couldn’t be recognized by smell.
“Try to,” he said, smiling in bliss when Will’s fingers started brushing the strands of his hair.

“I’ve been doing it for a while,” Will confessed. “Trying to identify your smell. It’s been driving me crazy from the beginning, and seeing everyone’s reaction to you, it’s clear that I’m not an exception.”

“You like my scent?” Hannibal asked, pleased. “I love yours, too.”

Will snorted.

“Then you are the only one,” he said. “Even I have no idea what I smell like. You, on the other hand… you have such an… elegant scent. Unobtrusive, soft, pleasant. Almonds and some bitterness, like that of those expensive drinks you like so much. It’s very refined, but this bitterness also has a note of… almost like… oh!” Will’s eyes got round, and he leaned away, staring at him with a mixture of awe and astonishment.

“What?” Hannibal licked his lips, his heart beating faster. Could Will figure it out?

“Hannibal,” Will’s voice sounded serious, but there was laughter in his eyes. “You smell like cyanide. You smell like poison! Oh my God. How did I miss it before? My father used cyanide when I was a child, so I got used to this smell. But I still never connected the dotses until now.”

“And what do you think?” Hannibal asked hoarsely. His blood was singing, and he wasn’t sure if it was from joy or from tension.

“What do I think?” echoed Will. “I think this is amazing. Deceptively pleasant scent of almonds hiding lethal bitterness. Interesting. I can see why Jack finds you intimidating.”

“He finds you intimidating,” Hannibal noted, pinning Will under himself and leaning to nip at his ear lobe. “He told me so himself today.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Will moaned, one of his legs sliding up Hannibal’s calf. “Jack would never say that. He never took me seriously.”

“Fear breeds ignorance,” Hannibal’s fingers touched Will’s throat and then wrapped themselves around it slightly. “He fears you. He always has.”

Will rolled his eyes, but all playfulness left him when Hannibal pushed himself roughly against him and then entered him again, making him cry out.

All senses were elevated. Sex with Will had always been special, but this heat-produced frenzy threatened to shatter all definitions of pleasure Hannibal had ever devised.

It could bring them even closer. It could give them children. It could bond them forever.

Bond.

Hannibal let out a low sound, thrusting harder and licking against Will’s neck. Will growled at him and bit his cheek, and Hannibal growled back, making him whimper.

He lost time, giving into deadly sparkles he could practically see around them, melting in the feelings and emotions until no part of him felt real. Even Will’s lovely face faded — the only thing that was still visible was his neck, pale and clear, begging for his mark.

Semi-consciously, Hannibal licked the skin there again, feeling saliva overfill his mouth. Only
then did he realize that he was trembling — every part of him was trembling from the longing and yearning that he couldn’t name. He didn’t know what was real any longer, but through this torturous veil of bliss, he heard Will’s voice, “Do it. I want it.”

Baring his teeth instinctively, Hannibal snarled, and Will’s arms wrapped tighter around him, pressing his head to his neck.

“Do it,” he whispered again. “I want the bond. I want it so much.”

Hannibal instantly clenched Will’s skin between his teeth, ready to bite, but the remaining human part of him suddenly protested. Images flashed in front of his eyes — images of Will as a child, and then of Will who agreed to be with him, but who had never imprinted on him. As if the intensity of Hannibal’s feelings was one-sided.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t bond with him now, before the imprinting. Will had to be his entirely first, he had to accept him, because without it, what kind of future would they have? How could he bind someone not fully willing to him?

Removing his teeth and turning his face away was the most difficult thing Hannibal had ever done. Disappointment sent bitterness down his veins, and the beast inside was wailing with fury, demanding to go on, to proceed, to possess Will in whatever ways that were available to him currently.

“No,” Hannibal spat, and dug his nails into Will’s arms as he tried to struggle.

“No?” Will said, his voice hurt and small. “Why?”

“No,” Hannibal hissed again, still furious, and slammed his hips into Will, absorbing his pained sound. “Not until you imprint on me.”

“What?”

“Why haven’t you imprinted on me?” Hannibal gripped Will’s dark hair in a fist, jerking it sharply. “I’m doing everything. I’ve done everything, and you still. Won’t. Imprint back on me! Why? What else do I have to do?”

Without waiting for an answer, he thrust again, and again, and again, not seeing anything, barely understanding where he was, but knowing that something endlessly precious to him was on the verge of slipping away.

Hannibal hated him for it.

His release left him boneless, and he collapsed on top of the pillow, his limbs heavy and unmoving. A second — and he was sleeping.
Thank you so much for all your wonderful, wonderful comments! I'm always overjoyed and honored to receive them.

Now, with Hannibal accidentally outing himself as the Ripper in the last chapter, we have reached the most painful part of the story. So, this whole chapter is basically 'Will Reacts', with all angst warnings there could be.

For a while, Will stayed in bed, just sitting and staring, hearing the strange buzzing noise that kept getting louder, and louder, and louder, drowning all sounds that the beginning of the night could bring with it.

His mind was piecing information at the frightening speed, but he paid almost no attention to it. He was focused on nothingness, feeling how his heart started to beat faster, and then even faster, making him unable to breathe.

His stomach seemed to be ready to betray him, too, because when Will tried to move, the wave of nausea made him shudder. The walls were suddenly closing in on him, and at this moment, he understood with perfect clarity that he needed to get out. He needed to find the strength to stand and then to run from here, run wherever he could.

Glancing at Ha... at him even for a second was so terrifying that Will involuntarily let out a choked sound. Barely seeing anything, he managed to fall from the bed and crawl up to his clothes, knowing that his legs wouldn’t hold him right now.

The wardrobe seemed miles away, but eventually, he made himself find the first bag he could see and mindlessly filled it with some clothes. Money, he also needed money. Without it, no one would let him in anywhere, and he would need a place to stay, at least temporarily.

Pressing his hand to his chest in a futile attempt to calm his racing heart, Will tried to get up again, and finally succeeded. His wallet was on his shelf, and when he reached for it, he felt something else. The gun that Ha... that he had given to him. To protect himself.

What a joke.

Hiding the gun in the bag, Will shut it and stumbled out of the room.

‘Don’t look around. Don’t look around. Don’t look around,’ he whispered to himself silently, trying to focus on the darkness and not on the rooms and halls that had somehow become so familiar to him.

Why haven’t you imprinted on me?

Such innocent words, bearing such terrible meaning.

The Ripper has imprinted. It's confusing him, because he never saw it coming.

Yes, someone like him would have never seen it coming. All cold and deadly, always in a perfect
control, and suddenly facing the reality of imprinting on someone who he would never, ever deem worthy.

*He’s acting chaotically, with no cold precision he loved to demonstrate before, no clear scheme.*

But there was a scheme there, wasn’t it? It’s just Will had been too blind and too foolish to see it.

*The Ripper found out about me.*

How many months ago had he had this realization? And he had still failed to connect the facts. He had still continued to babble about the Ripper and how he’s courting someone when being courted himself, courted by *him*. And oh, how happy and overjoyed it had made him.

A part of him longed for another explanation, but denying the truth again wasn’t possible. The Ripper’s split interest between the omega he’d imprinted on and Will never made sense, and it shouldn’t have, considering that they were the same person.

The cold, biting air was a salvation that Will so desperately needed. He closed his eyes, letting the wind cool his burning skin, and when he opened them again, he saw a car parked right in front of the house. His new, ridiculously expensive car that he was never going to enjoy. Yet still, it was like a gift from the skies now, when he needed to get away.

The keys were in mailbox as *he* had arranged earlier today, so in several minutes, Will was already on the empty road, trying to watch where he was going but getting distracted time and time again.

He couldn’t think about anything now. He would break, and he still needed to run where no one would be able to find him.

Imprinting. Imprinting had turned people self-destructive, now Will understood it. Most people — certainly not *him*, who was so callously enjoying this sick, twisted game, waiting for a moment when his own mate would be eviscerated by the pain of betrayal and horror.

Self-pity was disgusting, but tears still fell, and Will shook his head, chasing them away. It was getting harder to concentrate on the road, but he carelessly sped up, watching Baltimore melt at the distance.

Jack had called him self-destructive sometimes, but he couldn’t even imagine how deeply it went. At that night of his childhood, at the night when he had lost everything, he faced the Ripper, and through the darkness, he had seen his face. Will knew it now. Now, he remembered, as if the thick wall that had separated him from his memories suddenly shattered.

He looked at the Ripper and he saw *his* face.

Hannibal’s face.

And then imprinting happened. His mind, young as it was, had decided to imprint on the monster, establishing a connection between them that Will could never escape, not even when he wanted to. The memory of the monster’s face had been buried for the same reason why he hadn’t called the police and obeyed the command to return to bed so passively.

His mind was trying to protect him. Hannibal. It realized that Will wasn’t ready to accept this ugly connection, so it hid the weapon he could use against him.

Touching.
Revolting.

The hand that had split his father’s mouth apart, mercilessly pushing itself down his throat, was touching him just an hour ago, so gently and lovingly. Pretending.

Will stopped the car abruptly, almost tore the door off in his haste to get out, and vomited right onto the road, his skin crawling. Only now he realized that the tears never stopped, and he gave out a stifled cry, hiding his face and giving into despair that was choking him all this time.

Why did it happen? How could it happen? He was truly a freak — Loffat and others, they were right. Only someone like him could imprint on his father’s murderer. Only someone like him could live next to the Ripper, sleep with him, and remain blind.

His knees gave way under him, and Will screamed, unable to keep it inside. The crash of thunder answered him, and he screamed again, feeling the new flood of tears burning his face.

Hannibal should have killed him then, in that night. It would have been far more merciful.

Will didn’t remember getting back to the car. He was wet, cold, and shaking, still crying, but long since not paying attention to it.

He had no idea where to go, so he just drove forward, wishing to escape the past, but knowing that it would be standing right behind him regardless of where he’d go.

***

He dropped the car when he ran out of fuel. By then, Will was in some small city, and he bought the ticket for a bus without looking where it was going.

He didn’t turn to look at the car.

He knew he wasn’t going to drive it ever again anyway.

***

In the bus, he managed to sleep, even though it lasted only for an hour. His phone began to ring, and Will’s blood ran cold when he saw the name on the display.

No.

He hid the phone back in his pocket, and only when it stopped ringing, he allowed himself to breathe in the air.
For some reason, he hadn’t considered the idea that Hannibal might call him, even though now it seemed absurd. Of course he would. His game wasn’t over — he wouldn’t stop until he reached his goal.

Did he know? Was he aware of how much he had revealed yesterday? Or did Will still have at least some advantage on his side?

Rubbing his forehead, he closed his eyes again, hoping to sleep some more, or to lose conscious — anything to avoid thinking for a while. For several moments, at least.

The bus stopped too soon, so Will was forced to drag himself out of it and buy the next ticket. Sitting at the window, he tried to imagine tomorrow, but instead of it, all he saw was darkness.

The bus and the road were in a miserable shape, so all the passengers were thrown in all directions as more and more distance was conquered. Among the dissatisfied murmurs, Will felt like he was the only one happy with such outcome. The bus was shaking so much that it slowed his mind down, making it focus on such base things as hold on tightly and avoid hitting his head. It was a welcome distraction, so Will hoped that this trip would never end.

They arrived to another small town hours later, and while Will would have gladly changed the buses again, he realized it was time to settle down. His heat was still not over, and hours spent without the presence of his alpha began to take their toll. Other people started to look at him strangely, probably because of his scent, so Will took his bag and moved down the street.

Soon, he saw a small hotel, with dim blue letters that formed the word “over”. Weak curiosity stirred, and Will approached. A startled, empty laughter escaped his chest when he realized that the hotel was called “Cloverleaf”, but the majority of letters had gone dark, so only “over” was left.

How appropriate.

His phone rang, and Will shuddered, trying to ignore it.

Not now.

Soon. But not now.

He had nothing to say.

***

The bed at the hotel was hard and uncomfortable, but even Will’s omega, spoilt after having spent months in luxury, remained silent. Letting him grieve.

*Why haven’t you imprinted on me?*

Poor, naïve Hannibal. The only flaw in his perfect grand plan, the only detail that couldn’t let him sleep peacefully. He wanted Will’s full destruction. Making him fall in love with him wasn’t enough — it had to be everything. It was intolerable for Hannibal to be the only one imprinted.
How he would probably laugh if he knew that Will had been the first to imprint, many, many years ago. His plan would be complete, and Will would be discarded forever.

His phone rang, Hannibal’s name flashing across the screen again, and Will’s stomach tightened because he knew that this time, he was going to answer.

He couldn’t avoid it forever. It was too late to save anything anyway.

His hand was shaking badly, but he still pressed “talk” and then listened silently.

“Will,” Hannibal purred, and just like that Will understood that he didn’t know anything. Hannibal continued to think that everything was fine, so maybe he could somehow use it? “You’ve been gone since morning. Are you with Jack? I called you earlier, but you didn’t pick up.”

“I… was busy,” Will said, his voice strange, as if it belonged to someone else.

“Oh,” a note of mild concern touched Hannibal’s words. “When are you coming home? I prepared dinner.”

Suddenly, it was all sickening. This terrible, terrible conversation, the truth that was violently tearing Will apart from inside — he couldn’t keep it buried. He didn’t want to.

“Never,” Will replied. He wanted to sound stronger, but instead, his answer had come out as a whisper. “I am never coming back.”

A brief silence, and then Hannibal spoke again, more urgently, “Where are you? Did something happen?”

Will tried to speak, but tears choked him, so he was forced to stay silent.

“Will,” Hannibal said sharply. “What happened? Tell me where you are. Are you safe?”

“Would you care if I wasn’t?”

More silence.

“If this is about yesterday,” Hannibal began, “then I can explain. We have not discussed the bond yet, and I didn’t want you to make this decision under the influence of hormones. When we do bond, I want it to be forever, do you understand, Will? If you agree to this, there will be no way back.”

Will wondered what would happen if he screamed right into his phone. Or if he gave into his childish desire to break down and wail, “Why? Why did you do this to me? I loved you and you destroyed me. Why, why, why?”

“Will?”

“I know,” he said flatly. His hysterics would only amuse Hannibal, though at this moment, he didn’t have strength to care.

“Good. So if you are ready for this step—”

“I know,” he repeated again. “You broke your cover yesterday. I know, so you don’t have to pretend any longer.”

He could get used to these long silences. Staring at the ceiling, Will counted the strips of dirt there,
and stopped only when Hannibal asked, “What is it that you know?”

His voice had transformed completely — it was wary now, tense. A voice of someone who suspected he might be losing, but still refused to give up on the game.

“You told me that you imprinted on me,” Will said. “It obviously happened a while back, if you were so frustrated with one-way imprinting that you blurted it out like that.”

Even through the phone he could hear how Hannibal inhaled sharply.

“Will—”

“It was the last thing I needed to finish the picture,” he continued. Suddenly, the words began to flow, and he couldn’t stop them. “Of course there were too many coincidences already — the Ripper becoming aware of me soon after our meeting, this crazy courtship with bodies. The choice of bodies that was just so fitting, your night disappearance. If the Ripper was courting his omega by killing others, then this omega must have had a chance to see the bodies, right? Or what would be the point? There were many small details. And Alana—” Will’s breathing hitched. “So many deaths around me. Of course Jack started to suspect me. With your subtle encouragement, I’m surprised I’m still not in prison. But it wasn’t a part of your plan, was it? No, you had to wait until I imprint on you. It must have been an entertaining experiment — wait until I can’t imagine my life without you, and then take everything from me. Again. Throw me into prison for a laugh, probably volunteer to monitor me, and watch how I die day after day.”

“Will!” Hannibal raised his voice, and this time panic was undeniably there. “You have to listen to me. I can explain.”

“You are sick,” Will whispered. The storm of emotions raging inside was making him both hot and cold, and devastation and fury kept fighting for dominance. “You saw me, you learned who I was, what you took from me. Then you imprinted on me and decided to experiment on me? To set me up for your murders? For my father? I was horrified when Jack suggested it, but he got it from you, didn’t he? You told him that. You hinted that I could be guilty of my father’s murder. Who does that? Who does that to their own mate?”

“Will, please—”

“For your first reaction to be like that, you must be completely inhuman. What you did, it’s… it’s so… I don’t understand it. I don’t understand you, and I probably never will, Hannibal.”

“Listen to me!” it was the first time Will heard Hannibal so emotional, as if he was genuinely distressed. “You have to return. We have to talk, immediately, in person. Please, Will. I will try to explain.”

“You said I needed someone on my side,” Will murmured. Now that he had said everything, the stream of strength left him as suddenly as it had appeared, and he felt boneless again. “But in the end, I was the only one on my side. I was right. Good things don’t happen to me.”

“Will…”

Will hang up, turning the phone off, and coiled up into a ball, shutting his eyes tightly.

This time, the burn of tears didn’t even hurt.
In the morning, he was feeling as broken and chewed out as he had yesterday, and he still had no idea what to do. Probably he needed to eat — it’d been a day since he last ate, but hunger seemed such an unfamiliar sensation that Will didn’t even move from the bed.

The bright rage that had been melting him yesterday had disappeared, but he still felt hollow and hopeless. Moving, calling anyone, eating, even breathing — it all seemed purposeless. So Will stayed in bed until the urge to go to the bathroom won, and when he returned to the room, his phone was ringing.

He didn’t feel anything seeing Hannibal’s name, so he risked to answer.

“Come home right this instant,” Hannibal’s voice was freezing cold, drastically different from the way he’d sounded yesterday. “I have the power to track you down, but I would prefer not to do it. Let us talk, and then, if you want, you can leave. I won’t stop you.”

“You really do think I’m an idiot,” Will chuckled bitterly. “What, the emotional approach didn’t work out, so now you are going for a threatening one? You think there is anything you can threaten me with at this point?”

“But I do have something of yours. Your dog that you left behind. If you think I’m such a monster, aren’t you worried about what I might do to him?”

“Wow,” Will shook his head. “That’s low even for someone like you. Blackmailing me with Winston? Seriously? Aren’t you worried that I might call Jack and your game would be over? What are you even still doing in the house? I thought you would be far away from there by now.”

“I am waiting for you to come home and I won’t go anywhere meanwhile. Will…” Hannibal’s words softened. “I understand what you are feeling. I know you don’t believe anything I say now, but I tried to protect you from it. I admit that initially, my intentions weren’t good, but it changed. I changed.”

“Leave me alone,” Will hung up and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, pressed hard, until he saw sparkles.

What was he doing here? What was he going to do next? He didn’t want to fight Hannibal. Maybe seeing him in prison would be a reward, but it wouldn’t bring anything back. Not his father, nor the person he had thought he knew. The one he had loved.

Will hid his face into the pillow and ignored his phone that kept ringing occasionally, knowing who was calling him and having nothing to say. Closer to the evening there was a knock on his door, and he froze, a paralyzing dread turning his blood to ice.

Could Hannibal really have found him? Will didn’t want to see him. Not now, not ever again. Please, no.

Someone knocked again, and he was ready to bolt when a female voice asked, “Mr. Graham? Are you all right?”
Recognizing the voice of the hotel manager, Will relaxed and moved to open the door, though his heart was still trying to claw its way out of his chest.

“Yes,” he said belatedly, looking at the worried young girl, but being unable to smile at her. “Thank you for checking.”

“Would you like me to order something for you?” her eyes briefly scanned the room before stopping at him again. “You didn’t eat anything, and with your state…”

Understanding that she meant the heat, Will flushed.

“Thank you,” he repeated. “I don’t need anything. It’s kind of you to offer.”

“All right,” the girl — Jolie, according to her name-tag, looked dubious. “If you change your mind, just call at the reception. Okay?”

“Yes.” Will closed the door and went back to bed.

Hannibal. Smelling of deadly and lethal cyanide. It was a deceptive smell — so alluring, so pleasant, but one mistake — and it would drain all life from its unfortunate victim.

Maybe if he had recognized the smell earlier… although he would have probably laughed it off like an idiot he was.

This night, Will dreamt of blood and absent touches. Hannibal stared lovingly at him, smiling, but every time Will reached out for him, he moved, farther and farther away. Will tried to follow, but he felt weaker with every attempt, and when he looked down, he saw blood soaking his clothes. Hannibal’s smile grew wider at this, and Will woke up, sick and heaving.

His stomach was empty, so when he vomited, it was with bitter yellow liquid. His body was shaking violently, and he wrapped himself into the blanket, wanting to cry, but hating himself for this continued weakness.

He couldn’t stay here forever. But he had no desire to do anything at all. Calling Jack, going back to Baltimore… it all filled him with revulsion and terror so strong that his body jerked at the mere thought, urging him to run.

Run.

He couldn’t run for long.

***

His newly charged phone rang at ten in the morning, and Will pressed it to his ear without saying anything.

“Will,” this time, Hannibal’s voice was defeated. “Please, tell me where you are. You shouldn’t be alone. I promise that if you choose to trust me now, at least this one last time, I won’t disappoint
you. I need to know that you are safe. Please.”

Will said nothing, listening silently, and heard how Hannibal laughed in a horrible, choked way.

“I don’t know what to do,” Hannibal whispered. “Do you hear me? I don’t know what to do, or say. I thought I had more time. Please, Will, come back to me. We can still work something out.”

These words were only making him feel more badly, so Will threw the phone away and tried to forget what he’d heard.

The vision of Hannibal being on the verge of breaking down was unbearable for some reason. Will knew it was pretense, a show designed specifically for him, but it still affected him, and he took a deep breath, fighting his way through blackness but knowing that he would inevitably fail.

Hannibal knew what he was doing.

Will was dreading the next phone call.

***

That day, Hannibal didn’t call again. In the evening, Jolie had brought him soup and tea, and Will accepted it, though he still wasn’t even remotely hungry.

He fell asleep feeling even more defeated than before, knowing that his time was reaching its limit, but having no idea what to do when it ended.

***

The next phone call in the morning was from Jack. Will glanced at the phone, unsure, but then decided to pick up.

“Will,” Jack sounded exasperated. “Listen, I have no idea what the hell happened between you and Hannibal, but you need to come here and put a stop to this nonsense.”

Will laughed shortly in disbelief. Had Hannibal really gone to Jack for help?

“What did he tell you?” he asked.

“Oh, so you don’t know? Better prepare yourself, then — he’s claiming he’s the Chesapeake Ripper.”
Shock ran through him in a cold wave, and Will sat up abruptly, his senses heightened.

“What?” he asked slowly, and Jack let out a tired sound.

“Yeah, this is what I told him. Honestly, I could expect this kind of childishness from anyone, but not from him. The Chesapeake Ripper!”

No. No, it wasn’t possible. It made no sense — Hannibal had no reason to give himself up. He would never do that. Someone like him valued his freedom more than anything else in the world— he would kill anyone to protect it, so what the hell was he doing?

“Did he… say anything?” Will asked hesitantly. His heart was beating wildly again, and he pushed his knees to his chest, desperately seeking something to ground himself on.

“No. He just claims that he’s the Ripper and told me to call and ask you about it. So I’m calling you and I’m telling you — get your ass here and get him out of my office! I have no time for this foolishness!”

“I… okay,” Will gulped in some air, even though it burned his lungs. “Give him the phone. I’ll talk to him. But please don’t listen.”

“I couldn't care less about your domestic disputes,” Jack grumbled. Will listened to his footsteps, and then Hannibal’s emotionless voice answered, “Will?”

“What the hell are you playing at?” Will hissed. Now, hearing Hannibal’s voice, he suddenly felt furious again. “What do you want?”

“You refuse to listen to me. This is the only way I thought would help me get your attention.”

“Are you trying to make it look like some sacrifice? Don’t lie to me! You may have told Jack the truth, but you offered him nothing else. He doesn’t even take you seriously, so if you thought it would impress me, or make me run back to be your toy again—”

“Ihaven’t given Jack any real evidence because it is your choice to make,” Hannibal’s tension was palpable. “Do you want me to confess, Will? Do you want me to accept the blame and go to prison? Because I will. Whatever it takes for you to listen to me.”

“So this is your new plan,” Will breathed out. Misery and hopelessness flooded him again, and he let out a hollow, bitter laugh. “You are making me choose. You are testing what is stronger — my feelings for my father, for myself, for all people that you killed, or for you. You want me to decide and condemn myself one way or another.”

“Will, this is not what I—”

“To send you to prison and revenge my father, and then be forced to live with the knowledge that the person I love most in the world is trapped forever because of me, or let you go free, admitting your victory and my failure to do anything right. Breaking promise to my father.”

“You… love me?” Hannibal’s voice was incredulous and strange, so strange that Will shook his head again, trying not to be distracted.

“I don’t think I can live with what you’ve done to me,” he said truthfully. “You destroyed me. There is nothing I want any longer. I can’t… breathe.”

“Will—”
“Good-bye, Hannibal.”

Will dropped the phone and sat on the bed for several moments with his eyes closed. When it rang again, he picked up without opening his eyes.

“Jack?”

“Yes. So, what did you tell him? Because it doesn’t look like he’s getting ready to leave my office.”

“Jack, I want to thank you. For everything you’ve done to me. I’ve let you down in the end, but I’m grateful that for a while, you believed in me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Please tell Hannibal that he won. I can’t do that to him. Will you tell him that?”

“Of course, but… I don’t like how you sound. Where are you?”

“Please tell him that,” Will hung up and put the phone on the shelf. It began to ring again immediately, but he ignored it.

Darkness was growing thicker around him, and his heart felt as if it was beating with the last ounces of strength. The world around him had fallen apart, and now his body was betraying him, too.

Betrayal. Always betrayal. And he was a betrayer himself — falling in love with a monster who had brutally murdered his father. Letting him go free even knowing about it.

Will didn’t know what was stronger, anguish or self-disgust. But if he learned anything during these terrible days, it was that tomorrow would never come. He was perpetually stuck in the night of his heat, with all the consequences that it had brought, and the new days didn’t become a salvation. He was still a prisoner, and he was still dying of poison. Of cyanide that had entered his bloodstream and could only bring him to one end.

On wooden legs, Will approached the bag and took out the gun from there. An elegant gun, one given to him for protection — or so he’d thought. Undoubtedly, Hannibal had other plans, but he would never know what they were. He had no desire to.

Loading it was easy. Will stared at it for a moment, letting himself remember and absorb all feelings of warmth and joy its sight had brought him when he first saw it. His first night at Hannibal’s house. Their first morning together.

And now, the last.

Swallowing hard, Will pressed the gun to his forehead. Allowed himself one last second of love and regret, and then pulled the trigger sharply.

The darkness swallowed the sound and swallowed him.
I'm so blown away by the response to the last chapter! Thank you all so much, I'm thrilled you enjoyed the revelation-chapter, even though it was dark. We've had Will's reaction, now it's time for Hannibal to react!

‘I didn’t think I could ever feel like that,’ Morhov had told him. ‘Like everything is falling apart and I just don’t have the power to go on.’

When he had heard these words, he’d treated them with contempt and irritation. He was disgusted at the display of this pathetic weakness, but now his own weakness was devouring him from inside, and he had no idea what to do.

Reminding himself to breathe in and out, Hannibal clenched his fists, willing time to go faster. The walls of Jack’s office had never seemed so limiting before, yet after spending less than an hour here, Hannibal already felt as if he was suffocating.

He was going crazy. That had to be it. He was losing his mind, and nothing but Will’s presence could bring it back.

He’d thought that the day of the first phone call was the worst, but he was wrong. Every following day had brought even more fear and helplessness — helplessness that filled every cell of his body to the point when it felt like he was bursting with it.

Will’s words had been a shock. In the pause that followed, Hannibal had urged himself to wake up, almost confident that it had to be a dream. A nightmare that would never, never become the reality.

Out of all things that could have gone wrong, it was his own idiotic blabbering that had revealed the truth he wanted to hide so desperately.

How? He knew that fate favored cruel jokes, he had learned it from his own experience, but this? Now, when they had just started to enjoy their life together?

Breathe in, breathe out. Hannibal closed his eyes, attempting to control the way his chest moved, but panic kept sending flickers of terror through his veins, the urgent do something-do something-do something impulses that made his lungs demand more and more air.

Will. His Will, weakened from the unfinished heat, confused and shattered by the truth, refusing to believe anything Hannibal said to him.

Going here, to Jack, had been madness, but something Hannibal doubted he would regret. It came to him during another sleepless night, after endless pacing had started to make his muscles ache.

How could he prove something to a person who was looking for malicious intent even in his most sincere and neutral words? Everything he had ever done or spoken of was being turned into a weapon against himself, so only few options were left. Giving up something that he used to love and appreciate most, his freedom — it was something that Will could understand. Something that he was supposed to understand. And yet, Will had twisted even this action, so sure of Hannibal’s
cruelty that he failed to comprehend how much was at stake. Every torturous minute of silence now was an almost unbearable challenge because sitting and doing nothing — Hannibal couldn’t stand it. Not any longer. He wanted to scream and rage, to lash out at everyone who approached him, to slay towns and cities until he found Will.

If he could see him just once, this maddening worry would be over. Hannibal would never let him go again, even if he had to imprison him in their own home. But how to get to him? He couldn’t even guess where Will was. He had managed to track down his car, but that was it — his traces disappeared after that.

It couldn’t end like this. Surely Will wouldn’t hide from him forever? The damage was tremendous, but time could deal with it. It would deal with it, if only Will chose to return…

The door opened, and Hannibal almost jumped up, aching to throw Jack against the wall and demand answers from him.

He must have spoken to Will. By now, he must have gotten his answer.

The expression on Jack’s face was unusually lost, and an icy hand gripped Hannibal’s heart in a vice.

“What?” he asked, not recognizing his own voice. “What is it?”

Jack didn’t look furious, meaning that Will couldn’t have told him the truth, but he also didn’t wear that foolish mask of annoyance that had been present on his face since Hannibal’s confession.

Something must have happened. Something else.

“Hannibal, I think you’d better sit down,” Jack rubbed his forehead nervously, and Hannibal nearly growled at him.

“Tell me now,” he spat. “What’s wrong?”

“I got a call from the girl named Jolie. She works at the hotel where Will was staying. She said…” Jack hesitated. “She said she heard a gunshot.”

No.

“From Will’s room,” Jack took a deep breath. “It seems like he has shot himself. In the head.”

No.

“No,” Hannibal said out loud, not even hearing himself through the roaring in his ears. “He wouldn’t do that.”

He wouldn’t.

Would he?

“I’m sorry,” Jack looked like he was going to step to him, but then he clearly changed his mind. “She called the ambulance, they are on their way. She also called the last number on Will’s cell phone. From what she told me, he was still breathing when she found him, but the extent of his injury… it seems like he might be…”

“Shut up!” Hannibal snarled. Madness was crawling around him, whispering, trying to drag him into darkness from which he would never be able to escape. He moved, or tried to move, but only
staggered and was forced to grab onto the chair.

“We need to go there, but first you have to calm down. Come on, you are the shrink here,” Jack attempted to smile at him — Hannibal managed to recognize it even through the veil of blackness that threatened to engulf him. “The car will be ready in a minute, it will take us to the airport, but you look like you are going to lose it, and you can’t do it right now, do you understand? Will needs you.”

“Where is he?”

“I will tell you, but first you have to—”

“Where is he?!?”

“Hannibal—”

This time, he moved smoothly, and in one single motion he had Jack against the wall, pushing against his windpipe.

“If you don’t tell me now,” he whispered, “I will pay a visit to your wife. I will cut her throat in a way so I could rip out her tongue through it while she’s still alive, and then I will force-feed it to you until you choke on your vomit.”

The stunned look on Jack’s face quickly melted into one of realization and utter horror.

“You,” he breathed out. “You are the Ripper.”

“I have been telling you this all morning, you idiot. Where is Will?”

The door opened suddenly, and they both stared at the pale-faced young man.

“Sir, the car is ready,” he said.

Hannibal jerked to the door, but Jack grabbed him by the shoulder, dragging him back.

“You are not going anywhere near him,” he hissed.

“Try to stop me, and I will sue your entire department,” Hannibal shook Jack’s grip off, staring at him. “You have no evidence. You have no proof. And most definitely you have no right to tell me what to do. I am going to see Will, and you can stay here and try to obtain a warrant if you’d like. I will warn you only once — do not cross me. You will regret it.”

Jack said nothing, but Hannibal didn’t expect him to. Turning away, he moved to the door, almost blindly, his pulse beating wildly against his temples. He couldn’t think — as if his mind had broken, as if myriads of anguished feelings had pushed out everything else, leaving him with ache and terror that he’d never, never felt before. Will’s image kept swimming in his head, and he wanted to howl out of despair and helpless rage.

It couldn’t have happened. Yes, Will had always been vulnerable when it came to his past, to his father, but choosing to end his own life… even thinking about it made Hannibal sick, so he stopped for a moment, just breathing.

Jack stormed past him, toward one of the cars, and Hannibal followed on wooden legs, ignoring the black dots dancing on the brink of his conscious.

The whole ride to the airport and then on the plane, he tried to accept what had happened, but
failed again and again. Even in his worst imaginable scenarios, things like that didn’t happen. Will could be furious, hurt, hating him, but not so broken that reaching him would be impossible. Not traumatized to the point where all Hannibal’s words would be meaningless to him, where death would seem like the only solution.

It couldn’t be the truth. It wasn’t.

They landed in some godforsaken place, where the prisoner transfer vehicle was waiting to pick them up and deliver them to the hospital. Hannibal was too numb to appreciate the irony as he and Jack took the place in the back, sitting across each other, but he was forced to look up as Jack said, “Do you even realize that he did it because of you? You disgust him so much that he tried to run to the death itself to escape you. You are right, I can’t tell you what to do — for now. I don’t think you are capable of love, but if you care about Will even a little bit, you won’t go near him.”

“Save your lectures for your eager FBI students.”

“You selfish bastard,” Jack’s harsh whisper was full of impotent rage, though Hannibal was unable to enjoy it as he once would have. “No one shoots themselves in the head to survive. He’s most likely—”

“If you finish this sentence, I will fulfil my promise to you.”

“I’ll be glad to see you try. You can play your sick game for a little while, but I am watching you, and at your first mistake, I will get you. Mark my words, Doctor. Enjoy your freedom while you can, because it won’t last long.”

Hannibal let out a hoarse, twisted laugh. Then, pretending to bend down to search the floor for something he’d allegedly dropped, he whispered to Jack, “It is you who should be wary, Jack. You and your wife. I did not forget how you treated Will. I will not forget how you made him feel, and if something happens to him, there will be nothing to stop me. I will pay each of you back.”

“Yeah, yourself included?” Jack spat. “I was unfair with him at times, I admit it. I know it! But you? You ruined his life! And you have the nerve to compare us? What are you even hoping to achieve here? Whether you want to accept it or not, he’s most likely dead, or will die in the nearest hours because people don’t survive headshots—”

“Shut up!”

“—and even if he does survive, do you honestly think he will accept you, after what you did to him? He will kill you himself!”

“Well, then he will spare you some trouble, because you will never get this satisfaction.”

The car stopped abruptly, and the mindless childish argument with Jack suddenly lost its appeal. Hannibal tensed, looking through the small window and seeing the walls of the hospital.

Every step brought him closer to Will, but at the same time, every step made him feel as if they were getting farther and farther away from each other. His mind still refused to accept the possibility of Will being lost forever to him, taking his own life and condemning Hannibal to the existence with guilt and self-hatred as his only companions.

Jack spoke briefly with the nurse and moved to the third floor. Hannibal went after him, refusing to look at the hospital indicators, knowing what he would see there.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before a doctor walked out to greet them, with a grim
expression that seemed almost ill-suited for someone so young.

“I am Doctor Laeson. This is the first for our hospital,” she said, glancing at Hannibal and then focusing her attention on Jack. “Omegas with this kind of self-inflicted injury… I’m afraid the prognosis isn’t very good. He is still alive, the bullet went in under an awkward angle, but that’s the only positive thing. The damage is severe. It is highly unlikely that he will wake up, and if he does, we have no idea what state his brain is going to be in. I can let you in, but not for long. And… I would suggest saying good-bye while you can. Any moment—”

“What are your qualifications?” Hannibal asked, his voice icy. The doctor looked taken aback for a second, and then she flushed.

“If you would like to make sure that I am qualified to—”

“Yes, I’d like to make sure. Your age suggests the lack of experience — sufficient experience. I don’t need to hear any general phrases. Provide me with official files — I am a doctor myself, I will be able to understand them. I want to see what has been done, what is being done, and what Will’s actual condition is. Now excuse me,” Hannibal moved to the ward Laeson had just exited, but she immediately protested.

“Now wait a minute, I need to see some proof of your relation to the patient. Only closest relatives might—”

Surprisingly, assistance came from Jack.

“He’s imprinted on him,” he said, not taking his eyes off Hannibal.

“Oh!” Laeson appeared shocked. Her next words sounded softer, “Of course. I understand. I will bring you the files you asked for, Doctor…”

“Lecter,” Hannibal said and disappeared behind the door.

The moment his eyes fell on the body that seemed to be drowning in bandages and whiteness of the room, the whole weight of terrible realization fell on him at once, shattering the weak hope that there had been some kind of mistake and he wouldn’t see Will here, in this state.

Carefully, slowly, Hannibal approached the bed. There was no chair, so he lowered himself onto his knees, aching to touch Will’s hand, but having irrational fear that it would only make things worse.

Will looked dead. There wasn’t any other word for it. He was pale, so pale as if every single drop of blood had been pumped out of him, and while he was obviously breathing on his own, his pulse was weak and slow. Terrifyingly so.

The upper side of his head was bandaged, and Hannibal tried not to look there. He didn’t want to make the situation even more real.

“How could you do this?” he whispered. His eyes began to burn, and he blinked quickly, refusing to give in to the merciless weakness.

His fault. It was his fault — he couldn’t lie to himself or try to shift the blame onto someone else. He had miscalculated — badly. His first mistake was plotting against Will instead of cherishing him as he should have once he realized that the fate had deemed them perfect for each other.

His second mistake was giving Will the gun. He’d already had an experience with it, one that had
changed his life forever, and now this empty, soulless piece of metal was threatening to steal the person he loved again. He had killed his sister, and now he had all but killed his mate.

Even substandard, inadequate alphas that he despised managed to take better care of their partners.

Inhaling deeply, Hannibal curled up around Will’s hand. His smell was still there, but it was faded, as if dying along with its owner.

Somehow, the possible loss of it had become the last drop in this never-ending nightmare, and Hannibal finally clenched Will’s hand in his desperately, pressing his lips to it. His body shuddered at the attempt to hold back a sob, so only a quiet, choked sound escaped him.

It couldn’t be the end. Not like this. Not with their last conversation being what it was, full of bitterness and distrust.

Will had said that he loved him. And then he shot himself, never knowing how much he was loved in return.

“I will make everything right,” Hannibal murmured, nuzzling Will’s wrist in a futile attempt to get more of his scent. “I promise. One more chance — and I won’t ruin it.”

The door opened and Hannibal tensed, without looking back.

“Doctor Lecter, I brought you a chair and the file you asked for,” Laeson said quietly. “Please let me know if there is anything else.”

Slowly, feeling as if he was thousand years old, Hannibal stood up and sat on the chair. His hands were shaking as he accepted the file, but he ignored it, focusing on the text.

He tried to read the first sentence, then the second one, but they were meaningless. All words seemed familiar and yet Hannibal had no idea what they meant.

Swallowing hard, he gave the file back to Laeson.

“I don’t understand anything,” he said quietly. Admitting one more defeat was nothing in comparison to what he had already been forced to acknowledge. “Please bring it to me later.”

“I’m so sorry,” Laeson sounded genuinely sympathetic, but Hannibal couldn’t stand even the sight of her. “It’s from stress. It happens sometimes.”

Hannibal didn’t react, so she sighed and left, closing the door and leaving him alone with Will.

Failing to read the file and understand if there was something he could help Will with. How much more pathetic could he get?

A strange feeling welled up inside him — a sudden hopeless longing for comfort, for reassurance that only omegas’ pheromones could provide him with. Trembling, Hannibal dropped back on the floor and hid his face in Will’s hand, and this time, the burning in his eyes was too intense to fight it.

Tears felt foreign on his skin. Unfamiliar. The traces they left behind were almost painful, and Hannibal bit his lip, trying to hold back the sounds that strived to break from his chest. However, wave after wave of agony crashed into him, reminding him that every breath Will made could be his last, reminding him that he had only himself to blame, and that his plan had backfired in a way that he would never be able to recover from.
Ugly, barely human sobs broke through his resistance, and Hannibal finally allowed them to take over, uncaring if anyone could hear him.

He would give anything. He would give anything to turn back time, to court Will like he should have done it in the very beginning, and to bury the Ripper once and for all. No more thematic murders that helped Will see the Ripper clearer, no more hints left out of curiosity of whether Will would be able to recognize them for what they were.

But he couldn’t turn back time. He couldn’t even read the pathetic medical file. He was useless. Useless at loving Will, useless at protecting him.

Useless.

The tears dried off with time.

The helplessness remained.

***

Will’s pulse was excruciatingly slow. The slower it became, the faster Hannibal’s own heart began to beat, and his lungs refused to accept the air until the line on the monitor sped up again.

Another day of nothing. Will’s condition remained unchanged, and Hannibal kept sitting on his chair for hours, staring at him, willing him to wake up.

He knew how to wait. He was used to it, but waiting had never felt so unbearable.

He wasn’t sure how long he would be able to stand it.

***

Imprinting.

It had to give him something. It had to provide him with at least some insight as to where Will’s mind currently was. If Will could feel the Ripper without imprinting back on Hannibal, then Hannibal had to feel him even more strongly.

However, no matter how often he reached out, there was nothing. As if Will’s brain was dead, silent and indifferent forever.
Hannibal thought about it. He also thought about another possible option.

Could Will lose all his memories as the result of trauma? Both traumas, physical and mental ones?

It would be perfect. It would be the answer Hannibal was craving. A chance to start everything anew. A chance to earn Will’s affection without the distance that would irrevocably occur otherwise.

It was too good to be true, and it seemed completely impossible when he looked at Will again and saw how unnaturally still and pale he still was.

But hope was a stubborn thing, and Hannibal held onto it even knowing that it could eventually destroy him.

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“I have a house not far from Baltimore,” he said. It was the third day spent at the hospital, at Will’s bed, and his voice was rough from disuse. “It’s near the ocean. The house is not very big, but there is the garden there. You would like it. It’s beautiful, especially during spring. I could take you there and we could spend several months together, without work or crowds of people. Just the quiet, as you like it. Us. Starting anew.”

It was unlikely that Will heard him, but Hannibal continued to talk, painting pictures of the future that would never happen. The more he talked, the more he believed in his own words, even though darkness was still crouching nearby, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Jack came in every day — Hannibal suspected it was more out of the urge to watch him rather than out of loyalty for Will, or maybe it was both. He didn’t know, and right now, he didn’t care. Jack was just an annoying fly on the wall. He could become the danger only in case Will woke up with amnesia — then Hannibal would have to work quickly to remove him from the picture, but it was too early to plan, especially since the doctors’ prognosis did not change.

Sighing, Hannibal looked at Will again, and froze.

His eyes were open.

Open.

“Will!” he breathed out. Shock, trepidation, and relief hit him all at once, and while he wanted to jump from his chair, to do something, a part of him feared that even blinking might destroy this miracle.

He’d been living in nightmare these last few days. Could it really be the end of it?

“Will,” he repeated again, still quietly. Will’s blue eyes focused on him. For a moment, they seemed empty, with no trace of recognition in them, and Hannibal’s heart skipped a hopeful beat. However, a moment later, some inscrutable emotion flickered in them, and Will turned his head
away, refusing to look at him.

Hannibal sat frozen for a while, this obvious rejection fuelling a cold fire in him that started to consume every fragile dream he had allowed himself to build.

Clearing his throat, he finally stood up.

“I’ll call a doctor,” he murmured and backed away, his stare not leaving Will. As he left the ward, an already familiar terror paralyzed him, whispering that Will was going to be dead once he came back, that this improvement was only temporary, the last opportunity to say good-bye.

Shaking his head forcibly, Hannibal moved to Laeson’s office.

In five minutes, he was back at the ward, staring and unable to look away even for a second, with both Laeson and Jack hovering over Will.

“Mr. Graham, I can’t believe you are back with us!” Laeson seemed childishly excited, making various unnecessary movements. “How are you feeling? Can you speak?”

Will said nothing, just blinked in her direction. His gaze went to Hannibal briefly, and then stopped at Jack.

“Excuse me,” Jack stepped forward, gently moving Laeson away. “Will,” he said quietly. “I know. I know everything. Do you want me to get him out of your sight?”

Will glanced at Hannibal, eyes lingering, then looked back at Jack and blinked again, in obvious affirmation.

The hurt that pierced him in response was strangely unexpected. Upset, Hannibal hesitated, but then moved toward the door, having no idea what to say or do, especially with audience.

He waited outside until Jack came out, looking both grim and infuriatingly smug.

“Doctor Laeson is still examining him,” he said. “As you could witness by yourself, Will has no desire to see you. So stop playing the martyr and get out of the hospital. Now that Will can speak for himself, you won’t have access to him.”

Rage that had been seeking an appropriate outlet ever since Will’s rejection concentrated on Jack, and Hannibal stepped to him, his lips twisting in a chilling smile.

“You forget an essential thing, Jack,” he murmured, his voice deceptively soft. “Will is my omega, and society isn’t kind to omegas. I have legal rights on him, which means that I am the one to decide what to do with him.”

“You have no rights!” Jack spat. “You haven’t bonded with him, so your imprinting isn’t official either.”

“I can prove the fact of imprinting. You yourself have told Doctor Laeson about it, so she would be the first witness. Moreover, Will has been living with me for a while. There are his things, even his goddamn dog in my house. He scented everything these, he spent his heat with me, and he did mark me, which I can prove in the span of an hour. I don’t want to cause him additional distress, but if you force me, I will take my case to court. They will affirm my ownership over Will, and if you have any knowledge of how the system works, you must realize it.”

“Will will make a statement about you, and no court will give any rights to a serial murderer.”
“If he makes a statement, I will comply. This is what I promised to him. But until then, I am going to stay with him, regardless of your wishes.”

“He will make this statement,” hatred emanating from Jack was unmistakable. “I can assure you that he will.”

“We will see,” Hannibal said neutrally.
I hoped to write something more Christmas-like, but considering where we are in the story, it just wasn't possible - even though things are way more calmer and lighter here. It is a rather short chapter, but an important one because it defines where we'll go from here.

Thank you all so much for your ongoing support - this is a wonderfully creative year for me, and it is your comments/kudos that make me even more thrilled about writing. Merry Christmas, everyone! I plan to have another update by the New Year.

“The fact that he’s even awake is a miracle,” Laeson was saying, studying Will’s file with exaggerated attention. Hannibal eyed it, wondering if he could just tear it from her hands and look at it by himself. “Frankly, I didn’t think he would live, so he defied all of my expectations here. Still, the overall prognosis is not good. As a doctor, you must understand it. Headaches, migraines, loss of consciousness — he will be lucky if he suffers only from these post-effects.”

“What is the worst option?” Hannibal asked evenly.

“Blindness. Maybe even full physical incapacity. He will have to be checked regularly for a while, and of course he’ll need therapy. Suicide attempt is a very serious matter. We are still looking for an appropriate psychiatrist — not everyone knows how to deal with omegas, and even less people are ready to accept responsibility for a suicidal one.”

“Will is not going to talk to any psychiatrist,” Hannibal cut her off. He knew alienating Will’s doctor was not a smart thing to do, but at this point, he found that he had very little patience. “I am a psychiatrist who often works with omegas. I know what he is going through and why, so I will be the one to take care of him, both physically and mentally.”

“With all respect, Doctor, that would be unethical,” Laeson frowned. “You shouldn’t monitor your own partner. I don’t know what happened between you, but Mr. Graham doesn’t seem happy to see you whenever you visit him. You could only make the situation worse.”

“He won’t talk to anyone else,” Hannibal repeated stiffly. Laeson’s words stung, even though he knew they were true. Because they were true.

Four days since Will had woken up, and there was no progress between them. Will still couldn’t find strength to speak properly, so whenever Hannibal entered his ward, he simply turned his head away and refused to even look at him.

Hannibal wanted to speak. To say something to him. However, without even some basic acknowledgement from Will, the words refused to come. The silence was intolerable sometimes, but it was better than being away from Will completely.

Will couldn’t ignore him forever. They had to talk, and Hannibal kept hoping that it would happen sooner rather than later.

“Will despises psychiatrists,” Hannibal added more softly. “He will not open up to a stranger.”
“He doesn’t seem willing to open up to you as well.”

“Perhaps, but it doesn’t make my words any less true. He might not want to talk to me, but I will keep him safe from harm.” Hannibal hesitated, and then, coming to a decision, lowered his eyes. “Our argument was minor,” he said sorrowfully, feeling an immediate emotional response from Laeson. “You have to understand that Will is highly impressionable. He acts rashly sometimes, but it is typical of omegas. I only wish to protect him, but he doesn’t always understand it — he craves independence.”

Laeson’s lips curled in unexpectedly sympathetic smile.

“I believe that,” she said dryly. “Times are changing and some omegas try to be more modern, even though it only leads them into trouble. I don’t think there will be a problem here, not at all. You will be able to take him home when his condition improves.”

Hannibal smiled in relief, and this time, he didn’t have to pretend.

Will would hate him even more if he heard him, but it was for the better. All they needed was some time alone — away from Jack, away from this terrible hospital and other annoying people. With no obstacles, they would be finally able to sort everything out, and every cell of Hannibal’s body longed for this opportunity.

They could still have a future. If they were far away from all outside pressure, nothing would stop him from saying all that he had to, and Will would have to listen.

“Under strict conditions,” Laeson added. “You will have to postpone your work for some time, increasing your workload only gradually. You will have to monitor his mental state and create an atmosphere of comfort and safety around him. Think you can do that?”

“Of course,” Hannibal stretched his lips in another artificial smile. Who did this woman take him for? “I have already dealt with my schedule and I plan to take Will to our summer house. He will have a chance to relax there and to remember everything he loved before.” Including him.

Will thought that the person who courted him did not exist. Hannibal would prove him wrong. If he got his chance.

Satisfied with their agreement, he went back to Will’s ward, and froze when he heard Jack’s voice within it.

“…evidence, but your statement could help us start. All you have to do is tell me everything that you learned and the way you learned it, and then—”

“No.” Weak, hoarse, barely-audible, but it was Will’s voice. Hannibal’s heart skipped a bit, stupidly overjoyed to be able to hear Will again, but the joy darkened under the onslaught of anger as he belatedly realized what had happened.

Using his temporarily absence, Jack had barged in once again. Intruding. Harassing Will to the point when he felt forced to speak without being ready.

His first words, even if they were to be words of hatred and rejection, belonged to Hannibal. Jack had no right to steal them.

Gritting his teeth, Hannibal wondered if he should enter and stop this right now, or stay and listen further. Desire to throw Jack out was overwhelming, but this conversation… he had to hear it. It
was possibly the only window to what was going on in Will’s mind that he would be able to get a glimpse of, and if he had to tolerate Jack’s insensitivity, then so be it.

“No?” Jack sounded incredulous. “What do you mean, no?”

“I am not making a statement against Hannibal,” Will was speaking evenly, but Hannibal could hear every hitch in his breathing, every short pause he had to rely upon to push the words out. “I told you that before. On the phone. I may have been saved. But I won’t change my decision.”

“I understand that you have to rest for now, that any mention of him must be hurtful, but Will, I’m afraid you don’t know what you are saying.”

“I know… what I am saying,” Will inhaled loudly, letting out a small painful sound that had Hannibal grabbing the handle of the door automatically. He stopped himself at the last moment, even though everything inside him vibrated with the urgent need to soothe and comfort his partner.

“Will—”

“I won’t… send him to prison. Whatever you say, I will not change my mind.”

“So you are going to get back with him? Even knowing what he is?”

Hannibal tensed, anticipation turning his blood into hot, burning liquid, but it transformed back into ice as soon as Will said, “No. I will never come back to him.”

The quiet determination in his words hit Hannibal hard.

He had expected it. It was foolish to hope for anything else, considering how Will tried to avoid him all this time… but hearing it was still unexpectedly, bitterly crushing.

“Well, it might not be so easy to accomplish if you refuse to press charges!” Jack spat in obvious frustration. “Do you know what his plans are? Did he tell you?”

Will said nothing, so Jack continued.

“He’s planning to force you to live with him on the legal grounds. He told me he’ll go to court and prove the fact of your imprinting on each other, so your only way out is to put him into prison! Otherwise, you yourself will be his prisoner, and there will be nothing I would be able to do to help you!”

More silence. Finally, Will said, “No is no, Jack. I will not do it. Stop asking me to.”

“I don’t understand you!” Jack raised his voice, and all protective instincts inside Hannibal came to life full force, making it impossible for him to keep standing silently. “You would rather live with a monster, with your father’s killer, than see him punished? Are you out of your mind?”

Pushing the door open, Hannibal stared at Jack intently, noting how unacceptably close to Will he was.


“Whatever you are doing to mess with his mind, it won’t work,” he said. “I will make sure of it, and if something happens to him because of you again—”

“If you change your mind, just ask one of the nurses to call me,” Jack muttered finally. “I’ll see you later.”

Sending Hannibal last, full of hatred stare, he left, and Hannibal carefully offered the glass of water to Will.

Will accepted it with a shaking hand, closing his eyes as if even the slightest movement was painful. As he finished drinking, Hannibal took the glass away, unsure if he should be the one to break the silence.

When he returned to the bed, Will was looking at him, and his eyes were so dark that Hannibal couldn’t even imagine what was going through his mind.

“Is it… true? What Jack said,” Will wheezed out. “You are actually threatening me. With legal actions. What for?”

“I want to take you away. From this city, and from Baltimore.” Hannibal’s voice sounded very calm, but his heart was jumping out of his chest, beating so fast that he was surprised he could talk at all. “I have a house where you would be comfortable. Where you could heal.”

“Near the ocean. With the garden.” It was obvious that Will still fought to be able to utter anything, but the mockery in his words was powerful enough to be stinging. “I thought my decision was clear, but it seems you didn’t get it. I can’t… look at you. You make me sick. If you force me to go with you, I will try again, and this time… I will make sure that no one finds me.”

Everything around Hannibal faded, and for a moment, he was torn between unease, fury, and fear.

He knew he was only getting himself into an even deeper grave, but everything was already wrong, not at all like he had planned it.

“Then I will have to spend every minute with you to make sure you don’t succeed,” he said coldly, and Will stared at him before breathing out a laugh.

“So you are still set on fulfilling your plan,” he murmured emptily. “You must be thrilled they saved me. All the more chances to play with me — with whatever is left of me.”

“I am glad you lived, but not for the reasons you think.”

“Of course,” Will looked away. “It was stupid of me to think that at least this would stop you. That you would act like an actual human being for a change.”

“You are not ready to see a human being in me,” Hannibal told him. He hoped to convey everything he was feeling with his voice, but it sounded flat and lifeless. “You are not ready for me to apologize. For now, I am the embodiment of everything you hate, and I can only hope that with time—”

“With time what?” Will hissed, trying to sit up and immediately falling back with a grimace. “With time what?” he repeated. “I will forget that you killed my father? That you turned my life into hell, where I had to hide what I was, live in the place where I had nothing, where I was hated? I had one goal that kept me going — to make you pay. That’s why I bothered to fight for survival in the first place. And in the end, you stole even this from me. So what do I have now? What is the point?”

“You will find a new one,” this time, Hannibal struggled to keep his face emotionless, but he knew his mask had cracked under the impact of Will’s words.
He was a psychiatrist. He was used to misery and hopelessness, but those of Will threatened to bury them together. His alpha side was going crazy with the need to crawl into Will’s bed and soothe him, but he knew how well it would be received, so somehow, he managed to stay where he was.

Will’s lips twisted in a humorless smile.

“I know what you want,” he said. “You want me to imprint back on you, to prove your superiority once and for all. I remember how frustrated you were that night, when you told me. But you know what? If you really want to take me away, you will have to go to court, not just threaten me with it. I will never agree to go with you willingly.”

“The court will support my claim when they learn about imprinting. They will reach the decision in the matter of seconds.”

Some shadow flickered across Will’s face, a hesitation that Hannibal couldn’t even hope to understand. Then, his expression hardened, and he drawled, “But I am not imprinted on you. If it didn’t happen before, then it sure as hell won’t happen later. Do you still think the court will support you?”

Each blow hit him right in the middle of the chest, and Hannibal raised his arm, touching his chest almost in wonder.

How could one small person have so much power over him? It was terrifying. He couldn’t understand it.

But he would also never fight it again, because the last months of his life were the happiest.

“It will,” he said instead. “You know it will. I will be able to prove my imprinting, and after that, they won’t even ask you. That’s how the system works.”

“Fuck you.”

Briefly astonished, Hannibal raised his eyebrows.

“I cannot believe you have said that,” he uttered finally. “It is childish.”

“As childish as your plan to wait for my imprinting before getting rid of me in one way or another. Did you think long before coming up with it?”

Annoyed, Hannibal stared at him silently, but Will didn’t look away.

“As soon as Doctor Laeson gives her permission, I am taking you to our new house,” he said curtly. “You can come with me or you can fight me, but the outcome will be the same. Whatever dark thoughts plague your mind, I will not let them take you. If needed, I will watch you every hour, like I said before, until you are ready to live again.”

“Thank you, this is very reassuring,” Will spat. “Doesn’t seem like much of a choice to me. I get it. Being an omega means that I cannot even decide whether to live or die. Not on my terms.”

“You will not die on anyone’s terms,” Hannibal said darkly. “And regardless of what you say or do, you are coming home with me.”

Will looked at him with hooded eyes.
“You will regret it,” he said simply.

And then he refused to utter another word.

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Time passed much more quickly after that. Will still looked pale and couldn’t move much without triggering a headache that left him on the verge of consciousness, but as soon as he made his first steps, Hannibal began to make arrangements.

Will didn’t speak with him, choosing to ignore him entirely. Jack visited the hospital every day, clearly hoping to change Will’s mind, but more and more he seemed to come simply to watch Hannibal. One time, Hannibal had caught him tailing him as he was on his way to the hotel, and he couldn’t help but sneer at such crudeness.

Did Jack actually expect him to go on a killing spree? When Will was still at the hospital?

He would have to do something about this. Later.

The first thing Hannibal did was pay a handsome reward to the young girl named Jolie who had saved Will’s life by calling the ambulance. Then he hired people to take care of the summer house and get it ready for his and Will’s arrival, and left for Baltimore to collect all things that would need to be transported.

He hesitated in front of the painting with the ludicrous fish that Will felt so tenderly about, the one he had drawn with his father. Would it be a bad taste to bring it? Will would hardly be happy to think of Hannibal even touching it. More than that — it was a reminder of the loss that Hannibal didn’t want anywhere near them.

Will could also appreciate it, though, so in the end, he decided to move it along with other things.

Carefully preparing his suits, Hannibal was startled to find a piece of paper in one of them. As soon as he unfolded it, a rush of longing and regret enveloped him, and he closed his eyes, recalling the words that he knew by heart.

Will’s love letter. An awkward poem that had brought him such pleasure and joy. A proof that despite the lack of imprinting, his feelings were… had been reciprocated.

Reverently, Hannibal hid the letter in his pocket and looked at his reflection in the mirror.

He looked wistful. Lovesick.

He didn’t recognize himself.

Maybe with time, Will would do it for him.
The day of Will’s planned release from the hospital, Hannibal felt uncharacteristically anxious. He kept fighting the urge to pace, choosing to patiently wait for Will to exit his ward instead.

Jack hadn’t come today. He’d demanded to know where they were going, but Hannibal refused to give him address. He would have if it made the haunted look leave Will’s eyes, but he knew it wouldn’t work. Will didn’t care much about Jack, though it seemed that at times, he appreciated his concern. No, he just didn’t want to leave with Hannibal, and no matter how much he wanted to make Will happy, he couldn’t change his decision. If they were to ever reconcile, regardless of how impossible it seemed now, they had to be in close proximity to each other. Otherwise, Will would flee, and Hannibal couldn’t allow it.

The door opened finally, and Will stepped out, with a small bag in his hands. As always, he didn’t say a word — just stared at Hannibal while Laeson hovered over him, obviously regretful to let him go.

“You have to keep vigil,” she warned Hannibal, not seeing a suddenly dark glare Will sent her way. “You are a psychiatrist, you know the drill.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said tersely, then added in a friendlier voice. “Thank you for everything you have done.”

Laeson’s face lit up and she nodded.

“Take care,” she uttered.

Will didn’t say anything — turning his back to her, he walked toward the exit, and Hannibal moved after him, concerned with how tense he looked. Will refusing to speak and being tense could mean he had another blinding headache — or it could mean he was angry.

Or both.

Near the car, Will stopped, turning to Hannibal with an inscrutable look on his face.

“I moved Winston to the house yesterday,” Hannibal said when the pause got too long. “I thought you would be glad to see him.”

Will was silent for one more moment, then sighed.

“So you still haven’t changed your mind,” he concluded. “You are going to force me to live with you.”

Hannibal missed his voice terribly, so he absorbed every note of it before shaking his head.

“It will be for the best,” he promised, and Will regarded him coldly.

“I told you, you will regret it,” he said. “You can underestimate me all you want, but remember these words.”
“I will,” Hannibal agreed.

At this moment, he would agree to anything, as long as Will went with him.

Willingly or not.
I'm really embarrassed to say it, but since my country was celebrating Christmas in the last two days, I got caught up in celebrations and confused Sunday and Monday :D So, here's the too-late or too-early update.

Will is a mess - he starts actual planning only toward the end of the chapter. For now and for the nearest future, be prepared for a slow-burn angst fest)

It was too dark for midday. For car interior. For his mind.

Will watched dispassionately how the car stopped near the two story house, one looking too cozy and simple for someone like Hannibal.

Hannibal, so refined and demanding. Living in something like this? This house was nothing like the one in Baltimore. Had he bought it for the sake of pretense?

Opening the door, Will stepped out of the car, clenching his small black bag in his hands. The shadows around him flickered, whispering, but he ignored them, focusing on the scenery in front of him.

This house did have a garden. And the ocean nearby. If Will closed his eyes, he could smell it — the heavy, salty, alluring smell, beckoning him closer.

“We should go inside,” Hannibal said, his voice deceptively soft. Deceptively safe. “I want you to feel at home. You may choose any room you wish for yourself.”

Without saying a word, Will walked to the house, waiting for Hannibal to open it. The first thing he saw was Winston who nearly went crazy with joy, jumping at him and trying to lick his face enthusiastically.

Will managed to force out a small smile, but it died almost immediately. He had no strength to maintain it. No desire to try, not even for the only being that was actually loyal to him.

“Will?” Hannibal sounded strangely unsure, and Will flinched, wanting only one thing — to get as far away from him as possible.

The room. He had to find some space for himself and close himself there. Hannibal was clearly set on pretending to be considerate, so he wouldn’t disturb him there for some time.

Will started moving before realizing it. He had never been in this house before, but it was as if his legs knew where to take him.

When he stopped near one of the doors on the second floor, he froze. The scent emanating from there was unmistakable.

This room belonged to Hannibal. His stupid omegan mind had chosen to bring him to the place that it considered the safest and most comfortable for him.
Letting out a flat laugh, Will turned away and walked to the farthest corner from here. The door there led him to a small, elegant room in blue and gray shades, and Will threw the bag on the floor, inhaling… and exhaling.

Yes. This was for him.

There was a mirror on one of the walls, and he approached it slowly, staring at his reflection.

Pale. Disheveled. With an ugly scar in the middle of his forehead.

At the hospital, Jack had been trying very hard not to stare at it. Hannibal, on the other hand, acted as if he truly didn’t see it, and at this moment, Will wasn’t sure which of them he hated more.

Turning his back to the mirror, he lowered himself onto the bed, watching the ceiling.

Watching.

And watching.

He had never been a good omega. Now he was also an ugly one. Forced to live with a person who saw him as a temporary plaything.

Betrayer. Murderer.

And yet, what had Will done? He had lied about imprinting. Because he knew that as soon as Hannibal got what he wanted, the game would be over. He would be discarded for good. His fear of abandonment was stronger than anything else, so he had condemned himself to more days, weeks, months spent in impenetrable darkness, with a sociopath he was in love with for a company. The sociopath who had killed his father.

His heart started to quicken its pace in anxiety, so Will tried to breathe slowly. In and out.

Was he still in love with Hannibal?

Yes. He couldn’t deny it. This feeling wasn’t new any longer. But a toxic mixture of hatred and bitterness was something unfamiliar — something entirely maddening.

Will couldn’t stand to look at him. He couldn’t stand even being in his presence for a long time — the drive here had been disastrous, sending him on the verge of panic more than once.

He wanted to hurt him. To maim him. To kill him. To rip out his heart, the way Hannibal had done it to him.

But he couldn’t say good bye. Not now, at least.

The darkest whispering shadow entered the room, and Will looked at it briefly before glancing away.

Darkness was his constant companion now. He stopped paying attention to it. These days, it was more pleasant to look at it instead of looking at Hannibal, so he started to appreciate its company.

The house was warm. Winston had followed him and was now faithfully lying near him, but coldness still pierced him, and Will shivered.

This kind of dissonance within him was slowly driving him crazy. He didn’t want anything, yet at the same time, he wanted too much.
What should he do? His ideas were chaotic, drastically different from one another.

Continuing to exist in a limbo?

No. The mere thought sent his heart skittering.

Ending his life, this time for good, with no chance of being saved?

…Maybe.

Transforming the idea of his revenge to a more solid one, making Hannibal pay?

Maybe.

So which was it? What could he do? He didn’t want to live with Hannibal. His Hannibal never existed in the first place. But the illusion was still there, and Will foolishly clung to it despite knowing how pointless and degrading it was.

Was any of it worth fighting for?

Tears burned his eyes, and he blinked, burying his face in Winston’s soft fur. With tears, the pain came, so fierce that Will almost choked on it, coiling himself into a small ball. Everything hurt — his limbs, his stomach, his heart, and most of all his head. Very quickly, it filled with white-hot, screeching, blinding flame, and Will pressed his hands to his ears, trying to block the sounds.

He had no idea if it was physical or not, but it felt like every cell of his body was dying.

Shadows crept to him and started to engulf him, one by one, and Will lost himself amidst them, hoping it would bring him at least some comfort.

When he came to his senses, it was dark outside. He frowned, wondering if it was really evening or another delusion, but then decided it didn’t matter. Standing up, Will looked around the room, searching for a clock. There was none, so with a deep sigh, he reached for a door handle. Hesitated.

Going downstairs meant seeing Hannibal. Will wasn’t sure he was ready for it. On the other hand, he would never be ready, and he did need to find a bathroom and eat something.

Probably.

There was light in the hall, but Will saw it as dim and gloomy. As he had thought, Hannibal was sitting on the sofa, reading a book — but most likely, just waiting for him to turn up.

“Were you sleeping?” Hannibal’s voice still sounded very soft, as if he was afraid that any loud word might break Will. “I did not want to disturb you, but hours have passed. I was starting to get worried.”


Hannibal tilted his head, watching him with a half-frown.

“I’ve brought your clothes,” he murmured after a pause. “I didn’t know which room you would choose, so I’ve put them into my own. You are welcome to retrieve them.”

“I don’t need a lot of clothes, do I?” Will nodded at the front door that was locked securely. “It’s not like I have many places to go. I seem to be a prisoner here, with you as my guard.”
“You are not a prisoner,” Hannibal stood up, and Will stepped away in a sudden burst of genuine fear.

The expression that crossed Hannibal’s face was startled. Then shocked. Then, for a very brief second, anguished. Will shook his head, wondering how someone could pretend so well. The world around him swam, and he gripped the side of the sofa, blinking rapidly.

Thank God, Hannibal didn’t attempt to touch him. He was standing frozen, like a statue, staring at him in a way that made Will uncomfortable.

“I can’t leave. It makes me a prisoner,” he said finally.

“You can leave, just not alone. Not until I am sure of your state of mind.”

“You were the one to attempt to destroy it.”

“Will—”

“Forget it,” Will’s eyes darted sideway. The room was still moving, with shadows having followed him downstairs, and in the midst of this chaos, Hannibal, ironically, was the most real and human thing.

“Will,” concern in Hannibal’s words brought Will’s attention back to him. “You are very pale. How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Will said curtly, shivering when one of the shadows brushed against him.

“You need to eat. I prepared dinner — nothing heavy, simple rice and vegetables, and a small dessert.”

Hannibal and his cooking.

Involuntarily, Will thought about all the times they cooked together, side by side. When Hannibal taught him how to preserve the vegetables’ juiciness, how to treat the meat and the difference in cooking different parts of it.

The meat.

The Ripper was taking organs. It never made sense for him to take trophies, although Will did consider the idea that he could be making some kind of personal creepy museum.

But Hannibal… Hannibal wouldn’t want a museum. No, someone like him would more likely consume the fruits of his labor, and then manipulate others into doing it as well.

All Hannibal’s dishes did revolve around meat.

Had he eaten a part of Will’s father?

Sick to his stomach, Will backed away, wondering how on the earth he could have missed it. He was so focused on personal betrayal that he completely forgot about other victims and things done to them.

“Will?”

Refusing to even look in Hannibal’s direction, Will rushed upstairs, needing to put as much distance between them as possible. He found a bathroom on the second floor and closed himself in
it, breathing heavily, fighting nausea that kept sending spasms through his stomach, approaching his throat.

Hannibal was a monster. He knew it already. Cannibalism didn’t come close to the truth of Hannibal killing his father and toying with him, but doing this, as if other blows weren’t hard enough? Why? How could they spend so much time together, and how could Will remain so blind?

Cold water cooled down the heat burning his skin, and when Will risked looking into the mirror, he frowned, seeing its strange surface. It was almost like it was made from some special material, similar to the mirror in his room.

Will had no desire or strength to uncover this small mystery now. He stayed in the bathroom for several more minutes, just standing, waiting for his heartbeat to stabilize. He couldn’t even start to try to sort through the hectic thoughts and cries in his head because it was hopeless. Impossible.

His room, when he crawled back to it, was completely dark. The shadows were waiting already, and Will welcomed them, hiding in their thick essence. It comforted him, knowing that even if Hannibal decided to come in, he wouldn’t be able to see him. At least not immediately. It brought him a ghost of a feeling of safety.

Destroy Hannibal? Or kill himself?

His father would have chosen the first one. He wouldn’t understand the desire to end it all — he had always loved living, always tried to get the best from his life. But what was best in this situation?

He loved Hannibal. He loved him, monster or not. But he could never forgive him. Never, because he hated him.

Hated him, but could not kill him. Could not even send him to prison.

Laughing, Will rubbed his eyes violently, ignoring the pain his harsh movements triggered.

Maybe he couldn’t kill or imprison Hannibal, but Hannibal still deserved to be crushed. To do that, Will had to determine his weakest spots and use them, slowly and meticulously. The only question was, did he have patience for it?

He wasn’t sure. He thought ‘yes’ one second and ‘no’ during the next one. His temples were pulsing with heated ache, ache so strong that nausea began to collect itself into a poisonous ball in his stomach again, so Will closed his eyes, hoping to fall asleep or lose consciousness.

The omega within him was mostly oblivious to physical pain. It kept shifting restlessly under his skin, urging him to find his alpha and have him make every bad feeling go away, and if Will could, he would kill this weak, pathetic creature.

When sleep finally came, he was exhausted by bitterness and hatred to everyone. Including himself. Then morning came, and nothing changed — the shadows were still there, and in addition, Hannibal was standing near his bed, watching him.

“What are you doing here?” Will hissed. “I did not allow you to come in.”

Hannibal pursed his lips, clearly dissatisfied.

“I apologize,” he said stiffly. “It is time for breakfast.”
“I’m not hungry.”

“I’m afraid I must insist. You haven’t eaten anything in the last twenty four hours — it is unacceptable.”

“Get out!”

Hannibal glared at him, and Will reveled in this display of rare genuine emotions.

“I understand that you don’t want to see me,” Hannibal said lowly. “I am trying to respect your boundaries, but you are currently my responsibility. If you refuse to eat, I will be forced to take you back to the hospital, and trust me, there is nothing I want less.”

Hesitating, Will got up, turning so Hannibal would not see his face.

“Fine,” he uttered. “I will come downstairs in a minute. For now, leave me alone.”

Hannibal made a point of sending him a supposedly pained glance before nodding and closing the door after himself. Will walked to the mirror, staring at his reflection. His lips curled in disgust.

He did not just look ugly — he looked dirty. Ruined. As far from what omegas were supposed to be like as was humanly and inhumanly possible.

Infuriated, Will punched the mirror, and frowned when nothing happened. The glass didn’t break.

An unusual design? Or something else?

Briefly thinking about changing his clothes and then deciding against it, he moved to the bathroom, turned on the light, and examined the things in there.

No scissors. No sharp razors. The same strange, unbreakable mirror.

If he went to other rooms, he would undoubtedly find similar things, with windows and mirrors and everything else made in one and the same design.

Hannibal had created a safe house. To prevent Will from trying suicide again — as if it could help. As if it didn’t just make him angrier and more determined.

Fury clouded his vision, cutting into him. Trembling, Will stormed downstairs, where the breakfast was already served — as if Hannibal still hadn’t tired of playing the attentive host.

Maybe he hadn’t.

Will’s sudden appearance had evidently taken Hannibal aback, but then he smiled at him, and Will’s fury unexpectedly transformed into something colder and much more controlled.

Hannibal might have tried to secure the house, hoping Will was enough of an idiot not to notice it, but in this case, he had underestimated him. Will didn’t know what he could do with this information for now, but he would. For now, he stored it, and focused on food.

“No meat?” he asked. “What, did you run out of ingredients?”

Hannibal opened his mouth to answer, but Will interrupted him, “Not enough neighbors here?”

Another emotion that had to be genuine — surprise. Hannibal stared at him with amazement and cautiousness, as if he didn’t know how to react. Then, choosing a pleased expression, he noted,
“Not enough rude neighbors.”

“Rudeness. Yes. The mortal sin. Was my father rude enough for you?”

All amusement vanished from Hannibal’s face in an instant.

“Will. I don’t think we should speak about it. Not now.”

“Why not? Breakfast seems like an appropriate time.”

“We will discuss your father. We will discuss everything, but not when your hatred is still running hot.”

“My hatred has been running hot for ten years. Do you really think it will disappear in a few days, or even months?”

“Not ‘disappear’,” Hannibal put his fork down. “Never entirely. But it will weaken. You will see.”

Will didn’t dignify it with response. He ate his breakfast with no further comments, feeding Winston some pieces despite Hannibal’s silent disapproval, and thinking.

Destroy Hannibal? Or himself?

He left his empty plate for Hannibal to clean, moving back to his room. He didn’t think about anything else, focused on those two thoughts, but panic still engulfed him for some reason. One moment he was sitting on his bed, looking out of the window, and the next, his heart started to pound anxiously, his breathing process turned into desperate gulps of air, and black dots intertwined in a maddening dance. The worst of the worst had already happened — there was nothing he could fear at this point, but his mind disagreed, plunging him straight into the abyss of panic and terror.

Choking, Will tried to stand, but fell on the floor. Somehow, he managed to crawl into one of the shadows-filled corner, hiding his face between his knees and trying to breathe slowly, again and again, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

It seemed hours had gone before he could breathe normally again. Strengthening, Will went back to bed on shaking legs, wondering if his every day was going to be like this. What had he turned himself into? It was only one o’clock, and he already felt bone-tired.

The doctors were wrong. A vital part of him was already dead. Only his stupid body failed to get a clue and was dying now instead, slowly and much less pleasantly than it would have after the gunshot.

Destroy Hannibal, or destroy himself?

If there would be anything left of him to destroy by the time he made the decision.

At four, there was a knock on the door. Will didn’t answer — simply turned his head and waited.

Another knocking sound, and then Hannibal came in, in another expensive suit.

Will had teased him about his need to change every several hours.

Before.

“If you are not busy, come with me?” Hannibal asked him in his artificial gentle voice.
“Why?”

“I would like for us to have a schedule. To spend time together at least several hours a day.”

Will laughed against his will.

“Do you honestly think it will stop me from hating you?” he asked. “It’s a very cheap therapy. I’m not one of your patients.”

“Please.”

Will looked away, knowing that if he continued staring at Hannibal, he would scream. The inner dissonance was tearing him apart with every gaze, and the feelings it evoked were far from positive. Any longing he felt as omega was marred by revulsion he felt as human, all aimed at Hannibal.

Destroy him, or destroy himself?

“All right,” he said. “But I am not going to talk to you.”

Hannibal nodded slightly, waiting until Will reached him. As their hands brushed by accident, Hannibal’s eyes glazed over and he breathed in sharply, inhaling his scent. Will recoiled, sending him a warning glare.

Hannibal immediately stepped away, appearing apologetic, and Will walked past him, gritting his teeth and urging himself to stay calm.

So that was how Hannibal was going to play. He was not only going to pretend being a considerate, loving alpha — he also planned to imitate desire. As if Will could believe that any alpha would want him now, with the addition of an ugly scar. He hadn’t been particularly desirable before, considering the amount of attention he’d been getting, which was why he’d been stunned by Hannibal’s courtship. But now? Did Hannibal think he would fall for it for a second time?

The treacherous burn in the eyes made them sting, and Will lowered his head, hoping Hannibal wouldn’t be able to see or smell it.

In the living room, the fireplace was lit. Hannibal pointed him at the sofa, took the armchair himself, and pulled out some book.

“So, am I supposed to just sit here and watch you read?” Will asked derisively. Hannibal’s lips twitched in a small smile.

“If you don’t mind, I will read to you.”

Will stared at him incredulously, wondering if it was some kind of joke, but Hannibal’s face remained serious.

“So this is a cheap therapy,” Will concluded. “Fireplace. Sofa. Armchair. You, reading a book to me. Me, listening to the sound of your voice for several hours every day. You really believe it will help me get used to you again, magically forget everything you have done? How did you even become a psychiatrist?”

To Will’s disappointment, Hannibal remained unmoved.

“Whether it is efficient or not should not matter to you since you are not interested in results,”
Hannibal noted. “However, to me, it is important.”

“If you think it will trigger my imprinting on you, you are wrong.”

This time, Hannibal’s eyes did flash, and Will reveled in the distress he felt emanating from him.

“You don’t want to go back to the hospital,” Hannibal said after a pause. “I don’t want you to go there either. To avoid it, there is a routine you have to adhere to, one I have agreed to in order to obtain the right to take you away. Eating properly is the first condition. Spending several hours with me daily is the second one. Doctor Laeson specifically asked me to—”

“You hated Laeson,” Will spat. “Every time she entered the room, you looked like you were imagining how smoothly her skin will separate from her bones.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows rose, and for a moment, he appeared very pleased.

“She was a despicable human being,” he agreed. “I would love nothing more than to invite her to our table. But in this particular case, I agree with her.”

“You will agree to anything as long as it benefits you,” Will said coldly. “Laeson might have been despicable, but who are you to make this kind of judgment? Even if she tried, she would never be able to surpass you in regard to assholeness.”

“Are you ready?” was all that Hannibal asked, patting the cover of the book. Will shrugged, dragging his gaze to the fire. Soon, the room was filled with Hannibal’s even voice, but the meaning of the words he was uttering never reached Will’s mind. He was focused on the fire only, thinking, ‘Destroy Hannibal? Or destroy myself?’

He didn’t have an answer. The reading hour ended, allowing Will to return to his room, but the peace didn’t come — on the contrary. There was something ominous and hostile in the shadows’ whispering now, and Will shivered, trying not to look in their direction.

Hannibal? Or himself?

Hours began to slide by. Eleven. Midnight. One in the morning.

Hannibal, kissing him with reverence, as if Will was the most precious thing he ever held in his arms. Hannibal, growling at Jack to keep him away, so readily protecting him and giving him comfort. Hannibal, giving him an alibi by lying to Jack, which Will had taken as the most meaningful and real love confession.

All lies. Every feeling, every flicker of emotions — all faked. All words carefully chosen. Charming Will while tightening the noose around his neck, getting ready to hand him over to Jack for all deaths, including Alana’s and Will’s father.

Will’d had a lot of time to come to terms with it in the hospital, but it was pointless. His mind kept obsessively going back to all months spent with Hannibal, reminding him of the sweetest moments they shared and forcing him to see them in the light of truth.

Will pressed his hand to his chest, applying pressure, hoping against hope to make the pain leave, but his breathing grew ragged.

Enraged by this yet another one moment of weakness, Will jumped from the bed, crept to the door, and quietly slid outside.
He wasn’t sure what he was going to do. His mantra of ‘Hannibal or myself?’ was getting louder in his head, and he had no idea how to stop it.

The front door was still locked, with the lock being complicated enough for Will not even wanting to bother with it. Mindlessly, he moved to the living room, and then to the kitchen. Did Hannibal hide all the knives and forks, too?

He didn’t know whether to laugh or be pissed when it turned out that yes, Hannibal had indeed secured all shelves with cutlery. He honestly thought that it would stop Will from trying to harm himself.

He was right. Hannibal was a shitty psychiatrist. Seeing the efforts he’d applied only filled Will with more resolve.

He still wasn’t sure what to choose, but annoyance and contempt he felt at Hannibal’s presumptuousness made him look around the kitchen in an attempt to find something Hannibal had missed. Soon, his eyes stopped at the small bottle of vinegar, and he took it from the upper shelf curiously.

Vinegar. Technically, if he drank the entire bottle, he would most likely die. Not a good way to go, and there was a chance that he would be saved by either vomiting it all back or being rushed to a hospital, but still.

Even Hannibal could make mistakes.

Will was still looking at the bottle when the light in the kitchen was suddenly turned on. Hannibal stood on the threshold, frozen, staring at him.

Oh.

It wasn’t what he had planned. Hannibal catching him like this was far from ideal — he would immediately jump to conclusions when Will himself wasn’t sure what he had been going to do.

As he predicted, Hannibal looked furious.

“What are you doing?” he hissed, his voice almost inhuman with black rage that sounded in it.

“None of your business,” Will growled, clenching the bottle harder. He couldn’t retreat now, or admit that he had no specific plans yet. “Did you have fun playing your little game, hiding things so your poor, traumatized toy wouldn’t be able to off itself?”

“Do not refer to yourself in that way!” Hannibal slammed the door shut. “All I’ve been trying to do in the last months is to protect you. From Jack. From the truth. From yourself. But you seem determined to ruin all of my plans out of spite, without even giving me a chance to remedy what I have done!”

“You cannot remedy anything,” Will uttered. Something was building up inside him, consuming him, until every thought that went through his mind was poisoned by bitterness. “You cannot,” he repeated. “You killed my father. You’ve been lying to me from the moment we’ve met. You are a murderer. A cannibal, as if mutilating people wasn’t bad enough. You’ve betrayed me in every possible way, and nothing in the world can change that.”

“I can,” Hannibal stepped closer to him, his eyes glistening with a fire crazy enough to make Will back away. “If you give me a chance, I will prove the genuineness of my feelings to you. I will earn your forgiveness.”
“I will die sooner than it happens,” Will said honestly. Hannibal’s eyes darkened, and in the next moment, he stood right in front of him, having moved with almost supernatural speed. Will startled, not expecting to see him so close, but Hannibal was already grabbing his hand, viciously twisting out the bottle of vinegar from it.

It wasn’t painful, but his proximity immediately filled Will with a sense of primal terror. He tried to pull free, and when Hannibal didn’t let go of him, his panic grew.

“Get away from me!” he screamed. The world around him instantly darkened, and he thrashed in Hannibal’s grasp, feeling like every part of his body that collided with Hannibal’s was burning. The violence of his struggle must have surprised Hannibal because this time, he let go, and Will dropped to the floor, blindly crawling away.

He didn’t get far. Strong hands grabbed him again, and before Will could fight, Hannibal whispered into his ear, “You will never do it again. I will lock you in one, windowless room if you try, with soft walls if it’s needed. And if you try to leave… I think… I would rather kill you than let you go.”

The pressure disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared, and when Will’s heart calmed and he regained the ability to see, he realized that Hannibal had left the kitchen, taking the unfortunate bottle of vinegar with him.

Licking his lips nervously, Will chose a more comfortable position in his corner. Thinking.

Hannibal would rather kill him than let him go. Not discard him, as Will had initially thought, but kill him. Not that it made a lot of sense, considering he was so adamant about not letting Will commit a suicide… then again, the Ripper was someone who called all the shots. Letting Will kill himself meant giving him freedom. Killing him himself, though, losing his prized self-control… it meant losing. Failing to complete his intricate plan and acknowledging it. Hannibal would do it only if pushed to the extreme — only if he was forced to admit that Will was never going to imprint on him, that all his careful planning was in vain.

Destroy Hannibal, or himself.

Why not both?
This time, a Sunday update) Thank you all so much for your tremendous support! I think we will be having 2 Will's chapters and 1 Hannibal's from now on.

So, Will starts implementing his plan, Hannibal is being his miserable self (and somewhat threatening at the end). This chapter is still more angsty than not, but in the next ones, we will have some semi-artificial peace ;)

That same night, Will couldn’t sleep. He tried his bed, but moonlight that shone through the window, bathing him in its light, made him feel like he was being slowly eviscerated. Unsettled, he went to one of the whispy corners and hid in the shadows residing there, comforted by their constant presence.

He had to decide where to start. He had to hit Hannibal where it would hurt most, and with the facts he had, there was only one thing he could use. Imprinting. Something that Hannibal craved because in his mind, it would give him the ultimate control over his foolish, infatuated omega.

But how to use it? Simply withholding it, pretending he wasn’t imprinted, could only ever be temporary. Hannibal would get tired of waiting sooner or later, and being who he was, he probably already had an alternative plan for this turn of events.

No, it had to be something unexpected. Something that would shock and enrage him. Something that would force him to make good on his promise.

Will glanced at the clock. Almost four. Several hours since his and Hannibal’s confrontation.

His throat was parched, so after a short hesitation, he left his corner and went to the door. He would have to move quietly, because if he woke Hannibal up… going through the same argument again—

Will’s thoughts came to a halt when he opened the door and saw Hannibal sitting on the floor near it, leaning against the wall, sleeping — or pretending to. Will recoiled, and Hannibal immediately opened his eyes and hastened to stand up. His hair was disheveled, his face pale, and he looked… strange. As if in these several hours, he had aged by ten, fifteen years.

“What the hell is this?” Will asked, and Hannibal tried to appear flustered.

“I wanted to make sure that this night passes quietly,” he murmured finally, and if he were anyone else, Will would say that he was embarrassed. “Whatever your opinion of me is now, I care about your safety. I told you — I will protect you, even if I have to do it against your wishes.”

Will measured him with a long, careful look, thinking, ‘We will see.’ He was about to move forward when Hannibal suddenly narrowed his eyes.

“Where were you going?” he asked sharply.

“To drink some water,” Will hissed, the seeds of annoyance growing back to life. “Do I not have the right to go where I want in this place?”
“You can,” Hannibal replied after a moment. “Of course you can.”

“Great,” Will walked past him, knowing he was being followed, but not sure what he could do about it.

Hannibal had apparently decided to watch him by himself now, with the same old goal to prevent him from attempting another suicide. The most infuriating thing was that Will hadn’t even tried it for the second time, yet the circumstances made it look as if he was still a wreck.

Well, he was. But he also had other plans.

Hannibal kept shadowing him during all the time Will spent in the kitchen, not saying anything even when Will poured water into a glass that he knew Hannibal kept for wine. He was standing behind his back as Will drank it, and then followed him back to the room, stopping only at its threshold.

“Good night,” he said softly. Will refused to reply. He shut the door, went to the bed, and dragged the pillow from there to his corner.

Yes, his choices were limited. There was only so much he could do with imprinting, and he had no idea what other weaknesses Hannibal could have. Every word from his mouth was a lie — or a lie mixed with some tiny bits of truth. At this point, even if he said anything and meant it, Will would have no chance of knowing if it could be trusted.

Unless his connection to the Ripper allowed him to differentiate between truth and lies? He hadn’t reached out for the Ripper yet, not since the night of his heat.

Maybe it was time to change it.

Closing his eyes, Will sought the connection that had been a nightmare and a blessing one time. The time when he still believed he would be able to catch the Ripper and sentence him to death.

Sometimes it was almost painful to withstand the strength of this connection — it was always there, but now, Will had to apply efforts to find it. When he did, his eyes opened, and he frowned in confusion.

He couldn’t feel a thing. He sensed the emotions themselves in Hannibal, shifting heavily under the very surface, but he couldn’t identify them. None of them. One feeling was the most prominent right now, but Will had no idea whether it was joy, sadness, glee, or anything else.

Confusion started to turn into anxiousness, and it took some time for him to squash it.

Why couldn’t he recognize Hannibal’s emotions? He had never had problems with the Ripper before — he could always tell what he was feeling. Why not now?

Had the truth changed it, or was it the consequence of shooting himself in the head? Trusting Hannibal’s facial expressions, gestures, the intonation with which he spoke — it was reckless and dangerous. His emotions were the only semi-reliable indicator, and with it gone… well. Will would have to rely on his own perceptions.

Hannibal and his craving for imprinting. To evoke a violent, genuine response, Will could only pretend to imprint on someone else. That was the only thing he could think of, the only thing he could use in his current situation.

There was no one to choose as appropriate target, though. Hannibal had mentioned there were few
neighbors… but there had to be someone, and it was quite possible that there was at least one unmated beta or alpha.

Too many things to consider. Despite being an omega, Will wasn’t generally found desirable, and to risk another person’s life like that… Hannibal would most likely go berserk, not only on him, but also on Will’s fake mate. Was the potential bloodbath worth it? Did he even have it in him, to fake something so significant, to charm someone deliberately?

Sleep finally began to conquer parts of his mind, bit by bit, and Will allowed the calming surge to claim him.

He would think about everything in the morning.

***

“I want to go for a walk,” Will said, staring above Hannibal’s shoulder. No reply followed, so he clarified, “With Winston.”

“All right,” Hannibal agreed after another pause. “But I’m coming with you.”

This time, Will did glance at him, for the first time in the morning.

Hannibal looked terrible. His tired, gaunt face screamed that he hadn’t slept enough this night, and he stared at Will as if he was trying to calculate whether he was going to suddenly jump on the nearest knife. Not that there were any in the vicinity.

Still worried about the fiasco with vinegar, then.

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Will went to change his clothes, and when he came down the stairs again, Hannibal was already waiting, patting Winston, but staring at Will almost unblinkingly at the same time.

Whenever Will imagined the Ripper, he used to think that his eyes must be dead. The type of eyes that kept everyone at the appropriate distance, terrifying and fascinating.

Hannibal’s eyes weren’t dead, but sometimes they seemed so dark and fathomless that Will couldn’t help but wonder if they were even human.

At the door, Hannibal’s hand reached out to touch Will’s waist — perhaps out of habit, and Will angled away, a pang of uncontrollable fear echoing through his body, making every part of it buzz with tension.

It wasn’t that he was afraid of Hannibal… Or was he? Why did even the smallest touch make his skin burn, filling him with the urge to run?

Will thought about it as they were slowly walking alongside narrow, empty road. How had this instinct appeared? If it was so strong that it had the power to cloud his mind, no matter how briefly, then how would he able to live here, with this person, for the following weeks, maybe
When they reached the ocean and Will stared at its surface, which glistened in a deceptively welcoming way, he suddenly got it.

He wasn’t afraid of the Ripper, not even now. But he was terrified of Hannibal.

The only thing the Ripper could do was cause him physical pain and kill him. Despite knowing his identity, he still remained a stranger to Will, someone who evoked simple emotions.

Hannibal, though. Hannibal was an entirely different kind of monster. Even now, still, he held power over Will, power so intense that even the slightest use of it could be crushing.

Will knew that Hannibal did not love him, but he hadn’t seen him without his affectionate mask yet. He knew how cold and indifferent Hannibal could be to others, but he’d never seen it directed at him.

He wasn’t sure he could handle it when this moment came. The Ripper had killed his father, but Hannibal betrayed him, and despite everything, Will found it difficult to think of them as of one person.

Winston went crazy with excitement at the sight of the ocean. He kept running back and forth, woofing and yelping repeatedly, and Will slowly moved after him, shivering when a gust of cold wind crept under his clothes.

Too big for him. Or maybe he had become too thin to wear them because in the past, they fitted him just fine.

Will stopped when Winston did, looking at the massive, slow waves that kept rocking the dark surface of water. For a moment, he imagined coming here in summer, with Hannibal as his real partner, swimming in the ocean together, laughing at their powerlessness when trying to conquer the waves, sitting on the sand and breathing in the unique scent around them.

Such a sappy, romantic picture. An image from the textbook about alpha/omega bonds, yet Will craved it with the urgency that was almost frightening.

Before, he’d thought he would never be able to stop his pursuit of the Ripper. Now, he would probably give up everything to have this beautiful picture come to life, to have his Hannibal back — Hannibal who appeared to genuinely love him.

Will shifted his glance to the left. Hannibal was standing nearby, not even pretending to look away, and another wave of bitterness and anger crashed into him, washing away the idyllic image in his mind.

He had to focus on his plan. He hadn’t seen any houses on the walk here, but there had to be some on the other side.

“Let’s go,” Will said, and Hannibal straightened, looking wary.

“Where to?” he asked, and Will’s lips curled in a derisive smile.

“I was talking to Winston,” he informed him coolly. “It’s too cold on the beach. I’d like to go someplace else.”

“There is not much else to see here,” Hannibal clearly chose to ignore his tone of voice. “Only the
road, some trees, and several houses.”

Houses.

Just what he needed.

Whistling for Winston to follow him, Will resumed walking. His temples began to pulse with dull pain, and he rubbed them, trying to massage it away.

Houses. Houses. He needed the right house. He needed for the right person to live there. If this semblance of a plan failed, he would have to find something else, and he had no idea what it could be.

Maybe later. The best thoughts seemed to come to him at night.

They passed Hannibal’s house, and the pain worsened. Something started to flicker on the periphery of his vision, and Will frowned, wondering if it was real. There were no shadows on the beach — why would they follow him here? Was he truly losing his mind, or was he performing some weird therapy on himself?

Hannibal sent him a strange look, and Will turned away from the shadows, trying to ignore them. However, he could feel them approaching — an almost physical sensation that made him shiver. One of the shadows slithered past him, turned left, and disappeared behind the corner. Curious, Will followed it, and drew in a breath when he saw a house. Not a new one, but neat enough to believe that someone was taking care of it.

“Will?”

Hannibal’s voice was tense. Several more minutes — and he would start insisting that they go back.

Will couldn’t just ask him who lived here. Then again, there wasn’t any address visible, and so far, this was the only house he had seen.

“Do you know your neighbors?” he asked. The question was stiff, but Hannibal looked surprisingly delighted. What, did he think Will decided to start a casual conversation?

“No really,” he said. “This particular house belongs to one Jeremy Glashow. He’s a lawyer on some private firm. We met when I moved in, but apart from that, we never interacted. I don’t know anyone else here — this place is not meant for social connections.”

“No. It isn’t,” Will agreed, still studying the house carefully.

Jeremy Glashow.

He would remember this name.

As he’d predicted, Hannibal started to hover over him, claiming that they needed to get back and that Will wasn’t in the state to stay outside for so long. Will didn’t argue. His head was still pulsing with pain, and when he carefully glanced at Glashow’s house, he saw that the shadow continued to stand there, gloomy and immovable, frighteningly solid.

He was silent on their way back, and Hannibal, thankfully, didn’t try to initiate another conversation. Only inside the house, when Will started to move upstairs, he said, “Lunch is in two hours. After that, please come to the living room.”
“What, another reading hour?” Will sneered, but Hannibal remained impassive.

“Yes,” was all he said. Then he hesitated, an unsure look crossing his features. Opened his mouth, closed it. Opened it again.

“Anything you want to say?” Will asked, not even trying to mask his irritation. When would Hannibal realize that all his attempts at looking human were wasted on him? He would have to be a complete idiot to think that someone as meticulous and cold-blooded could be genuinely unsure — at least when it came to conversations. Especially conversations with him.

“What are you going to do?” Hannibal blurted out, and Will stared at him.

“Rest,” he said shortly.

Hannibal continued to look at him with that same hesitant gaze, and Will pursed his lips. He had no desire to engage with him any longer. Whatever Hannibal was planning to demonstrate to him by this strange display, it wouldn’t work.

Will returned to his room, feeling an unexplainable rush of relief at the sight of it. There, wrapping himself in the blanket, he sat in his corner and closed his eyes. Tried to feel the Ripper, but just as during the night, nothing happened. He felt the presence of emotions, and that was it. Nothing specific. No emotion that he could recognize.

His thoughts slipped into one another, mixing and twirling, slowing down with every passing minute. Will couldn’t say whether he fell asleep or got stuck in the middle of his own head, but the dark surrounding peacefulness shattered when the door to the room suddenly burst open.

Blinking, Will looked up, at Hannibal’s pale face, and frowned.

“What are you doing here?” he asked hoarsely. “And why did you come in without even knocking?”

“Are you unwell?” Hannibal made several huge steps to him and kneeled in front of his soothing cocoon. Will reeled back, pushing against the wall.

“Get away,” he warned. Even the contours of Hannibal’s body were emanating scorching heat, and Will couldn’t stand it. He was burning.

Hannibal retracted his hand and inhaled deeply instead, probably checking if Will had a fever. His frown deepened, and when he spoke again, his voice was gentle.

“Do you have a headache? We can move lunch to a—”

“No,” Will stood up, careful to avoid any form of touching. “I’m fine. We can eat now.”

“Is your bed uncomfortable? Why are you sitting in the corner? You can move to any other room, or I could purchase...”

“No,” Will repeated. “Everything is fine. Stop fussing over me.”

A wry smile appeared on Hannibal’s lips.

“I will never be able to do that,” he said quietly.

There were many things Will wanted to tell him in response, but he held back, knowing he was in no shape for another argument yet. Wordlessly, he went to the dining room, feeling a weak spark
of curiosity about what Hannibal could have cooked this time.

Every meal with him was a show. Will used to like it — it was unusual and refreshing, seeing this much passion for something as seemingly trivial as food. Hannibal managed to turn it into art.

Just like the Ripper turned corpses into something more meaningful.

A show. Everything was a show to him. This person existed for a sheer goal of being amused.

This time, Hannibal didn’t introduce the dish. He started eating, but Will couldn’t help but notice how his eyes strayed to him time and time again.

It was getting increasingly annoying. What the hell was Hannibal’s problem? Was he still trying to gauge whether Will was in the mood to kill himself?

Weird how out of both of them, it was Hannibal who seemed obsessed with suicide.

He really was an awful psychiatrist.

Will finished his food as quickly as he could and stood up, but Hannibal frowned at him.

“Reading hour,” he said firmly.

“Joy,” Will snarked. The reading hour was probably one of the worst ideas Hannibal had ever suggested. Having dinners with him was hard enough in these circumstances, but spending an hour or more listening to his voice? Voice that sounded even, soothing, evoking the primitive response in Will’s omegian side, the desire to crawl up to his alpha and breathe in his scent, find comfort that he desperately needed.

Well, he had managed to space out last time. Maybe he would do it again.

As before, Hannibal lit up the fireplace, waited for Will to take his place, and then started reading. The first several minutes were tense. Will tried to stare into the fire only, blocking Hannibal’s voice, but it still slipped under the wire of his conscious, filling his entire body with unwanted warmth.

What kind of book was Hannibal reading to him?

Gritting his teeth in quiet fury, Will forcibly pushed out all irrelevant thoughts and focused on his draft of a plan. Eventually, his efforts were rewarded — Hannibal’s voice faded, and the vague ideas began to gain clarity.

He had to learn what he could about Jeremy Glashow. He was grabbing at straws here — there were only some chances that this person would turn out to be an unmated alpha or beta of appropriate age, one who would be currently living in that house, and one who would find Will alluring enough to consider spending at least some time with him.

This place was too secluded for other options… but even if Glashow was only some of those things, Will could come up with the rest. All he had to do was be believable.

So, his immediate goal was to find out who Glashow was. How could he do it?

No thoughts came, which pushed him back to reality. That was when Will realized Hannibal had stopped reading.

When he glanced at him, Hannibal was watching him with the expression that could only be
described as hurt. Will raised his eyebrows questioningly, and Hannibal sighed.

“You are not even trying to listen,” he said morosely.

“Maybe I don’t find this book interesting.”

Hannibal looked at the cover and didn’t say anything. Taking it as his chance to escape, Will stood up.

“Did you bring my laptop?” he asked, and Hannibal’s face instantly turned wary.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Will narrowed his eyes. “I’m bored here. And if you brought my laptop, I would like to have it.”

“Fine.” Hannibal left the living room, and Will sent a curious glance in the direction of the book he’d left on the armchair.

He had no idea what it was about. What kind of literature did Hannibal think he was interested in?

He couldn’t afford to check it now, though, not when Hannibal could be back any moment. So he stood, waiting, and when Hannibal re-appeared, he took the laptop from him and wordlessly left the room.

Hannibal’s stare was burning a hole in his back — Will knew it without turning. He probably suspected him of looking for something he wasn’t supposed to online.

Will had never thought he would reach the point where someone’s overprotectiveness would infuriate him this much. He had enjoyed it before, coming from Hannibal, but now?

Not now. And not about this.

A quick searched proved to be more successful than he’d imagined. Almost immediately, he found the profile of Jeremy Glashow, with the photo taken right in front of the house they had seen today.

Jeremy Glashow. An alpha. 34 years old. Ordinary looking, in a boring suit, with a bright smile on his face.

Elation heated Will’s blood, making his heart accelerate, but then the feeling of dread dropped a heavy stone into his chest.

Glashow fitted the parameters, but would they have a chance to even meet? Was Will ready to pretend something he never was? Yes, even brief contact would be enough — even several seconds would be enough for him to claim imprinting. Hannibal’s plan would fall to pieces in front of him, in the most humiliating way, and the anger he would feel, amplified by who he was, could only have one ending.

But Will wanted to extend the process. To make Hannibal suspect something was wrong at first, to make him nervous and worried. Only this could give him the explosive reaction he was craving… or no. There was something he was missing. Something in his plan didn’t make sense, but what?
Turning off the laptop, Will pulled a blanket over himself and stared at the dark ceiling.

He would have to embark on another walk tomorrow.

On a longer one.

***

In the morning, Hannibal greeted him with a long, silent stare that Will had no desire to interpret. Breakfast wasn’t ready yet, even though Hannibal always loved to start at nine o’clock sharp, so Will wandered to the living room. Tonight, he had managed to sleep for several hours, and he felt… better. At least better than yesterday.

Somber classical music filled the room, and Will smiled and rolled his eyes involuntarily, before he could stop himself. Hannibal’s pretentious ringtone. Every time it sounded, it was impossible to rein in his laughter.

Even now, it seemed.

When Hannibal entered the room, though, Will’s smile was long gone. Measuring him with a cold gaze, Will moved to the kitchen, unwilling to spend more time than absolutely necessary together.

To his astonishment, the kitchen was a mess. Well, a mess for someone like Hannibal. Several ingredients were lying on the cutting board, others were right on the counter, some of dirty dishes were still in the sink… everything was in disarray.

Frowning, Will approached the counter and peeked into the open box of chocolates standing there.

What was wrong with Hannibal? Where was his dismay coming from? Or was it another part of the show, with the same end-goal — prove that he had emotions?

Absently, Will reached out for a chocolate and put it into his mouth, but before he could chew it, he heard a gasp behind his back.

Turning, he saw ashen-faced Hannibal, who was staring at him with horror that made Will’s blood run cold, even though he had no idea what caused it.

In three steps, Hannibal crossed the kitchen and grabbed him by the hair painfully, twisting his head in a way that had Will thinking he was going to break his neck.

“What did you take?” Hannibal shouted, and Will blinked, at the loss for words. “What did you take?! Tell me!”

Hannibal had never raised his voice at him like this. Not that there were any doubts that Hannibal was capable of it, but the novelty of the experience still rendered Will speechless. Something inside him shivered as if in pain, and stupid omegian instincts immediately urged him to beg forgiveness.
The realization of it lit up a torch of fury in his chest, so when Hannibal yelled his question again, Will pushed him away as hard as he could.

“What the hell is your problem?” he demanded. “It’s just a fucking chocolate!”

Hannibal stepped back, his mouth hanging open.

“A chocolate?” he repeated softly.

“Yes! Will you stop thinking I’m going to kill myself the moment your back is turned? It’s driving me crazy — stop it!”

Something indecipherable flashed in Hannibal’s eyes before he shook his head slowly.

“You don’t understand,” he murmured. “You don’t understand how it feels.”

“I know exactly how it feels,” Will hissed. “Don’t act like it is my well-being that you are concerned about.”

“As I said — you don’t understand,” Hannibal uttered hollowly. “You don’t, and I’m not in the state to explain it to you right now. The mere thought of you doing anything to yourself again is unbearable. I will do anything to stop you.”

“I’m not going to try again. Okay?”

Hannibal cocked his head, but said nothing. Exasperated, Will repeated, “I’m not going to try.”

“You did the night before.”

“You misinterpreted. It was never my intention to drink that flask.”

“Why should I believe it? You hate me,” he practically spat those words, and Will gritted his teeth, unable to comprehend how anyone could pretend so well. Hannibal’s anguish, no matter how fake, was affecting him, so he tried to solidify his defense mechanisms.

“You hated me when you tried first,” Hannibal continued, his face suddenly crazed. Feral. “You hate me even more now. What changed?”

“I realized that my life does not revolve around you,” Will said. He didn’t stop to think whether it was a lie or not. He just knew that he had to get Hannibal off his back about this, at least temporarily. “I don’t plan to die in the nearest future.” Maybe after that. “So you can stop freaking out every time I do something.”

Hannibal’s eyes bored into his, and Will got a ridiculous feeling that Hannibal had acquired his ability to sense emotions. His body tensed, worried about his thoughts being stolen, but then Hannibal looked away, nodding, strangely subdued.

“Fine,” he said. “Thank you.”

The whole encounter filled Will with uncomfortable restlessness. He looked at the damned box of chocolates, at the ingredients lying all over the kitchen, at Hannibal again.

“Will we be having breakfast?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannibal looked around the kitchen, and Will was ready to believe that the embarrassment he saw in his eyes was real. “I need twenty more minutes.”
“I want to go for a walk afterward.”

“I will accompany you,” Hannibal sent him a hesitant smile, and Will took pleasure in ignoring it. Without saying anything else, he went to the dining room and sat at the table, glancing at the clock.

Maybe today would be the day they met Glashow.

***

When they approached Glashow’s house at the leisurely pace, the first thing Will noticed was a car parked near the gates. The excitement and anxiousness that rolled through him made his breathing quicken, and he knelted in front of Winston, hoping Hannibal wouldn’t notice anything.

Fortunately, Winston seemed content to sit in one place and be cuddled, so Hannibal was forced to stand by the tree and wait. The gates opened suddenly, and a man came outside. One look at him revealed that he was indeed Jeremy Glashow, and Will’s heart jumped to his throat and then dropped to his stomach.

He wasn’t ready. He wasn’t.

“Doctor Lecter!” Glashow waved at them and started to approach. “I haven’t expected to see you here.”

“We needed some time away from the city,” Hannibal gave him a thin smile. “This is my partner, Will.”

“Nice to meet you,” Glashow offered his hand, and Will shook it, sending him a wide-eyed stare, as if he was stunned by what he was seeing. Inside, he was cringing, sure that he was coming across as a complete moron, but a surprised pleasure that flashed in Glashow’s eyes gave him more confidence.

“Nice to meet you, too,” he said quietly, dropping his eyes in deliberate submission. He felt Hannibal tense near him, and then Glashow suddenly made a step back.

Will raised his head, and when he glanced at Hannibal, a cold chill shot down his spine.

At this moment, Hannibal looked deadly. Just in a second, he managed to transform from a tired, depressed boyfriend he was pretending to be into a dangerous, lethal creature that even Will found terrifying. His stance changed to predatory, his eyes darkened, and the coldness in them promised cruelty and destruction.

“I have to go now, but maybe we could have lunch together once, how about that?” Glashow smiled nervously.

“We will,” Hannibal murmured, his expression not changing. They stayed until Glashow drove away — Hannibal still watching, Will rubbing Winston’s back.
“Ready to go?” Hannibal asked him calmly, and Will shrugged.

“Not yet,” he said. Going now would be too suspicious, and Hannibal was already on guard.

How could he have been so stupid? What, did he think Hannibal would just let him make friends with another alpha, without thinking something was up? That bullet had really made him an idiot.

His plan had just gotten more complicated… and more effective.

So Will thought. And thought. And thought again.

That’s what he had been missing. For everything to work in the best possible way, he had to give Hannibal hope that they might still have a future. It would make him relax, give Will some space, and not mind it if he started a semblance of friendship with the only neighbor they had. If Hannibal had hope, he would probably agree to let him do anything.

And then the blow from the revelation that imprinting had malfunctioned so spectacularly would be much harder… and the reaction would be much more explosive.

Step one, melt the ice between him and Hannibal. Not wholly, but partly. No matter how torturous and emotionally exhausting it was, it was necessary for their mutual destruction.

Step two, build something with Jeremy Glashow. Something not obvious enough for Hannibal to go mental over right away, yet something believable enough to have an impact in the future.

That would suffice for now.

When they entered the house, Hannibal immediately moved to hang his coat, but Will made a few steps across the threshold and stopped. There was a strange feeling growing in him — a feverish, sick warmth that was quickly turning into a liquid fire. Suddenly, his head exploded with pain, and before he knew it, he was falling, still conscious, but unable to move.

Hannibal was too far away — until he wasn’t. Once again, he moved with terrifying, unnatural speed, and he caught Will inches from the floor, saying something rapidly, his eyes panicked.

Will didn’t hear him, but he still marveled at fact that someone as cold as the Chesapeake Ripper could appear so genuinely scared for another person.

Then everything went dark.

Through the misty haze, Will imagined many different things. He heard Hannibal’s voice, calling him beloved, whispering things that he would never really whisper. He felt a hand stroking his hair, with gentleness that was as unnatural for the Chesapeake Ripper as his inhuman speed was for Will.

However, when he started to see again, Hannibal was indeed stroking his hair, watching him with a worried expression.

The first thing Will wanted to do was tell him to get away. Then he remembered his plan… and smiled at Hannibal, as genuinely as he could.

The stunned disbelief and incredulous hope he got in response was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.
Chapter Notes

So... Will is trying to proceed with his plan, Hannibal wants to hope but is getting burned time and time again. In other words, some more angst.

When Will smiled at him, still lying in his arms, his hair still wet from sweat, Hannibal’s heart skipped a beat. Warmth began to seep into his blood, melting the ice that had collected itself there over the days of bitterness and rejection, and involuntarily, his own lips twitched in an answering smile.

He expected Will’s smile to fade. For him to realize where he was and who was holding him, but nothing happened – Will continued to smile at him, and Hannibal’s breathing went uneven.

If he learned anything during these miserable days, it was that Will’s hatred was rapidly becoming more and more difficult to bear.

Hannibal knew it would be difficult. He knew it would take him forever to at least start rebuilding the trust between them, but seeing Will flinch away from him, hearing his hurtful words and knowing they were genuine — he wasn’t ready for it. He wasn’t ready at all. So little time had passed, yet he already started to believe that changing Will’s perception would not be possible. Not now, not in several months or years — not ever.

However, Will was smiling at him now, and even though his smile was dim and small, Hannibal could swear he’d never seen anything more beautiful. The mere realization that it was truly happening was blinding, and for a second, he was at the loss for words.

“How long I was out?” Will asked.

“Twenty minutes at most,” unable to stop himself, Hannibal caressed the dark curls, his hand almost trembling from what was being allowed to it. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. The headache is gone.”

“Do you need anything?” Encouraged, Hannibal reached for Will’s hair again, but this time, Will did flinch, and hastened to get up.

“No,” he said stiffly, then added. “Thank you.”

Thank you. It was definitely a step up after the coldness that Will had been showering him with before.

Could it be that not everything was lost?

Hope was an ugly thing, Hannibal knew it. It could crush with the violence that even the bloodiest murder could not offer. But hope was also terrifyingly persistent, and right now, Hannibal could feel it grow within him, lightening every gloomy part of him.

“I’d like to go to bed,” Will told him without looking at him, and Hannibal nodded.
After that smile, he felt he would agree to anything Will asked.

The moment Will disappeared, though, concern and worry washed over him again, and he moved to the kitchen, wondering if cooking may help to soothe this anxiety.

Perhaps Will’s headaches were predictable after the trauma he’d suffered, but seeing him in so much pain, to the point of losing conscious — that was unbearable. It reminded him over and over again that he had made a mistake, and the price of it was something he still didn’t know he would be able to pay.

Realizing he had opened the fridge and was now blankly staring inside, Hannibal closed it back and sighed.

He had turned into a pathetic creature that he used to despise. He had ruined more than one meal already, too stuck on the thought of Will’s hatred for him to concentrate, and his nights were sleepless, filled with visions of Will putting a gun against his head, overdosing on drugs prescribed to him, drinking vinegar — or anything equally deadly. Will and death, Will and darkness. Human body was fragile, Hannibal knew it better than anyone. If Will wanted it, nothing, not even he would be able to stop him.

But he had promised. He had promised that he wouldn’t try again.

There was nothing left to Hannibal other than believe him, and hope it would be justified.

This night, Hannibal finally succumbed to exhaustion. One second he was examining the intricate design of his bedroom’s ceiling, the next — nothing. Chaotic, vague images, changing too quickly for him to remember them. Will’s face, twisted in a pained grimace, his eyes so sad that Hannibal tried to reach out for him, tried to comfort him, only to have the image in front of him dissolve.

The new Will was looking at him with cutting coldness, his glare intensifying when Hannibal called his name. Then, in a blink, he transformed back to an unsure young man, and as soon as Hannibal called him, he smiled, leaning against him, nuzzling his neck, raising his head to send him a loving look.

Tenderness and relief that crashed into him at this sight made him breathless. Hannibal clutched at him, whispering his name again and again, and Will touched his cheek, still looking into his eyes, pressing his lips to Hannibal’s slightly, before breathing out, “I hate you.”

Hannibal woke up, gasping, the impact of the words still haunting him. Suddenly panicked, he looked at the clock. Four in the morning. Which meant that he had slept for far too long, and during this time, Will could already…

It was instinct rather than logic that threw him off the bed and made him stumble blindly in the direction of Will’s bedroom. His heart was pounding, his legs too numb from sleep to obey him fully, but he managed to get to the door fairly quickly. Pushed it open — and froze.

Will was sleeping quietly. Not in the corner like he had those last nights, but in the bed.

Hannibal allowed himself to slide to the floor, shaking his head at his stupidity yet still counting Will’s breaths.

Nothing was wrong. Nothing but him, and the fact that he was steadily losing his mind.
They were over the most severe trauma. Will was getting better, and considering his smile earlier, they still had a chance. Maybe.

He had to leave — even someone like him needed more sleep, but being near Will was too addictive to give it up just now. So Hannibal stayed for several more minutes, drinking in the sight of Will sleeping, so calm and beautiful, with no animosity, no pain between them.

He watched, and his hope kept growing.

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Hannibal had managed to prepare breakfast before Will got up, but the fridge was mostly empty at this point, and it meant that for them to have a proper dinner, he would have to go shopping.

He would have to leave Will alone in the house.

The thought didn’t sit well with him.

However, when Will joined him, even these thoughts evaporated.

Because Will gave him another smile. A little cold, but a smile nonetheless.

“Good morning,” Will said curtly.

“Good morning,” Hannibal echoed, and to his embarrassment, he sounded hopelessly besotted. Will sat down, looking at the plate before him curiously, and Hannibal cleared his throat in attempt to sound firmer.

“Date, parsley, and sumac quiche with crushed almonds, along with honeyed cocoa,” he murmured. “This is not an ideal combination, but it seems we are short of the majority of products. I might need to leave for a while today. For supplies.”

Will shrugged, already starting on his meal.

“Looks perfect to me,” he said casually, and Hannibal was annoyed at how ridiculously happy the compliment had made him. “It’s delicious, as always,” Will added after a pause. “Thank you.”

Another “thank you”.

Their progress hadn’t disappeared at night.

The sudden urge to grab Will and kiss the words of gratitude off his lips was overwhelming, but Hannibal restrained himself. So far, the morning was perfect, and he had no intention of ruining it with his inability to control his instincts.

They didn’t talk while they were eating, but as they finished, Will moved to collect their plates.

“I think it’s my turn to do at least something,” he said dryly. “You cook, I clean.”
“I don’t mind…” Hannibal started, but Will interrupted him.

“I don’t mind either. Besides, I thought you were going shopping?”

Hannibal hesitated, and Will’s eyes narrowed.

“I told you, I’m not going to do anything,” he snapped. “Stop being so fucking paranoid. You are suffocating me.”

His immediate annoyance at the language faded when he looked at Will and saw nothing but frustration and anger in his eyes. Something heavy dropped to his stomach and Hannibal pursed his lips, feeling strangely hurt.

Will had said far worse to him, but for some reason, even such simple words were enough to darken his mood. Nodding, Hannibal chose to try to bring back the friendlier atmosphere, so he said, “Forgive me. You know I worry.”

“Well, stop.”

“I will try. But I will still attempt to get back sooner — not necessarily because of this worry, but because I want to be with you.”

It was too corny even for his own ears, but Hannibal didn’t feel as ashamed as he could have in the past. Something strange crossed Will’s face — an unusual mixture of confusion, sadness, and more anger, and then everything was gone, as quickly as it had appeared.

“Fine,” he said.

“Do you need anything? Any wishes?”

“Nothing,” Will stared straight at him, and his eyes were blank. Empty. Frighteningly so. “Bye.”

Discomfited, Hannibal went to change, thinking about their strange breakfast and conversation. Restlessness was crawling under his skin, making it itch, urging him to go and do something to get rid of it.

He ignored it.

For now.

***

When Hannibal arrived into town, he was immediately hit with a new wave of restlessness, this one very clearly coming from being separated from Will. He had never thought he would become one of those clingy alphas, but he also didn’t have a habit of denying the truth. He missed him — fiercely and passionately, and even knowledge that their relationship was in ruins, despite yesterday’s and today’s progress, didn’t make a difference.
At this time of the day, the place he shopped at was mostly empty, so Hannibal took his time choosing. Various meatless recipes slipped into his mind lazily, and he wondered what Will would like most. There was still so much he hadn’t cooked for him, and since Will seemed to start to enjoy his meals again, Hannibal wanted to make extra efforts to please him.

Remembering the unfortunate chocolate that Will had tried to eat, only to be interrupted by Hannibal’s panic, made him go to the sections with sweets. Selecting one of the exquisite boxes, Hannibal moved to see what edible greens were currently on the display when his phone rang, and for a second, he let himself believe that it was Will calling him.

Of course, when he looked at the screen, he only saw Jack’s name. Sighing, Hannibal accepted the call.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of hearing you, Jack?” he asked mockingly.

“Where is he?” Jack growled at him as a greeting, and Hannibal sighed again, louder this time.

“I assume you are referring to Will,” he drawled.

“You know damn well who I am referring to! Where is he? I know you’ve come back to Baltimore, and I know you’ve done it without Will. What did you do to him?”

Annoyance at hearing Will curse was nothing in comparison to what Jack was evoking within him. If he was in the vicinity, Hannibal might have been tempted to risk and silence him once and for all, for daring to imply what he did.

“Are you having me followed?” he purred instead, satisfied when Jack let out a harsh, angry laugh.

“I know where you are at this moment,” he spat. “I haven’t found your hiding hole outside of Baltimore yet, but it’s just a matter of time. Where is Will? Why won’t you let him talk to me? Did he change his mind already and you got rid of him?”

“If Will doesn’t accept your calls, then it’s his own choice,” Hannibal said coldly. “He is safe, and he will always be safe in my presence.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t need you to believe me. You can try calling Will until he picks up or until he blocks your number. It doesn’t concern me. But do stop bothering me.”

“Dream on. And next time you go shopping, you will be in for a surprise,” Jack hung up, and Hannibal glowered, wishing for him to be right here, right now. Nothing would satisfy him more than seeing Jack’s arrogance break and terror replace it as he met his end.

Someone crashed into him from behind, almost making him drop his shopping basket. Gritting his teeth, Hannibal turned his head and saw a young alpha with a shopping cart of his own.

A sincere apology might have saved him, but instead, the alpha smirked, leering, and uttered, “Nice scent you’ve got here.”

Realization that he was referring to Will’s scent, which clung to Hannibal even despite the distance between them, sent a white-hot shock of fury through his veins. Wordlessly, he watched the alpha go on his way, and his nostrils flared as he committed his smell to memory. His restlessness intensified, intertwining with his darkness, and Hannibal focused all of it on the retreating figure.
He knew what he would do.

Knowing that Jack was watching him, whether through people or cameras, made the chase all the more thrilling. Hannibal tracked the offensive alpha to his house and kept on driving without slowing down, as if he truly had some destination in mind. He stopped near the huge supermarket, notable only for many exits it had, and entered it, several things from his road emergency kit hidden safely under his coat. At the supermarket, he purchased a ridiculous hat, and slipped from the backdoor.

Catching a cab, he went back to where the alpha lived, asked to stop several blocks from his house, and crossed the rest of the distance on foot, making sure that no one was following him and that no accidental cameras were visible.

On the yard, he took off his coat, put it on the branch of the nearest tree, changed into his carefully constructed suit, and knocked on the door politely. After a while, the alpha opened it, and his eyes widened incredulously.

“The hell are you doing here?” he demanded, and Hannibal answered with a swift blow to his Adam’s apple. Gaspiong, the man stepped back, pressing his hands to his throat, and Hannibal followed, closing the door behind them.

“What you did today was very rude,” he said calmly, watching how the alpha tried to say something, but burst into another coughing fit instead. “What you said was even ruder. I do not take kindly to offensive statements, especially if they concern my partner. I did kill for less.”

“I… I’m sorry,” the man breathed out, still holding his throat, and Hannibal smiled.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for apologies,” he announced. As he took out his scalpel, he fully expected the alpha to fight — he was younger and filled with terrified energy, an interesting combination that could make this murder exciting. However, to his disappointment, the fight was over before it really began. Too soon, the alpha was screaming hoarsely while Hannibal was cutting the pieces he needed from him, wondering how much he should take, considering that Will wasn’t likely to eat meat any time soon. When he finished, he cut off the man’s nose for his distasteful remark about Will’s scent, and then stared at him, wondering how to display him.

Nothing came to his mind. And most importantly, he felt no inspiration. All he wanted was to get back to Will now that his frustration was mostly satisfied, to give him his box of chocolates, to read to him, even though Will seemed to despise the book he had chosen for him.

Having made the decision, Hannibal cleaned his weapon, packed the meat in a simple dark packet, and went back to the yard. In fifteen minutes, he was already in his own car, speeding to leave Baltimore behind. Absentmindedly, he wondered what would happen if Jack or one of his agents stopped his car and searched it. After all, he had a few cuts of meat and a bloodied plastic suit inside, which would be more than enough to warrant an arrest.
Jack would rejoice. And Will…

He had no idea what Will would think. Maybe he would have to test it at some point — play at being almost caught, or get caught for real, in order to see how Will would react. Whether he would care at least to some extent.

For better or for worse, no one stopped him, so soon, Hannibal reached their house. Will was nowhere to be seen, and Hannibal decided to hide the meat before looking for him.

Will was in his room, lying on his bed and staring at the corner, as if he was seeing something there.

It was not the first time Hannibal noticed it. A sting of worry that pierced him every time Will did that was getting stronger, making him doubt his decision to bring Will to this place.

Maybe he should have waited before taking Will from the hospital. Something was happening to his mind, and with Will obviously having no desire to share the truth with him, Hannibal could only guess at how bad it was.

“Will,” he called quietly, and Will jumped, turning to him with a wide-eyed expression.

“Oh. You are back,” he said.

“Yes. Are you well?”

“Don’t start again,” Will warned him, getting up and making several steps in his direction. “What did you bring?”

Surprised but pleased at Will’s continued interest, Hannibal opened his mouth to answer… and then closed it, every dark instinct coming alive within him.

Will’s delicious and deadly scent was marred by someone else’s. Someone alpha. Another alpha. In his house? Near Will.

“Where were you?” Hannibal asked, his voice deceptively mild. Will tilted his head, watching him attentively, before scoffing.

“I went for a walk with Winston,” he said irritably. “Met your neighbor again, exchanged several polite phrases, and that’s it. What, am I not allowed to go out without you and talk to people?”

“I would prefer it if you didn’t,” Hannibal replied, and when Will’s face turned indignant, he added, “Go out without me, I mean. Not in your current state. If anything were to happen to you…”

“I didn’t go far from home, and I won’t until I feel better. Promise.”

Home?

The warmth of joy spread through Hannibal’s chest, and he allowed himself to bathe in it for a while, savoring Will’s choice of words.

Home.

Finally.

Still, though, the fact that Will had talked to the boring and entirely forgettable alpha that was
Jeremy Glashow left a sour taste in his mouth.

Glashow wasn’t a threat. He was nothing. But he had certainly let his eyes wander when he met Will, and while it was understandable, Hannibal wasn’t inclined to be forgiving. Especially not when Will had reacted so strangely to him, staring at him like he was impressed… or like he wanted to impress him.

The mere thought of it made Hannibal irrationally angry. His fingers twitched as he imagined how Glashow would look if he tore him to pieces with his bare hands. Innocent or not, that fool did not deserve to even look at Will, least of all actually talk to him.

Unthinking, Hannibal reached out to touch Will, to replace the offending smell with his, but Will recoiled so much that he nearly fell over, and Hannibal went still.

This time, the cruel bite of rejection was even more hurtful — maybe because he had started to hope that they were making progress. But no. Will was obviously terrified of him if he acted as today’s insignificant alpha had, flinching away from him like that, as if thinking Hannibal would hurt him.

How could he ever fix that?

“Would you like to have a reading hour now?” Hannibal asked hesitantly, sure that his offer was going to be rejected, too, but to his astonishment, Will nodded.

“Yes,” he murmured, staring at his feet. “I don’t mind.”

His dejection weakened, drown by another flare of hope.

Maybe…

Maybe.

Downstairs, Hannibal lit up the fire in the fireplace, and then wrapped Will in a blanket, ignoring the way he tensed and then stared at him with raised eyebrows.

“What book are you even reading to me?” he asked suddenly, and Hannibal looked up, even more pleased by this first display of interest.

“The Erroneous Start of a Nameless Man,” he said. “It is highly recommended in specific circles. But if you truly don’t enjoy it, we may pick something else.”

Will studied him with a strange, unsure look before sighing heavily.

“I don’t even know what it is about,” he admitted. “I drifted off too quickly before to listen.”

“Oh.” Hannibal wasn’t sure what to do with this information. Embarrassment was a new flavor for him, and he felt like a fool now, having been reading something so intimate for him and not even noticing that his partner was not present.

But the fact that Will had chosen to tell him the truth… it meant something. Perhaps it meant everything.

“What is it about?” Will asked, so softly that Hannibal had to do a double-take to make sure that it was really Will speaking to him in that voice.

“It’s about a young boy who used to have loving parents and a wonderful sister,” he murmured
quietly. “Who lost them and who thought he would never love again… until he met the person who changed his entire world.”

“You are reading me a romance?” Will’s tone was still light, almost teasing, and a wave of longing so strong that it threatened to become overwhelming hit him. Longing for the life he and Will had shared not so long ago, with all those easy and sweet moments.

It would never be the same, but maybe if he tried hard enough…

“It’s more than a romance,” Hannibal said, and Will thought about it for a moment before nodding.

“Fine,” he replied. “Could you start from the beginning, though?”

“Of course,” Hannibal traced the heavy, self-made cover with his fingers. It would give him more time to finish it. “But please, listen.”

This time, as he was reading, he had Will’s undivided attention. He felt his gaze on himself, intense and thoughtful, and at this moment, he would have given anything to know what he was thinking. Will was a mystery, one Hannibal knew he would never stop trying to solve, and for the first time in what seemed like ages, he felt a startling intimacy between them. A new sort of it, but still genuine. With no masks on.

He stopped at the place where the intruders broke into the castle, and to his joy, Will seemed reluctant to interrupt their reading hour.

“You need to eat,” Hannibal said firmly. “You missed lunch as it is.”

“What’s for dinner?” Will asked, staring at him in a way that sent shivers down his spine for some reason.

“I haven’t decided yet. Do you have any preferences?”

Will’s lips disappeared as he pressed them together, making them fade to an even, pale line, and then he started to approach. Closer, and closer, and closer, and Hannibal froze yet again, having no idea what was happening.

Will stopped within the touching distance and leaned forward with his upper half, scenting his neck—or his face.

“You smell like murder,” he whispered. “You didn’t smell like that before your trip.”

Hannibal couldn’t think of any decent reply. Will pulled back, the look on his face inscrutable.

“Did you bring back the meat?” he asked, and after a short pause, Hannibal cleared his throat.

“Yes,” he said simply. Will hummed, still watching him attentively.

“So, let’s have meat for dinner,” he offered, and Hannibal blinked, feeling as if he had fallen in the pit of hell itself.

Was this some sort of test he was supposed to pass? Or was he really being offered something he hadn’t even dared to dream of?

Was Will playing with him?

As if sensing his thoughts, Will curled his lips in a sneer.
“You have already fed me people,” he said coolly. “I would like to start to accept it instead of thinking that it’s a nightmare that I am going to wake up from.”

“Will, I don’t think—”

“Look, forget it! If you prefer to play a martyr…”

“No, I… I don’t mind,” Hannibal assured him. “If you truly want it.”

Will nodded, but his face was grim, and Hannibal moved to the kitchen, still reeling from what was happening.

When he opened the fridge, he stopped to look at Will again, but since Will said nothing and continued to watch him expectantly, Hannibal took out the cuts he had procured today.

It had to be awkward. He thought it would be awkward, but minutes after he started cutting and marinating the meat, Will joined him. Granted, he didn’t touch the meat itself, but he was working by Hannibal’s side, cutting fruits and vegetables, silently following all advice Hannibal kept giving him.

It was nothing like before, when they cooked together in their Baltimore house, the atmosphere friendly and relaxed and happy, but still, Hannibal’s blood sang in contentment. Eventually, he started to pay less attention to the meat and more attention to Will, barely taking his eyes off him.

He was enchanted. Bewitched. The force of these feelings was still surprising because every time, they seemed to gain new angles, new strength.

He wanted him. He wanted to be with him. He wanted to cook and kill with him, though the latter was a part of the distant perfect future he had once envisioned. At this point, he would take anything but indifference and hatred. Maybe hatred, too, if it was still accompanied by forgiveness.

They didn’t talk once during the next several hours, but they finished cooking together. Hannibal set the table, and then they both took their places, with Will staring at the steaming meat closely.

Hannibal imagined different options. He imagined Will refusing to eat. He imagined Will eating. He imagined Will standing up and walking out.

What he didn’t imagine was Will looking at him and asking, “Why did you kill my father?”

The impact of those words had knocked every wisp of air from his lungs, and Hannibal just sat there, still as statue, struggling to realize what facial expression to assume, what to say or do.

He didn’t see it coming. Definitely not now.

“Will,” he said finally, almost imploring. “Please, let’s not talk about it.”

“No, I want to talk about it, and I want to do it now. Why did you kill him? What did he do to you?”

“Do you think knowing will make the situation easier for you? For both of us? Because it won’t. It will only feed your anger.”

“Tell me,” Will hissed, suddenly looking furious. His fork clanged as he threw it against the table, his eyes blazing as he glared at Hannibal. “Tell me now.”

“He tried to sell me foul fish,” Hannibal blurted out before he could stop himself. Now or later, he
had to confess, and if Will insisted... to hell with the consequences.

If they survived this, they would survive everything.

Will pulled back slowly, paling, and Hannibal continued.

“He took me for an ignorant rich traveler who couldn’t tell fresh fish from deficient. He tried to sell me the worst of what he had, and when I did buy it, he couldn’t hide his glee.”

“That’s... crazy,” Will shook his head, his blue eyes suddenly filling with tears, and something sharp and painful clenched Hannibal’s heart in a vice-like grip. “My father was a good man. Yes, he wasn’t always nice, and he could lie to people if it meant he would get more money for us, but he was good. I loved him. You destroyed my life twice, and all because of some fucking fish?”

“Will, I...” Different words twirled on the tip of his tongue. Words of regret and apologies, anything that could nudge him closer to Will’s good graces, but instead, what escaped his lips was, “Please don’t cry.”

“Fuck you!” Will stood up, his hands wrapped around himself, as if to keep himself from literally falling apart. “I don’t know why you imprinted on me. I don’t know why even with imprinting, you couldn’t love me. Whatever you say now is meaningless because I know you don’t regret it. You kept mutilating people for minor offences through all these years, and my father was just one of them. One insignificant occurrence, one forgettable name to you. Maybe, if you acted differently when we met... maybe I could forgive you. Maybe I could accept it. I don’t know, I can’t tell now, it’s too confusing. But I will never forgive you for looking at me and seeing a lab rat, for pretending to love me when all you wanted was to throw me in prison out of some sick curiosity. For feeding Jack all those lies about me, even making him think I could be involved in my father’s murder! I will not forget it, Hannibal, and I will not forgive it. Your words are misleading, your actions aren’t. You are the Chesapeake Ripper, through and through, and the only thing you care about is your sick little experiments. I just... have to remember that,” wiping his tear-stained face with his sleeve, Will left the dining room quickly, leaving immobilized Hannibal staring after him.

He tried to breathe, but his lungs kept working wrong, expanding more and more, ready to burst with a burning lava of hot air. Making a deep breath in an attempt to slow down his erratic heartbeat, Hannibal tried to stand up, but his legs refused to cooperate. Still shaken, he looked at the dish in front of him, and in a sudden burst of violent anger, he pushed it off the table, reveling in the sound of the broken glass.

He continued to sit there for a long time, unable to think or plan.
Will shut the door to his room, separating himself from the rest of the house along with its owner, and walked to the window, staring ahead without seeing anything.

He’d overplayed his part. In his attempt to warm the ice between him and Hannibal so striking him later would have more effect, he’d gone too far, and now he paid his price.

How could he have even asked about that meat? How could he have cooked it, side by side with Hannibal, knowing it belonged to a person, someone who had been alive just this morning, but wasn’t after meeting Hannibal?

What had this person done to provoke the attack? Stepped on his shoe? Stole Hannibal’s place in a queue?

And Will had held his or her meat in his hands. Helped to prepare it. Smelled it and felt his mouth water, even though he knew what it was.

He was sick. As sick as Hannibal.

Strangely, it didn’t shock him like he might have expected. Instead, it only made him think about his father, and how a part of him had once decorated Hannibal’s luxurious plate in a very similar way.

A harsh noise escaped him, and Will shook his head almost violently, trying to get rid of the poisonous thoughts.

He didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want to imagine it. Hearing it once was more than enough. He regretted his impulse to ask Hannibal now, regretted it deeply, but…

But he had no other choice. The whole day had been strange, and especially its second part.

The way Hannibal kept looking at him. The way he watched his every movement, the way his eyes drank in his presence, as if the mere fact that Will was here, with him, not as hostile as before, was the most magnificent gift in the world.

It was disturbing. Act or not, it affected him. Cooking with Hannibal had felt like the time before, when there was no one but them, together, and even as Will stared at the steaming plate of meat, knowing what was there, all he wanted was to eat it, just to see how happy it would make Hannibal.

He panicked, understandably. So he blurted out the only thing that came to his mind, something he knew would remind him just who he had imprinted on.
Well, it worked. Now, away from Hannibal’s relentless affection, Will felt a familiar hatred choking him, making him tremble with desire for revenge.

His meeting with Jeremy today was bland. In all his life, Will had never been as bored as during their conversation, and even though Jeremy was clearly overjoyed at the signs of attention, it didn’t make their dialogue any more interesting.

They talked about Jeremy’s work, Jeremy’s house, and Jeremy’s relatives. Once, Jeremy tried to ask about him, and Will immediately stirred the topic in another direction. Jeremy seemed more than happy to let him. In this at least, he was a typical alpha — just as self-absorbed, and harmless or not, the only feeling he evoked in Will was irritation.

Unfortunately, he was still the perfect option, especially since Hannibal had already reacted to him with hostility. The moment he’d scented Jeremy on him earlier today, his eyes flashed with something so primitive and dangerous that for a second, Will felt terrified — and unexpectedly excited.

But it was too early. Much more needed to be done before he could proceed.

Will blinked when something moved in his line of vision. Turning his head, he saw a long shadow taking its place across the wall. The whole room was full of them at this point, and he frowned.

“Not now,” he murmured, turning back to the window.

His father. Kind and loving, and supportive, but rude to the neighbors. Despising of the customers. Always grumbling about how those “rich fucks” needed to be shown their place, and how if he got a dollar every time they sneered at him, he’d be “richer than them all put together”.

Will could imagine how his meeting with Hannibal had gone, vividly. It was raining that day. His father was probably already annoyed at the lack of customers, so when a well-dressed stranger came to him, he had an idea. Sell the worst of the fish at the increased price, confident that someone like Hannibal went shopping once in forever and would never be able to tell good product from bad, and then go home to his son, earlier than planned, presenting the best fish to him as a surprise.

“Are those crappies?” Hannibal would have asked. To be polite? Or to test the waters?

“Sure they are,” his dad would have assured him. “You are in luck today, Mister, I’ve just got a fresh supply of these beauties. Would you like some?”

Hannibal would have sneered — not openly, but inwardly, in the way only Will could catch. He’d have found his dad distasteful, with his overlarge clothes and calloused hands, perpetually dirty from moving boxes and digging worms whenever he felt bored.

“Yes,” Hannibal would say after a pause. “What would you recommend?”

“Here,” his dad would present the fish from his special container known as “for idiots”. “That’s the best you could find in the area, especially in a weather like this. I know what I’m talking about. I’ve been a fisherman for all my life and let me tell you, you’ll never make a better meal than with these.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal would drawl, examining the fish and checking the gills, seeing they are white, and saying nothing.

“It’s the best.” Will’s father would insist, suddenly wary of losing a customer with a bag of
money. “It’s a special breed, not common in most markets.”

Will could almost see the way Hannibal’s eyes would have narrowed dangerously, how he would nod coolly and say, “You are clearly an experienced fisherman, Mr…?”

“Graham, Edgar Graham. So, are you taking them or shall I make a deal with another buyer?”

“I do not see anyone else in here.” Hannibal would note mildly, but he would take out his wallet and stare at Will’s dad expectantly. “How much?”

“Twenty bucks for all.”

“For this fish?” Hannibal would infuriatingly clarify, and Will’s dad would sign his own death certificate by nodding.

Later, coming home with the freshest fish, he would call Will, and Will would come running, jumping into his arms and snuggling close.

“You wouldn’t believe what an idiot I’ve met today,” his dad would boast, holding him tight. “He checked the gills and I thought, shit, it’s not gonna fly with him. And he still bought it! What an idiot!”

“But if you sold him bad fish, he won’t come back to you for more,” Will would rebuke, because he had always done it, and his father would laugh, like he always had.

“That was a passing stranger. Trust me on this, I recognize one when I see one. Tomorrow, he will be far away from here, and we will still be enjoying his money.”

Hannibal was indeed far away from their town by next afternoon, but Will’s father could no longer enjoy anything. He was dead.

Grimacing, Will turned away from the window, too unsettled to keep staring out of it and thinking of something he could never, never change. With a sigh, he stepped into the waiting embrace of the shadows, and lost himself in the cocoon of soothing darkness they offered.

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Hannibal didn’t notice him when Will came into the dining room. Considering the way his eyes usually went to him the moment he appeared, it was immediately noticeable, and Will frowned in confusion.

“Hello,” he said curtly, and Hannibal startled, finally raising his head.

“Good morning,” he murmured. His eyes did linger, but then he looked away, and Will sat down, watching him warily.

Several minutes passed, but Hannibal didn’t attempt to start a conversation. He was eating his breakfast mechanically, without raising his head, and the silence between them was grating on
Will’s nerves.

What the hell had happened to warrant… this? This silence, this awkwardness? They’d had a screaming match, but they’d had plenty of them recently, and Hannibal still kept trying to rectify situation. Now what, he’d given up?

It went against Will’s plans. Hannibal losing interest before the imprinting had never even occurred to him, and he had no idea what to do or feel about it.

“Do you have any plans for today?” he asked. Once again, Hannibal looked startled, as if he was shocked that Will was speaking to him.

“No,” was all he said. Then he resumed eating, and Will stared at him, rendered speechless. A growing discomfort started to press against his chest, so he did his best to ignore it.

He wasn’t going to get upset. There was nothing to be upset about. Nothing had changed from yesterday — he still wanted his revenge, and he was still reeling from the enormity of betrayal. Ignoring him was probably a part of Hannibal’s own plan, so Will shouldn’t let him see that it affected him in any way.

They finished breakfast in oppressive silence. Hannibal stood up to clean the table, and Will helped him, throwing him furtive glances.

“Would you like to read now?” he asked, and then immediately wanted to take his words back. Where the hell had this come from? Yes, he needed to keep contact with Hannibal if he wanted to make him pay, but reading?

True, it was a rather enjoyable activity. Will listened without having to talk, to pretend. The problem was, he was listening too much. Regardless of everything, he was as fascinated by the sound of Hannibal’s voice as he was in the past, and hearing it for prolonged periods of time made something strange to his brain. It could be hormones or some other form of omegian stupidity, but the fact remained — when Hannibal was reading, Will didn’t want him to stop. He was comforted by his voice. He liked it.

Loved it.

Gritting his teeth in silent fury, Will looked at Hannibal, knowing he couldn’t take his words back now, and found Hannibal watching him bleakly in return.

“You want to read,” he said flatly.

“Didn’t you make our reading hours obligatory?”

“Yes. I did.” Rubbing his forehead, Hannibal shook his head. “I won’t insist on it any longer.”

“Well, I would like to keep them.”

An expression of sheer astonishment crossed Hannibal’s features, and Will felt unsettled once again.

“Why?” Hannibal asked, and even though he tried, Will failed to find any trace of mockery in his voice. There was nothing but genuine confusion there. “I thought you’ve made your feelings very clear yesterday. Why would you want to keep the reading charade now? It changes nothing.”
“Well, for one, I’m interested in the book,” Will said, hoping he hid his bewilderment well. His sudden inability to understand Hannibal was incredibly frustrating. “Also, I’m not sure what in yesterday’s conversation finally made you change your mind. I told you I can’t forgive you. I kept telling and telling you, but you never listened. Why start now?”

Hannibal let out a sigh, and the empty, wistful way he was staring at him tightened the already uncomfortable knot in Will’s chest.

“When I brought you to this house, I still thought there was something I could do,” he uttered. “I planned… I don’t know what I planned. When I look at it now, I understand how delusional I was. Our yesterday’s conversation has demonstrated it with perfect clarity. I have nothing to offer to you anymore. At least nothing you might want.”

“I thought you always played for the win,” Will threw mockingly, and for a second, Hannibal’s eyes flashed with helpless, murderous rage.

“This is not a game, Will,” he said icily. “Not to me.”

“So you are ready to let me go? Since you acknowledge that our situation is hopeless?”

Hannibal stiffened, silent, and then said, “No. You will stay with me.”

The knot loosened slightly. His body lost its hard posture, and Will relaxed again.

“Then we will be reading,” he concluded. “I have nothing else to do in this house anyway, and I want to know what happens next in the book.”

This time, Hannibal didn’t protest. He wordlessly walked in the direction of their reading room, opening the door for Will and waiting until he came inside.

Will thought about the book Hannibal had chosen for him as Hannibal was getting ready. They hadn’t moved far, and Will generally wasn’t fond of books with children as protagonists, but something about the story caught his attention. Or maybe it was the way Hannibal was reading it, so quietly yet intensely, as if it was deeply personal for him.

“The ten years of happiness spent in the castle made the boy careless of what he had,” Hannibal murmured, and Will hugged his legs to himself, listening. “The night when his world collapsed for the first time, he was unprepared. His parents were being murdered in their own beds, betrayed by the servants. He heard their screams, but he knew that if he went inside, he would only share their pain, not save them from it. Therefore, instead, he hid his young sister, Mischa, in one of the rooms, and crept to the place where their father used to keep his weapons.

“He took a gun that he had held once, when his father had brought him on a hunting trip. He loaded it like he’d been taught and went to the room across that of his parents. They screamed no longer, although the boy could still hear quiet hoarse gasps of one of them. He wanted to burst right inside, but he knew it was reckless, even though listening to the dying sounds of his loved ones was the most agonizing thing he had ever experienced. Trying to remain logical in his choices, the boy decided to shoot the murderers as soon as they left his parents’ room, to take them aback.

“He was enraged. He was shaking from adrenaline — his fury kept spreading it through his veins. But most of all, underneath that rage, he was terrified. He wanted to cry and seek protection, regardless of his title, regardless of being an alpha. So in a moment of weakness, he closed the door, hoping to escape the nightmarish sounds. He backed away from it until he couldn’t hear them and started to wait for the inevitable footsteps, his gun ready, his hands trembling badly.
“To the boy, it felt like forever had passed, but there were no footsteps, no creaking of the door, no sounds. Suddenly, someone grabbed the door handle of the room where he was hiding and started to push it down.

“Time ceased to exist. He was going to kill whoever would come inside, and a sick dark thrill was already exploding in his chest, fuelling his resolve and determination.

“In the last moment, he remembered hearing that gunshot to an abdomen was the most painful way to die, so he lowered the gun to where he imagined the intruder’s stomach would be. The door opened. The intruder stepped inside. The boy fired, and his dark triumph turned to horror when he realized that it was his sister who had entered the room, and who had now fallen to the floor, her forehead split with a bullet. A bullet he had fired.

“In that moment, a part of the boy had died. He lost his innocence when his parents were killed, but he lost everything else when he killed his sister. He didn’t let himself touch her body as he knew he wasn’t worthy of such honor. Still holding the gun, the boy went downstairs — moving, breathing, looking, but not feeling anything. The intruders were there, grouped around their findings, and he shot them all, one by one, without aiming for specific parts. They were so shocked at the sight of a child with a gun that they did nothing, and their incredulity cost them their lives.

“For the boy, time resumed its running only when the police arrived. The boy said that he had killed his sister and the intruders, but no one took him seriously. Even when it was proven that the gun his sister and the attackers had been killed with had only his fingertips on it, he was still treated as a victim, as a poor, delusional child who was so traumatized by the events that he began to blame himself. No one believed him. The police started looking for non-existing accomplices, and the boy was sent to the distant relatives.

“Death was far from being the only lesson he had learned that day, and it was far from being the most important one. The boy knew now that he would never lose the person he loved again — because he would never love anyone. And look how wrong he was.”
work with Jack, and his hostility hardened again. “What do you want?”

“Don’t use that tone with me. Can you imagine what I thought when you refused to pick up? I’ve been calling you for days — where are you?”

“I don’t know. And you didn’t answer my question — what do you want?”

“You need to try to come to Baltimore and give testimony. There has been another murder.”

Ah. The unknown meal from yesterday.

Hannibal was still looking, so Will turned away from him, even though his blood started to boil.

“Why would I give any testimony about it?” he asked. “I don’t know anything about any deaths. I haven’t left this house for ages, how can I help you with it?”

“You need to confirm that Hannibal was out at that time. My people managed to track him, but they lost him at some point. A person died in that exact time — no Ripper display, but organs were taken. It’s him, Will,” Jack’s voice acquired sympathizing notes, as if he thought the news might upset him. “It’s Hannibal. I knew he would start again. I knew it the second my people notified me that he came to Baltimore. Naturally, they worked in unofficial capacity, so I can’t use their testimony. That’s why I need yours.”

New sparks of anger heated the already boiling cauldron of annoyance, and Will gritted his teeth, willing himself to stay calm.

“I refused to identify Hannibal as the Ripper when I was at the hospital,” he said slowly. “Why would you think I would be willing to do it now, when I didn’t even know this victim?”

“No, you refused to make a statement. I don’t blame you for that, not everyone can do that to their partner, especially with imprinting thrown into the mix. But now, the situation is different. If you refuse to give testimony, then you are covering for him, and I believe I shouldn’t tell you what it means.”

For a while, Will stayed silent, mulling over what he had heard, wondering if it shocked him or not. In the end, he chose to go with “not”.

He regretted what was about to transpire because there was still a stupid part of him that craved Jack’s grumpy approval, and if he had to determine who cared about him more, Jack or Hannibal, he would definitely choose the former — which made him even more pathetic. If he was trapped in a burning house, Will was sure that Jack would try to save him, if it was possible at all, without any second thoughts. Hannibal, on the other hand, would evaluate the best outcome for himself and make a decision based on it.

But in the end, it didn’t matter. His and Jack’s paths had been getting farther and farther away from each other, and they would never cross each other again.

“Hannibal was with me yesterday,” Will said evenly, and a sudden silence from Jack’s side was deafening.

When he risked looking up, Will saw Hannibal staring at him in surprise, his brows knitted together, as if he couldn’t make sense of what was happening.

Seemed like his plan was progressing without him intending it to.
“Repeat what you have just said,” Jack uttered slowly, and Will sighed.

“Hannibal was with me yesterday,” he said again. “He didn’t go anywhere. We were at home all day.”

“You do realize I know that you are lying? I’ve told you a minute ago that my people were watching him. We know he was out.”

“So prove it, but don’t ask me to do it for you — again. Hannibal was home. That’s all I will say on this matter.”

“What happened to you?” Jack’s voice became quiet and pitying — unbearably pitying, instead of angry like Will had expected. “What has he done to you, Will? You were always seeking justice. You always tried to save lives. Do you need to know more about the victim? Will it be enough for you to hear that he had a family, a young daughter that had just turned three, a whole life ahead of him? If that’s what it takes…”

“I don’t care!” Will exploded, and this time, he didn’t give a shit if Hannibal was still listening. “I never cared! You overestimate my sense of justice, Jack — you always have. I wanted justice for my father. That’s it. I wanted it, and I was ready to solve a thousand crimes if it brought me closer to my goal. All other people — yes, they didn’t deserve it, and I wish they hadn’t died. I wish things were different. But I don’t know them, and I don’t want to know them. Their deaths have nothing to do with me, and you won’t make me feel guilty about them. Catch your killer by yourself if you can, but don’t drag me in the middle of it. And stop calling me because I won’t change my mind. Please, finally leave me alone.” Will terminated the call and threw his phone onto the table, his chest heaving.

That’s it. He ended his relationship with Jack, and by sheer coincidence, he was also closer to ending his relationship with Hannibal, once and for all. All he needed was more boring Jeremy, more friendly time with Hannibal, and then…

Something strange clouded in his head, and a surge of dizziness made him sway. For a second, all Will’s thoughts stopped, became blank. When he came to his senses, he was cradled in Hannibal’s arms, with Hannibal murmuring comforting words and brushing his hair from his face.

Another episode? But he didn’t have a headache… he felt weird, but there was no terrible blinding pain that attacked him several previous times. Some weakness, some numbness, and nothing else.

Blinking, Will gazed at Hannibal, and his heart skipped a beat when he was hit with the force of his concern and tenderness.

Out of curiosity, he tried to reach out for the Ripper, but like before, nothing happened. The Ripper was closed to him, while Hannibal’s emotions were bleeding from his every pore.

Fake emotions, Will reminded himself. Fake, because the real Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper, and the Chesapeake Ripper would never look at him like that.

Would he?

Confused, Will shook his head slightly, trying to get back his sense of control.

This close interaction with Hannibal was messing with his mind. He couldn’t allow himself to believe that anything from what he saw was real. It was easier in the beginning, when the wound was still so fresh, but a week together — and he started to waver. He started to want to believe again. The stupid reading hour only made everything worse, and Hannibal’s infuriating insistence
to look after him after his seizures was the final blow against his defense system.

It was unacceptable.

He had to control himself better.

He had to remember.

“Do you need to lie down? I can take you to your room,” Hannibal murmured, still busy patting his hair. “Or should I bring something for the pain?”

“I’m not in pain. I’m fine,” Will pushed Hannibal’s hands away, escaping from the dangerous touch, and stood up. “I need some air,” he added.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Will snapped. Hurt expression that flickered across Hannibal’s face only made him angrier. “I won’t be long,” he added, trying to sound softer, but failing. “And I want to be alone.”

Cold fire flared in Hannibal’s eyes, and Will reveled in the echoes of danger and cruelty he sensed there. However, it lasted only for a moment. Then the fire died out, and Hannibal put on a hollowed out mask once again.

“As you wish,” he said emotionlessly, and Will gritted his teeth in fury.

Not this again. Why did Hannibal have to pretend to be a martyr? It was even worse than his previous maddening arrogance and self-confidence. This washed out version of him kept driving Will crazy, and he had no idea what to do with it.

Fuming, he whistled for Winston, waited for him to join him, and walked out of the door, feeling Hannibal’s eyes burning his back.

He moved toward Jeremy’s house, knowing that he must be home. The idea of talking to him wasn’t thrilling in the slightest, but the dark promise of vengeance was pushing him forward, making him ignore everything else.

This time, he rang the bell, and forced a silly smile when Jeremy greeted him.

Jeremy’s face split in a wide grin as he ushered him inside, rubbing Winston’s back and then wiping his hands on his trousers.

Before he could stop himself, Will curled his lips in distaste. Fortunately, Jeremy didn’t notice, so he quickly masked his grimace with another smile, scolding himself internally.

Since when had he gotten so judgmental? Regardless of his habits, Jeremy was a nice guy, and Will was sure that his closet wasn’t full of skeletons like Hannibal’s. He was friendly, welcoming, warm. He didn’t deserve any scorn.

And yet, sitting in his living room, treated with tea and biscuits, Will was finding faults in everything. He wasn’t trying to do it, but it kept happening anyway.

“We have a really great corporate spirit at work,” Jeremy was saying. “For Christmas, my colleagues and I decided to have a party at Ritz-Carlton. Have you ever been in one of their hotels? Great place.”

“I haven’t. But I heard a lot about them,” Will said. It was worse than small talk during the
occasional parties that Jack had made him visit. Tuning Jeremy out, he took a sip of the tea, and grimaced again.

Weak and watery, not at all like what he was used to. The biscuits looked dry and unappetizing, like something bought in a store, and Will was suddenly engulfed by a longing to taste some of Hannibal’s cooking.

Hannibal had spoiled him. Before, he would have been delighted to be offered something like what Jeremy had put in front of him, and he himself would have never bothered to spend his limited resources on a luxury like cookies. Now, though, it just sent a dull ringing of annoyance through his veins, making him want to push the tea away and leave, go back to their house and ask what Hannibal was going to make for dessert.

He was utterly disgusted with himself.


“Do you plan to go somewhere this summer?” he asked, and Jeremy began to nod enthusiastically.

“Yeah, I hope to save enough money to go to northern-eastern Europe on a tour. I’d like to visit Baltic region — Latvia, Lithuania, a part of Russia maybe. These countries are not very popular among tourists, but they have some breathtaking views — or so I’ve heard.”

“Like castles,” Will said, thinking about the book Hannibal was reading to him.

Lithuania.

The book was not the only place where he had heard about it. There was something else, something he couldn’t immediately remember. Something important.

After fifteen more minutes of useless talk, Will said his goodbyes, promising to invite Jeremy for tea some time in the future. Then he fled, wondering if he should take a shower to wash away the smell of Jeremy’s house or if he should let Hannibal sense it. Both options held their appeal, and Will still hadn’t found an answer when he entered the house.

Hannibal wasn’t on the first floor. So, unless he went in search of him deliberately, the other-alpha-smell-attack would have to wait.

Not sure whether to feel relieved or disappointed, Will slowly walked to the fireplace, warming his hands against it absentmindedly. The house was quiet — from here, he couldn’t even feel Hannibal’s presence, so for all he knew, Hannibal had gone out himself.

Confusing. Why was everything so confusing? Why did Hannibal have such power over him — power to bewilder him, to evoke all these conflicting feelings?

Restless, Will moved to the sofa and then to the armchair, glancing at the table where the book was lying. Following a soft pinch of interest, Will approached it and touched the book, looking at its cover.

It was elegant and eye-catching, but he could immediately see that it was self-made. It didn’t even have a title. Frowning, Will opened the book, and his eyes widened as he realized that all the pages were typed on simple paper, not printed like they were supposed to in actual books.

Knowing that his face was stuck in an incredulous expression, Will went through the pages slowly, his hands shaking, his brain desperately scrambling to make sense of it all. His worst suspicions
were confirmed when he reached page 103 and saw that the rest of the pages were blank. Not typed yet.

Hannibal was reading a book of his own to him. A book that described his own story.

For a while, Will’s brain refused to accept this information as true. To recall everything that Hannibal had read so far and see it under different perspective. To give a face to the boy who had been faceless till this moment.

Emotionally drained, Will fell down on the armchair, still holding the book.

What was Hannibal after? Why was he doing this? What could he possibly seek to achieve?

Did he truly want to share a part of himself with Will? Such personal, devastating part, something he had never mentioned, never even hinted at during their relationship? Or was it another ruse aimed at making Will feel sorry for him, empathize with him, and forgive him?

If it was a ruse, wouldn’t Hannibal have said something sooner? Wouldn’t he have hinted as to who the protagonist of the book was, so Will would have an idea?

He hadn’t done any of that. On the contrary, he even offered dropping the book if Will wasn’t interested in it.

Then again, it would be difficult not to figure things out once Hannibal reached the point where the boy grew up and started killing and eating people.

If Hannibal continued writing it, and reading to him, did it mean that he would describe their meeting? His genuine reaction, his genuine plan?

No. No, nonsense. Hannibal was a liar of the highest caliber — who could say if there was truly anything genuine about him, in him, in what he said and did?

Turmoil and anxiety were gnawing at his already-shaken nervous system, so Will put the book back on the table, forced himself to get up, and went to his bedroom. Closing himself there, he looked up at the ceiling, but instead of its familiar design, he saw the images from the book. The images of small Hannibal — lost, anguished, and angry. So unbelievably, excruciatingly angry.

Truth or not, Will loved that boy. Even if it didn’t change his intentions toward the man.

Most probably, this book was fiction. Fiction devised specifically to manipulate his mind.

But it still meant something, and Will had no idea what to do with this knowledge.

Chapter End Notes

So, since we are approaching the realization of Will's plan, I have a question on something I can't decide. When Will informs Hannibal of his imprinting on another alpha and all hell breaks loose, would you prefer this chapter to be from Will's or Hannibal's POV?
Wow. I'm so grateful to you all for your amazing words and for so many responses about the imprinting POV! In the end, I decided to write the fallout from both points of view, starting with Hannibal and then moving to Will. So, we start in the next chapter already!

This night was sleepless, even more restless than the one before.

Having his father haunt his dreams was something Will was used to. Seeing a child version of Hannibal there was new, and somehow more terrifying.

He wasn’t angry and vicious like a part of Will had expected. Instead, he was silent, pale, covered in blood — shocked to the point of stupor. Staring at him, unblinking, his dark eyes fathomless and so pained that Will woke, gasping, words of comfort on his tongue.

He didn’t risk to try and sleep after that. He walked to his favorite window and stared at the night outside, thinking about the story Hannibal had read to him again.

If it was true, then it explained a lot. Hannibal was wary of guns — Will had noticed it back when Hannibal had given him one, after the fight with Tobias Budge. He hated it, was unnerved by it, but he had bought it for him. To give him a sense of protection? If Will remembered correctly, Hannibal had explained it by wanting him to feel protected against the Ripper, which was laughable, considering he and the Ripper had been sleeping in the same bed at the time.

Was it a joke? Another game? Or had Hannibal genuinely wanted him to feel safe?

And then Will tried to kill himself with that very gun.

Did Hannibal have nightmares about it?

Chuckling darkly, Will wrapped his hands around himself, filling a fresh portion of poison hit his bloodstream.

Hannibal and nightmares. Doubtful. Maybe he needed to go through every memory of his to make sure that this suicidal longing to believe in Hannibal’s feelings for him was an illusion.

Hannibal saw him as an amusing toy since their first meeting.

Hannibal wanted to send him to prison for something he hadn’t done.

Hannibal tried to make Jack think that Will had participated in his father’s murder.

It was sick, cruel, and heartless. Whatever happened in his childhood, whatever traumatized and brave and loving child Hannibal had been, he couldn’t change what he was now. It was impossible.

Will repeated it several times, first inwardly, then aloud.
He stopped only when he finally started to believe it himself.

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Hannibal was pretending to be an empty shell again in the morning. His eyes were dead, he gave monosyllabic answers, and he didn’t even finish the extravagant breakfast he had cooked.

Will’s irritation was growing, and finally, at some point, he snapped.

“Stop acting like you are a walking dead man,” he blurted out, and when Hannibal just stared at him blankly, he scowled. “I’m serious,” he said forcefully. “I can’t stand you looking like this all the time. It is boring — you are boring.”

Hannibal’s jaw twitched, as if he was pissed, and Will relaxed at the sight, feeling his gleeful confidence return.

“If you have nothing to do, then go to work,” he concluded, his voice cold. “I’m sick of seeing your sour face throughout the day. Doing nothing and staying with me all the time is clearly killing you, and I would never want to inflict my company upon you, especially for so long.”

Hannibal’s jaw twitched again, even more distinctly this time.

“It is your indifference that I find deadly, not your company,” he said. “It appalls me that you can still question it.”

“Question what?”

“My devotion to you. I’m not sure what else I could do for you to see how important you are to me.”

Taken aback, Will kept silent. Hannibal sighed, and the fire in his eyes dimmed.

“I would love to spend more time with you,” he murmured wistfully — or at least it sounded that way to Will. “I understand that we cannot bring back the past, but maybe if we could try—”

“No.”

“I miss you.”

“No!” Will repeated, louder, panicking. He had trapped himself with this conversation, and now he had to get himself out of it. Quickly. “Nothing changed between us. But you are doing everything to make the whole experience of living with you even more excruciating!”

“You find fault in everything,” Hannibal hissed at him, suddenly looking furious. “I tried to initiate contact at first, and you made it clear that you resent it. Now I am trying to give you space, but you are dissatisfied once again. What do you want me to do?”

“Let me go,” Will said immediately, and enjoyed a rush of dark satisfaction when Hannibal stood
up, almost breaking his chair in the process.

“Never in your life,” he said in a terrible voice, and then left the dining room. The front door slammed, and Will leaned against the back of his own chair, a small ironic smile on his lips.

He was right. Hannibal was trying different tactics, not sure which of them would work, but he hadn’t given up on his long-term game.

Will wasn’t going to give up, either.

Having finished his breakfast in a comfortable silence, with only himself as his company, Will whistled for Winston and fed him Hannibal’s portion, wondering what Hannibal would say about it if he saw it. Then he wandered to their reading room, where the book was lying. His hands reached out for it involuntarily, but Will stopped himself before he could touch it.

He didn’t need to know more. Those several scenes from Hannibal’s childhood were already actively haunting him — he didn’t need any other images.

The temptation was too strong, though, so Will turned away and walked back to the dining room. Since Hannibal was gone, he could use this time to visit Jeremy and try his dubious charms on him, but the mere idea of it was distasteful enough to blacken his mood further.

No Jeremy today. Today, he had to treat himself to some rest.

With Winston hot on his heels, Will went to the rooms he had never visited before, and stopped when he found a small library. Curious, he examined the books it had, rolling his eyes when they all turned out to be classics, mostly dedicated to philosophy, history, and medicine.

One of the upper shelves, however, was drastically different from the other ones. It was filled with newer and obviously cheaper books, dedicated to dogs, fishing, profiling, and for some weird reason, cooking.

Will realized his mouth was hanging open, so he closed it and frowned, bemused.

Seriously? Had Hannibal decided to make a shelf for him specifically, in this new house, filling it with what he thought Will would like? Why hadn’t he said anything about it before? He’d think Hannibal wouldn’t miss the chance to show what a caring partner he was.

Bitterness and melancholy washed over him, whispering about things he would never get, and Will rubbed his eyes tiredly.

When would he stop driving himself crazy? He was sick of himself at this point.

Grabbing the first thing about fishing he saw, Will wandered to the sofa and curled there, wondering if he would be able to focus for long enough to get absorbed in the book.

Time was passing slowly. He managed to finish several chapters, but then sleepiness started to collect itself under his eyelids, gluing them shut, and he fell into the pit of anxiousness and dejection. Brief images of Hannibal and their previous life together flashed in front of him, one changing into another.

He saw the forest of Wolf Trap, where he and Hannibal had used to walk Winston. He saw their house in Baltimore. He saw them during that terrible, disastrous night at the Opera House, where everyone kept throwing him incredulous, disapproving glances and where Hannibal tried to shield him from them all, claiming how much he was enjoying his company.
He must have been embarrassed. Why hadn’t he been embarrassed? Why had he brought Will there in the first place, considering what he himself thought about him?

Weak, desperate hope started to light up his dream, but it was immediately swallowed by the thick, dark surge of other memories.

Hannibal bowing his head in a gesture of respect at the sight of him — gesture that Will had secretly craved, but almost never received because people disliked his scent, or his behavior, or him in general. Hannibal doing it, but smirking at him behind his back, his every action carefully calculated, aimed at evoking imprinting within him.

Hannibal killing Loffat, someone from Will’s circle, knowing that Will would be the obvious suspect, considering their hostile history.

Hannibal talking to Jack, and every time after that, Jack looking at him with more and more suspicion. Treating him more and more coldly.

Hannibal helping him kill Tobias Budge, securing his trust, and then killing Alana when she was going to his house, expecting Jack to arrest him. Changing his plan at the last moment only because he must have been certain that once they fucked, Will would imprint, and the game would be over — and as it hadn’t happened, he was forced to continue with his plan. Going further, asking Will to move in, hoping to spend more time with him, charm him harder, to finally get rid of him.

When Will woke up, he was vibrating with anger. His breathing was harsh, so he had to slow it down forcibly, clenching his fists so hard it hurt, trying to pour all the black, enraged energy in them instead.

Hannibal. Hannibal had used him. Hannibal had been playing him like a fool for months. Hannibal never loved him.

Hannibal would pay, and he would be free.

Will stood up, viciously throwing the book that had been lying on his chest in one of the corners. He moved to the door aimlessly, not sure what he was going to do, especially now, with this dark fury boiling his insides, when he heard the front door open.

Baring his teeth in a snarl, Will stepped toward the stairs, and froze when the smell suddenly hit him.

Blood. Someone else’s, and Hannibal’s.

Hannibal’s blood.

Hannibal was hurt.

A cold shock of fear coursed through him, freezing his rage. Gasping, Will threw himself in the direction of blood scent unthinkingly, terror and nausea crawling up his throat. He breathed out only when he saw Hannibal, looking relatively well physically.

Still, the smell of his blood was thick and heavy, and Will jumped to him, grabbing his coat and pulling it off him. Hannibal turned into stone under his touch, clearly confused, but Will ignored him, too busy trying to locate the source of the scaring scent.

Finally, he got to Hannibal’s shoulder, and saw that the material there was torn, revealing a deep bloody cut.
Anger stirred, possessive, volatile, and unacceptable this near to the surface.

“Who did this?” Will growled, careful not to touch the wound. “What happened?”

“A lapse in judgment,” Hannibal replied, looking at him without blinking, with a small stupid smile on his face. “I was very… emotional at the time. I let it distract me.”

“Distract you from what? Go to the room, we need to clean it,” Will pushed him forward, and Hannibal obeyed, the dark, fierce glare he had been wearing before Will touched him gone without trace.

In the living room, Will placed a bowl of warm water and bandages on the table, and moved to inspect the wound once again.

“Who did this?” he repeated.

“I didn’t ask for his name. I was too focused on trying to kill him.”

Will blinked, and then, horrifyingly, his lips twitched.

Shocked at himself, he scowled instead, hiding the beginning of the smile behind it.

“Usually, your job is smoother,” he commented dryly, turning to the bowl and starting to clean the wound. “Who was the lucky man?”

“Lucky?” Hannibal echoed.

“He managed to get you, didn’t he?”

“I assure you, I was the one to get him in the end,” Hannibal said, dissatisfaction and resentment palpable in his voice.

“And yet, he landed a blow. An unusual occurrence.”

“I told you, I was distracted!” Hannibal’s indignation became louder, and Will forgot about his anger for a moment, letting amusement slip into its place.

“By what?” he asked. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“There is nothing to tell. I was driving, saw a beta changing his front tire. I decided to stop and help.”

“I can imagine just what help you had in mind.”

“I was courteous. I always am. He, on the other hand, was rude. He refused my help.”

“Yes, that’s a terrible form of rudeness.”

Hannibal narrowed his eyes, and Will scoffed.

“Be honest. When you stopped near him, you had no intention of helping him. You would have attacked him at the first opportunity, regardless of whether he would say something you didn’t like or look at you in the wrong way.”

“I was ruled by anger,” Hannibal admitted, not even grimacing when Will accidentally applied too much pressure to his wound. “After our conversation, I was not… myself. It was a mistake to
target anyone in this state — emotionality is what leads to getting caught. The beta had a knife, and I didn’t see it in time. He got my shoulder.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Will frowned, fighting the worry that raised its head again.

What if Hannibal hadn’t seen the knife in time? What if Will had waited, but Hannibal would have never come home again?

Shivering, he tried to remove all the dark thoughts and focus on the antibiotics he had found instead.

“How should I use them?”

“This one,” Hannibal pointed, smiling at him again, as if he was satisfied with Will’s awkward attempts to treat his wound.

“So, you did kill that beta,” Will said, hoping to distract himself from enjoying this moment the way he did. This spontaneous moment of closeness was unacceptable, but he didn’t know how to stop it. The need to take care of Hannibal was too strong, even in comparison to his instinct to flee.

“Where is the trophy?”

“I didn’t take anything. He struggled too much and I wasn’t in the mood.”

“Hmm,” Will murmured. “Like that beta in the forest. The one that brought Jack to your office. I was right, wasn’t I? You are the one who killed him.”

“Yes,” a proud smile touched Hannibal’s lips briefly. “I was astonished when I heard your thoughts. I couldn’t understand how you could be so insightful. I began to wonder if I had made a mistake somewhere, if I was losing my touch.”

Will said nothing, focusing on stitching the wound now, but he froze when Hannibal leaned closer and brushed his fingers across his chin gently.

“I admired you,” he murmured quietly. “You captivated me. Enthralled me. From the moment I’ve met you, everything changed for me.”

“Stop!” Will hissed. “Stop lying to me!”

“Will…”

“Do you think I’m an idiot? I remember everything that you did to me. It was easy to do it after I realized the truth.”

“Will…”

“The only thing that changed after our meeting was that you’ve got a new amusing toy. The one you’ve planned to throw behind the bars. I don’t know how you fought the imprinting, how you managed to be so cold even despite it—”

“I failed to fight the imprinting,” Hannibal growled, standing up, ignoring his half-stitched shoulder. “I tried to, at first, but it didn’t work. I thought it was obvious enough.”

“After our meeting, every kill of yours had a clear goal — to frame me. I am capable of drawing connections where they exist. There was nothing of infatuation in your actions. Everything was precise, cold, and calculated.”
Hannibal stepped closer to him, and Will recoiled, bristling.

“Think of your profile of the Ripper at that time,” Hannibal said, sounding infuriatingly calm, and Will just shook his head, trying to gain control.

“What?” he asked.

“Your profile on the Ripper. Starting from the first murder after our meeting.”

“I don’t…”

“You realized the Ripper was imprinted. You realized he was courting someone — an omega. That’s how you discovered the truth about me eventually. The imprinting. The courtship.”

Will shook his head again, feeling numb. Stunned.

The truth in Hannibal’s words was undeniable.

It was also something Will had never thought of before — at least not from this perspective.

His profile. The body of the flowers seller stuffed with blue flowers, something Will had called being chosen to match the Ripper’s omega’s eyes. Sickly sweet, romantic gesture. His belief that the Ripper was confused, lost in the midst of his imprinting.

Before, Will had been sure that imprinting had taken the Ripper aback, that he couldn’t fully control his actions. That he was in love, whatever twisted form of it he could understand.

Afterward, he believed that it was all a part of complicated scheme. He never considered the fact that the Ripper’s, Hannibal’s, confusion could be genuine.

Maybe if he was…

“No,” Will said coldly, both to himself and to Hannibal. “No. You fooled me once — it is not going to happen again. I won’t let you. My profile is irrelevant. I never thought there could be a personal element in the Ripper’s murders, something connected to me directly, so I couldn’t see the whole picture clearly. You didn’t just court an omega — you courted an omega who was trying to catch you. Your goal was to confuse me by pretending to be confused. You tried to set me up — or are you going to say that it wasn’t your intention?”

“It was,” Hannibal said after a pause, and Will let out a harsh laugh.

“Exactly,” he said. “So stop trying to play an innocent.”

He turned to leave, but Hannibal’s voice stopped him in his tracks.

“I’m sorry.”

Incredulous, Will slowly faced him again.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal repeated, stepping closer, and closer, the expression on his face tense, his eyes suddenly alight with emotions that Will had no desire to decipher. ‘I’m sorry for what happened with your father. I do not regret choosing to kill him, but I am sorry for all the pain that it caused you, for everything that you had to suffer because of it. If I had known what I know now, I would have never done it, regardless of how much I despised the person your father was. I’m sorry
for starting our relationship the way I did, with intentions to hurt you. However, I failed to go through with it — because I recognized in time the depth and the nature of my feelings for you. After that, I did everything I could to throw Jack off your trail. I wanted to protect you. I want to be with you, now. That’s the only goal I have. I don’t care about imprinting.”

“You will,” Will promised, his voice so choked that he hardly recognized it. It was as if he was hearing himself from the distance, as if he wasn’t the one speaking. “You will care about imprinting. What did you expect me to say to this… this speech of yours? Did you think it would touch me enough to make me finally imprint on you?”

“Will, I said I don’t care about it, not anymore!”

“Because I won’t,” Will said, ignoring him, refusing to listen any longer. “I might be the perfect partner for you, but you are not the perfect partner for me. Neither your lies nor the truth made me imprint on you because the person you are is incompatible with the person I am. I will never be able to look at you and love you the way I did, or at all. I am not going to forget anything, or forgive you. So you can cut this bullshit once and for all.”

Allowing himself to revel in a completely crushed look on Hannibal’s face, Will left the room, the shocks of tremor still convulsing through his body. Locking himself in his safe place, he hid under the blanket, the way he had done many, many years ago, right after his father’s death, and shut his eyes tightly, trying to stop the frustrated tears from forming.

Just a little longer, he swore to himself. A little longer — and everything would be over.

For good.

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The next four days passed in complete silence. Hannibal didn’t attempt to talk to him again, and Will was still too shaken to attempt conversation himself. So they both stayed away from each other, meeting only at the table, and avoiding looking at each other even then.

After these silent four days, Hannibal returned to work. He was gone for five hours, then he came home, and the silence resumed. Will could smell the faint odor of cheese coming from him, irritating and familiar. Franklyn something, the annoying patient who disliked Will the second he saw him.

At least he knew for sure that Hannibal had indeed returned to work instead of going on another killing spree. Though at this point, Will couldn’t honestly say whether he cared about it or not.

He didn’t miss Hannibal’s company — or if he did, this complete avoidance was for the better. The lack of reading.

Regardless of whether what Hannibal had written was the truth, Will needed to know what happened next. He needed to know how much more of this fiction, biography, whatever, Hannibal had written by now, and how he planned to portray their first meeting.
This desire was reckless. Illogical. Will knew it. But he still couldn’t resist.

Hannibal had removed the book from their reading room, meaning that it probably had to be somewhere in his bedroom. Will didn’t want to even approach that place, but the next morning, when Hannibal left once again, his patience snapped.

Waiting for half an hour to make sure that Hannibal wasn’t going to suddenly come back, Will went upstairs and slipped into his room.

The smell — intense, soothing, desirable, immediately hit him with full force, and he inhaled sharply, greedily, before he had a chance to stop himself. New memories resurfaced, memories of the nights spent together, of the heat that had been interrupted so abruptly…

Something in Will’s stomach curled in sudden pleasure, sending a rush of hot sweetness through his blood. Horrified, he backed away from the room, wondering if it was a mere twinge of fathom heat, a reminder of the past, or if it meant something much, much worse.

To his relief, there was nothing else. His body felt as usual, so Will allowed himself to relax. Taking a breath of clean air, he stepped back into Hannibal’s room, and walked toward the table that stood near the window, with the familiar form of the book lying on it.

He stared at it for a while, suddenly unsure of whether he should risk seeing what was inside. As he expected, the temptation won, so he opened the book and looked through it, noting how there were clearly more pages written now. Considering that Hannibal had apparently crossed out some words with the pencil, it was not a final version, but at this point, Will was ready to engulf whatever he saw there.

His heart jumped when he saw the mention of his name. Licking his lips nervously, he clenched the book in his hands and stared at the lines.

“…Will.

_That was the moment when he has truly gained his name in my eyes. The moment when the world around me began to reform, when instead of seeing a curious case of intriguing omega, I suddenly saw a person who the fate has chosen as my partner. My equal. Imprinting... it felt like a curse, but in that one brief moment, I saw everything in him. In you, Will. Later, when you left my office, I was restless. I wanted to see you again. It was unacceptable to me, and so I chose to view imprinting as an opportunity to discover more about the mind — specifically, the mind like yours, one that felt the connection with me so strongly without imprinting being involved from your side._

_When you called me next time, I pretended I didn’t recognize you._

_I regret it now. I regret how everything started. For all my life, I was terrified of being placed in the vulnerable state that I had found myself in during the night of my family’s murder. I found comfort in distance and darkness. Imprinting was a potential weakness, so I intended to turn it into strength by whatever means necessary._

_I kept making one mistake after another. I kept fighting against myself, but even then, every minute of this fight, I loved you. I always loved you. I would have loved you if I had met you in any other circumstances, and I love you still, even knowing that the fate has played a cruel joke on me and you will never return my feelings with the same intensity. Imprinting was a fuel, but it was never the essence. I would have loved you with or without it._”

Almost the entire last paragraph was crossed out, but Will could still read everything without...
difficulty.

And he wished he hadn’t.

Dropping the book as if it was burning his hands, Will recoiled. Suddenly, being here, surrounded by Hannibal’s smell, hearing those words he’d just read spoken by imaginary Hannibal’s voice, was too much, too overwhelming. Too dangerous.

Shaking his head violently to clear it, Will stumbled out of the room, fleeing to his own, far away from that damn book and everything it entailed.

It was a lie. It was a lie. It had to be.

His room was lit with the morning light, and Will’s head throbbed, his eyes ached. Growling with helpless rage, he jumped to the window and pulled the curtains shut. It didn’t help much with the pain, but it created the darkness that he desperately needed right now.

His shadows came when it was dark, offering him their comfort. Will turned around, hoping to see them, but instead, a blinding flash of agony pierced his head, and he fell to the floor before he even understood it.

Groaning, he crawled forward aimlessly, and stopped when he felt shadows descending, forming a cocoon for him, a cocoon of his own darkness.

Will dragged his knees to his chest, his breath hitching. He would welcome oblivion at this point, but instead, he kept seeing the words burned on the paper — I love you, I love you, I love you.

“Liar!” he hissed, and even such slight movement of lips sent a rolling wave of pain through him. Gasping, Will closed his eyes and let the shadows take control, letting them feed his anger and the quiet, deadly rage that was smoldering below it.

The pain would end, and he would come out stronger. He would ignore the lies. He would not be affected.

And he would complete his plan.

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“…so we made a deal with Trenton, but he turned out to be a huge son of a bitch. We worked for maybe two, three weeks, and that was it — my guys came to me and said, ‘Jeremy, that’s enough. Either you break the deal or we leave’. I had no choice after this, of course. I mean, professionalism is good, but it’s friendship that matters most, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Will replied melancholically. The echoes of pain were still murmuring in his head, but he tried to ignore them. It was time to move to the last stage of his plan. Now, as soon as possible, before he would get irrevocably lost in his own confusion. “Listen, Jeremy, would you like to visit me and Hannibal? Maybe on Saturday? Hannibal is an excellent cook, and the dinner can be
very… pleasurable,” Will smiled, hoping it looked at least somewhat alluring, and Jeremy’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, I’d love to!” he exclaimed, then hesitated. “It won’t be strange, will it? I mean, Hannibal and I don’t really know each other, and he might feel threatened by the presence of another alpha in his house, near his omega.”

“Our relationship isn’t like that,” Will assured him. “And Hannibal always likes having guests for dinner. So, will you come? Saturday, around six?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jeremy grinned at him, excited and oblivious, and Will smiled back at him.

Hannibal was preparing his book to prove his so-called love for him. Well, the evening on Saturday will show just how deep and real that love was. And Will didn’t think he would be surprised by the truth that would be uncovered.

It was time to end it.
So, we have finally arrived at a very important point of the story! It means that we are closing the second arc of the plot soon and approaching the final third one. I hope you'll enjoy it.

I am going through a pretty tough period right now, so I can't describe how much I treasure and value your support. On a more optimistic note, for those who know about Ravage, a third Fannibal book - I have been accepted as a writer, so I will be contributing to it. My circle of Hell is Lust :) I'm so excited!

“I was so happy when you renewed our sessions, Doctor,” Emily purred, glancing at him from under her lashes. “The more time passed, the more overwhelmed I started to feel. I missed our conversations.”

“I apologize for the inconveniences I caused you,” Hannibal said distantly. “I’m afraid there was no way for me to continue with my practice for a while. Personal emergency.”

“Oh, I’ve heard,” Emily’s red, glossy lips curled in a semblance of smile. “Something with that omega that you introduced to us once. Will, or something?”

“Yes. Now, considering our last conversation—”

“Are you still together with him? I heard that he got into an accident that left him disfigured. Is it true?”

Hannibal clenched his jaw so tightly that he nearly crushed his teeth.

He had never been particularly amused by Emily and often entertained himself with thoughts of her death, but never as strongly as at this moment.

His fingers twitched, and he had to wrap them around his notebook to avoid the sudden intense temptation.

“I would appreciate it if you refrained from speaking about my partner, now or in the future,” he warned coldly. “This is your therapy, Emily, not mine. It means that we will be talking about you.”

“I appreciate your interest, Doctor,” Emily’s grin widened as she leaned closer, her hand brushing against his own, and Hannibal stared at it unblinkingly, vividly imagining how breaking her fingers one by one would feel like. “And of course I did not mean to offend. It’s just there are various rumors and he didn’t make much of impression the one and only time we’ve seen him. I was just wondering.”

“My memory might be faulty, but I recall you feeling rather intimidated,” Hannibal remarked, and when Emily recoiled, flushing in outrage, he opened his notebook. “We were talking about your argument with your mother. Does she still disapprove of your desire to move out from your family house?”
“Oh, yes,” Emily looked away, clearly discouraged, and Hannibal’s eyes lingered on her neck.

It would be such an easy thing to break it. Without any additional games or drama — a quick, precise movement, and she would never utter Will’s name again.

If Jack hadn’t been tailing him so stubbornly, Hannibal might have risked it, and to hell with believable explanations. Yet under Jack’s attention, killing a patient would be risky. Reckless. It could cost him Will, in whatever capacity he still had him, and Hannibal wasn’t going to endanger it, no matter what.

So he pretended to listen to Emily, considered giving her a referral, wondered if he could kill her then, but the majority of his thoughts flowed toward Will. Will, and the way he refused to interact with him after their last conversation, and how for a moment, when they had been sitting on that sofa, with Will stitching his wound, Hannibal felt a flare of wild, desperate hope.

Will crushed it in the end, as always, but Hannibal could still taste it, so he bathed in this sensation and its glow.

Maybe it would be enough to give him time to regroup.

Regroup for what, though, he did not know.

He had to be honest with himself. His plans had failed — all of them. Will didn’t start to warm up to him, even if it seemed so occasionally.

They shared a past now, but they had no future. And Hannibal had no idea how to change it. Not anymore.

***

When he walked into the living room, tired after his session with Emily, the first thing Hannibal saw was Will. He was sitting on the floor, his back pressed to the sofa, with a book in his hands.

Hannibal opened his mouth to greet him, but words dissipated when Will jerked his head up and stared at him. His eyes grew round, and then he bared his teeth and snarled.

Hannibal blinked, taken aback by this strange reaction.

Not that they were on the friendly terms, but snarling at him? What had he done now?

Will stood up, not taking his eyes off him and still baring his teeth. He began to approach, and Hannibal remained motionless, although his body tensed, recognizing the danger where it sensed it.

Right away, he could tell that Will wasn’t in his human state of mind. His eyes almost glowed, his gait was unnatural, predatory, and when he stopped near Hannibal, his nostrils flared. He stared at his hand unblinkingly, and then took it into his own and pressed it to his cheek, rubbing against it.
Hannibal’s breath caught and he froze, afraid of moving, of ruining this unique, unexpected moment of physical touch. Will’s cheek was warm, so achingly familiar, so real. The current of sheer bliss ran through him, and he shivered, unable to stop himself. Will, probably mistaking it for desire to move away, hissed in warning, and Hannibal smiled, melted, completely, hopelessly charmed.

It must be Emily’s smell that still lingered on him, and which Will was so stubbornly trying to replace with his own. Hannibal had been annoyed when she’d touched him, but now, he regretted pushing her away. If this was how Will reacted to a simple brushing of fingers, he could only imagine the hell he would unleash if the touch had been more intimate.

Will continued to scent him, and a dark, dangerous feeling of greed bloomed within Hannibal. Carefully, trying not to spook, he lifted his other hand and touched Will’s curls, and Will leaned into his touch, purring.

The sound was positively magical. Will’s scent, always alluring, but suddenly intensified, filled his every pore, and Hannibal let out a soft growl, his mind swimming. The deceptive sweetness of deadly flowers whispered to him, shattering the remains of his self-control, and he mindlessly moved to cover Will’s lips with his own.

It was a mistake. The purring stopped suddenly, and Will recoiled from him as if he was the devil himself. He hissed again, but this time in clear warning to stay away.

Longing and wistfulness prevented Hannibal from thinking clearly, so he stepped toward Will, his body almost trembling with the need to touch, to feel again.

Will’s eyes narrowed, and before Hannibal could react, he made an abrupt movement.

Stinging pain scorched his cheek. Stunned, Hannibal did step away then, touching his face in quiet wonderment.

Will’s unexpectedly sharp nails left several deep scratches on his skin. Somehow, Will had done what practically no one ever had — got close enough to inflict physical damage. On his face. Without him even noticing him until it was too late.

Human intelligence was burning in Will’s eyes again, but his scent did not change, it remained just as strong and near irresistible.

Heat?

As if sensing his thoughts, Will flinched, and then hastened to grab his book and stormed upstairs — into his room, undoubtedly.

Hannibal took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

This encounter was… strange. Inspiring in all senses, but not something he could envision. Will’s loss of control, temporary as it was, was a gift. A wonderful gift. Something he wasn’t likely to receive again in the future.

Hannibal brought his fingers to his face, pressing them into the scratches, shivering with pleasure at the pain that passed through him.

Will was impressively fast and stealthy for someone who couldn’t have much experience in this regard. The way he attacked him — briefly, yet effectively, reminded Hannibal of the fight with Tobias he had witnessed, the way Will had snapped his neck as if it was the most natural thing in
the world for him. Before, Hannibal had been more inclined to think that Will was channeling the Ripper — his movements had seemed eerily familiar. Now, though, he couldn’t help but wonder how much more unresolved frustration and aggression Will had, and how much of it wasn’t related to him.

And his smell. The smell of heat. Hannibal would never confuse it with anything else. From the first time he sensed it, he was ready to slit throats and destroy cities just for the chance to be close to it.

He would recognize it. He had recognized it. Will was approaching his heat, regardless of the rift between them, despite the hatred that he so clearly felt for him.

A thought of pushing and using this unexpected revelation to his advantage flashed in Hannibal’s mind, but he grimaced and chased it away.

He didn’t need anything that wasn’t freely given, not from Will. If would only kill whatever was left of them.

Brooding, Hannibal went to cook dinner, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

More and more, he hated what he cooked. Another passion from the past life, ruined. Another thing that became meaningless without Will.

***

At night, Hannibal stared at the empty pages of his book in front of him, wondering if he should write, fighting with contrasting feelings of eagerness and embarrassment.

He liked writing. He liked pouring thoughts and emotions that had been plaguing him for so long somewhere, but knowing that Will would hear this… it changed things. It changed the way Hannibal perceived his own experiences.

He didn’t know whether Will already knew the truth, or suspected it, or still thought it was fiction, and this lack of insight affected the way he was writing. It affected the goal of his writing.

Was he hoping to evoke sympathy within Will? Compassion? Did he seek understanding?

Maybe it was neither. Maybe it was everything at once. He didn’t know. And because of this, he had no idea whether continuing writing was worth it.

***
The morning greeted him with Will laying the table, serving breakfast, and smiling at him, and for a second, Hannibal actually thought that he wasn’t awake yet. The scene was too domestic, too resembling the dreams he started having. Blissful, wistful dreams.

“Good morning!” Will uttered cheerfully. “I have everything prepared already. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” Hannibal replied automatically, still looking at him. “Is it a special occasion?”

“No,” shrugging, Will took his seat. “I just felt like making breakfast. Are you going to work today?”

“Yes, but not for long. I have only two sessions,” Hannibal poked at the omelet in front of him, highly dubious about its quality, but not risking saying anything. Such rare moments as this deserved to be cherished. “Why? Is it casual interest or do you have any plans?”

“No today,” Will smiled at him again, but even though his smile was brilliant, Hannibal sensed the darkness behind it, and his eyes narrowed. Something wasn’t right.

“Oh?” he remarked, and Will shrugged again.

“I ran into your neighbor yesterday,” he said. “Jeremy something. And I somehow ended up inviting him for dinner on Saturday. Is it okay?”

What?

Slowly, Hannibal put away his fork, trying to understand if he heard what he thought he had. Will invited a stranger into their home? That pathetic alpha who kept staring at him when they first met and ignored Hannibal’s presence?

Since when did Will start enjoying communication with strangers?

“That is not what I expected to hear,” he said finally, as neutrally as he could. It wouldn’t be a wise decision to lose control and say anything he could later regret. “I didn’t think you know him well enough to invite him to dinner.”

“I really don’t,” Will chuckled, as if he was finding the whole situation amusing. “It just slipped out, really. He was talking about your parties in Baltimore — I don’t know where he heard about them, but he seemed excited. He asked me if you were planning on doing something similar here, and whether he could come, and I said ‘yes’ before I could think about it. I don’t know, it just seemed polite to me.”

“Do you expect me to throw a party exclusively for our neighbor?” Hannibal asked incredulously. Could Will truly be this oblivious? Did he even realize what he was asking?

“No a party, obviously, but maybe dinner?”

Speechless, Hannibal stared at him, too stunned to feel anger.

Will seemed serious. Did he truly want this dinner? To share one of the evenings that were supposed to belong to them with a stranger?
“I doubt that Mr. Glashow would appreciate what I usually put on my table,” Hannibal replied, his tone chilly, but Will didn’t appear to be concerned.

“I don’t care what you’ll cook,” he said. “This guy asked for an invitation himself. I didn’t react quickly enough to refuse, and taking the invitation back now would be rude. Wouldn’t it?” Will threw a long glance at him, in a manner that was entirely flirting, and a part of Hannibal’s resolve softened, letting his desire to please his omega replace it instead.

“Is this dinner important to you?” he clarified, and Will’s face saddened.

“I’ve been thinking a lot recently,” he said quietly. “About many things. About us. I’ve been trying to distract myself, and that conversation with Jeremy… it wasn’t anything important, but somehow, it made me reevaluate things. See them differently. So yes. This dinner is important to me. Not for any particular reason, but I feel like things are about to change, and that Jeremy might help in this. Sometimes, the opinion of a third side who knows nothing can be surprisingly helpful.”

Hannibal didn’t want to hope. He didn’t dare. But Will’s words, coupled with his yesterday’s display of jealousy, with his periodical demonstrations of friendliness… with his approaching heat…

Could it mean what he thought it did? Was it possible? He had given up on hoping, but maybe he had been too hasty?

It was difficult to imagine how someone as insignificant as Jeremy Glashow could affect Will’s decision in any way, but if he did… and if Will was actually asking him for something…

“Please,” Will added softly, not taking his eyes off him, and Hannibal nodded, swallowing his protests.

Entertaining Glashow in their house for one evening was nothing in comparison to what he could gain as the result.

For that, he was ready to do much, much more.

Anything in the world.

***

Franklyn was bursting with self-importance, telling the story of how he had witnessed a robbery and had to share the details with the police. Hannibal tried to listen to him — he truly did, but Will seemed to have made him into a terrible psychiatrist. His thoughts kept wandering, going to Saturday dinner, to Will’s words, to their implication, and even when he tried, he could not focus on his patients. Especially the dull ones.

He still wasn’t entirely sure what to think of Will’s idea. Dinner with Glashow? Not that Hannibal had anything against him in particular, except for that short moment when Glashow allowed himself to eye Will in obvious admiration and lust, but still, something about this whole thing
triggered his sense of upcoming troubles.

Or maybe he was just being pessimistic. Will outright implied that he was considering giving them one more chance. If it was true, even by a small degree, then Hannibal had to make sure that the dinner was flawless, in all regards.

He managed to get rid of Franklyn without having to engage in detailed conversation with him. His next patient was less annoying, and while time passed more quickly, concentrating was still difficult.

Perhaps he needed to think about changing his fields — again. His patients were bound to notice he stopped paying attention to them sooner or later, even the most self-absorbed of them.

Sighing, Hannibal left his office and got into his car, wondering what dishes he should plan for Glashow, and what meat he should use. With how rarely he hunted these days, serving his special kind of pigs seemed wasteful. He would probably need to go to the market and pick something there.

With this issue resolved, Hannibal turned left, and frowned when he saw that one of the cars followed him. He hadn’t paid attention to it at first, but now that he started looking, he recognized a familiar shape.

Jack Crawford. Apparently, no one was willing to give him people at this point, so he decided to keep watch by himself.

Snorting, Hannibal increased his speed, and Jack’s car started to move faster as well.

For several minutes, Hannibal enjoyed the chase, wondering if it was supposed to lead to anything, but as more time passed, it stopped seeming likely. Jack was simply following him, without trying to catch up with him, without any visible goal. Perhaps he hoped that he would remain unnoticed and that Hannibal would attempt to kill someone — and be caught in the act.

Fool.

His lips curled in a derisive grimace, and Hannibal made a spontaneous decision.

He wouldn’t hurry. He would drive all over the city and see how long it would take Jack to figure out that his cover had been blown.

Today was going to be quite an amusing day.

***

When Jack realized that he was being driven through the most ridiculous places, it seemed like his car itself screeched in indignation. He turned it abruptly and sped away, and Hannibal was left smiling, genuinely amused, but also annoyed.

Jack was starting to become a problem. With his obsessive tendency to watch him at all times, he
could succeed one day. One day, Hannibal could be too distracted, too angry… like during his last kill. And then, he could give Jack all the reasons to arrest him.

Jack needed to be eliminated. Hannibal would have done it now, but the thought of Will was holding him back.

Will. It always came back to Will.

What would Will think of his decision? He didn’t seem particularly attached to Jack, but wanting to avoid him was one thing, and wishing him dead was quite another.

Maybe he would be able to tread softly and test the ground before taking any actions.

Satisfied with his decision, Hannibal finally stopped at the market.

Will wanted Saturday dinner.

He would give him one.

***

Saturday started in a very pleasant way. To Hannibal’s surprise, Will still seemed to be in that weird, friendly mood of his. He made breakfast again, and when he learned that Hannibal had no patients this day, his face brightened.

“We can start cooking together, then, right? For the evening,” he said, and Hannibal shrugged.

“As you wish,” he said casually, but his heart jumped in excitement.

Cooking with Will. Again. It was too good to be true.

And yet, Will didn’t change his mind. In an hour, they were both standing in the kitchen, the ingredients laid out in front of them, Will watching them curiously.

“So, what do you have planned?” he wondered.

“We’ll begin with osso buco, foie gras au torchon, and sage plum berry sauce,” Hannibal determined. “Dredge those veal pieces with flour and then sprinkle them with salt and pepper. I’ll heat the olive oil.”

Will hummed, moving to do what he was told, and involuntarily, Hannibal stared admiringly at his movements, smooth and flawless. Will didn’t have a natural talent for cooking, but he had the ability to follow the instructions perfectly, and there was always something so lively about him in those moments that Hannibal couldn’t take his eyes off him, transfixed.

“Is this really veal?” he asked, and Hannibal smiled before he could stop himself.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m not in the mood to share my more valuable supplies with our neighbor.”
Will lowered his head — to hide a mirroring smile, perhaps.

“I have a question for you,” he murmured. “I understand if you don’t want to answer, but I’d still like to know.”

“Yes?” His curiosity piqued, Hannibal made sure that the heat in the oven was medium-high and turned to focus entirely on Will.

“How do you never leave your scent anywhere? At crime scenes, I mean,” Will’s cheeks flushed for some reason, to Hannibal’s deepest fascination. “I had a theory that you were injecting yourself with something to mask your scent, but it doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“It is not,” Hannibal agreed, his lips twitching helplessly. “I would have to wait for quite a while for any drug like that to take effect, and sometimes, I do not have this luxury. So I always have my scentless suit with me.”


“I made it myself,” delighted with an opportunity to share something he could never tell anyone before, Hannibal turned back to the counter and began to chop carrots. “It subdues the scent completely. It covers my neck, so the scent gland is also covered and I can avoid putting something on my head.”

Will chuckled, and then immediately pressed his hand to his lips, as if ashamed of his display of amusement.

“So in love with your hair that you can’t bear the thought of covering it?” he asked dryly.

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Hannibal asked, offended, and Will’s smile widened, grew into a grin.

“Absolutely nothing,” he said softly, and once again, Hannibal’s heart skipped a beat.

For several minutes, they worked in silence. Will focused on adding onions, celery, and carrots that Hannibal had sliced to the oven, while Hannibal went to fetch the wine. When he came back, Will glanced at him, more curiosity in his eyes.

“Have you ever regretted killing anyone?” he asked. “Has there been a victim that brought you more problems than pleasure? Someone who you believed could reveal your identity?”

There was no malice in these words, so Will probably didn’t mean to imply anything.

How oblivious could he be? It was as if he was indeed doubting his place in Hannibal’s life, to the point where he never even took himself in equation when considering his motivations.

How could he ask that?

“Yes, there has been,” Hannibal replied shortly. Will continued to stare at him, so with a sigh, he added, “Your father.”

Will’s eyes flew wide open and he blanched, taking a small step back.

“I didn’t ask about him,” he said hoarsely, his voice wounded, like he regarded Hannibal’s answer as unexpected personal attack.

“He is the only person who I have any kind of regrets over. I told you before that I did not regret
choosing to kill him — and I don’t, but with all repercussions and consequences… yes, I have regrets. Numerous regrets. And I have never been as close to prison as I started to be after meeting you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Will hissed at him. The scent emanating from him became bitterer, almost spicy with anger, and Hannibal breathed it in deeply before he could stop himself. Will caught it, and his eyes widened further.

“Stop it!” he exclaimed. “Does your arrogance have any limits? Why do you always ruin everything! I didn’t want to talk about my father, or about us — why did you have to bring it up? And don’t smell me like that, it’s creepy!”

“It’s natural,” Hannibal corrected him. Despite Will’s palpable anger, it was different — softer somehow, vulnerable, so instead of backtracking, he stepped closer to him, tilting his head. “I always found your smell irresistible,” he murmured. “You complained to me once that other people don’t react well to it, and that you yourself have no idea what kind of scent you carry. I do. I identified it shortly after we’ve met. Carnivorous plants. Dangerous, deadly, yet so deceptively sweet when they want to be. It fits you well.”

“What?” Will stared at him, dumbstruck. “That is… crazy. I don’t smell like carnivorous plants.”

“You do,” Hannibal made another careful step forward. “It is an interesting combination of smells. It says a lot about you, maybe even those things that you would prefer to ignore.”

Something flickered in Will’s eyes — darkness? Realization? Then he turned to leave, and Hannibal blurted out, “Would you have accepted me if it was not for your father? If you learned who I was, but with no personal history connecting us. Would you have stayed with me?”

Will slowly turned back to him, and Hannibal bit his lip, out of the uncharacteristic surge of uncertainty.

He didn’t know why he asked that. He was upset with himself — he had pushed too hard again, chased Will away in less than an hour, and he definitely did not want him to leave. But asking this? Was he even prepared to hear an answer?

‘No,’ he thought, just when Will said, “Yes.”

Shock was a powerful feeling. It rendered Hannibal speechless, paralyzing his tongue and all efforts to speak. Perhaps something was written on his face because Will smiled at him, and his smile was twisted.

“The problem was never in who you are, but in what you did,” he uttered. “I can’t say for sure how I would have reacted to the truth if my father wasn’t involved and if you hadn’t lied to me. Maybe I would have asked you to stop. Maybe I wouldn’t. I don’t know, but I would have stayed with you. No matter what.”

This time, the desperate yearning hit him so hard that Hannibal almost staggered under the force of it. The desire to reverse time and have a life with Will, whatever version of it, was unbearable, and he had to call for all control he had left to refrain from doing or saying something entirely humiliating.

“If you asked me to stop now, I would,” was all he said, but just as he feared, Will’s expression only became colder.

“It hardly matters, doesn’t it?” he snapped. “Whatever you say, I could never trust you. And I told
you before, there are things that cannot be forgiven. You pretending to feel something for me and killing someone I loved are two of such things."

Hannibal didn’t try again, and watched silently as Will disappeared. Then he looked at the table joylessly, at what he and Will had managed to prepare, and sighed.

Cooking had become a chore. He had no desire to spend hours in the kitchen, especially for someone like Glashow.

He had made a promise to Will, though, and technically, he didn’t really need his help.

Rubbing his eyes tiredly, Hannibal picked up the knife, and stared at the meat.

Time to heat it up.

***

Glashow arrived with a bottle of mediocre wine and a smile so fake that Hannibal considered closing the door in his face. He was stopped by Will only, who hastened to join them and greeted Glashow like some old, dear friend.

“Thank you!” he exclaimed, accepting the wine and hugging it to his chest, as if it was the best gift he had ever gotten.

His hackles rose, and Hannibal closed the door slowly, watching Will with narrowed eyes.

Omegas reacting to gifts was an important phenomenon, almost a ritual. And Will’s excitement at the sight of some cheap wine… Hannibal didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all.

Wordlessly, he watched how Will ushered Glashow inside, first showing him where to wash his hands, then leading him to the table. As if he was the host. As if he was am omega demonstrating his worthiness to the potential alpha.

Hannibal’s upper lip curled in a snarl before he could stop himself, and he quickly tried to school his expression.

What a wonderful start of the evening.

Hannibal went to the kitchen to take the plates with foie gras, and when he returned, he stopped, seeing that Will leaned unacceptably close to Glashow and was murmuring something to him.

“Oh, what is it? Did you cook it by yourself? Looks delicious!” Glashow exclaimed as he noticed Hannibal with the plates. He sounded awed, and Hannibal allowed it to soothe the dark rage that was slowly starting to simmer inside.

“Foie gras au torchon, with sage plum berry sauce,” he informed curtly, putting the plates on the table. “And yes, I did cook it myself, although Will helped.”
“Yes, with this dish in particular, so I hope you’ll like it,” Will purred. Hannibal stared at him, stunned at the lie, but Will didn’t even look in his direction, so he was also forced to sit down silently.

When Will told him that this person was making him question everything, Hannibal took it as implication that they both still had a chance. Now, though, he wasn’t so sure.

As if sensing his thoughts, Will finally looked up at him and smiled – genuinely, almost tenderly, and all doubts faded, replaced by a familiar, relentless hope.

Maybe this evening was a test that Will wanted him to pass. The goal of it was unclear, but Hannibal didn’t need to understand it to still comply with Will’s wishes. A part of him was curious as to where it would lead.

“You are a lawyer, aren’t you, Mr. Glashow?” Hannibal asked, and Glashow nodded eagerly.

“Yeah, and please, call me Jeremy. I always thought that it’s a good thing to know the neighbors, so it’s a real pleasure to be invited to your home.”

Giving him a thin smile, Hannibal looked down at his own plate. He had cooked everything and he agreed to sit at the table. It didn’t mean that he also had to keep the conversation going. After all, Glashow was Will’s guest.

Taking a cue, Will turned to Glashow.

“You mentioned that complicated case with someone’s will, one that you were worried about,” he said. “I forgot to ask – how did it end?”

“We resolved everything in my client’s favor,” Glashow replied, gesticulating with his fork — the wrong one, wildly. “Not without the fight, mind you, but my colleagues and I, we know our work, we know what we’re doing. So yeah, in the end, my client got everything she hoped to get.”

Hannibal glanced at the clock furtively.

Ten minutes had passed.

At least 110 more to live through.

***

Hannibal was bored. At times, when Will leaned too close to Glashow, tension began to rise in him, but every time he sensed it, Will sent him a comforting smile, so tension subsided, and boredom returned.

Glashow was a bland individual. He wasn’t rude, but he was the most typical of the most typical people, and Hannibal couldn’t help but find him annoying because of it.

Fortunately, the dinner was reaching its ending. They were on the dessert already, and even Will
seemed to have gone strangely silent — probably tired of playing an attentive host.

“Everything is really delicious,” Glashow commented. “I would ask for a recipe, but I don’t think I could ever cook something like this. No skills in the cooking area, I’m afraid.”

Neither Will nor Hannibal said anything, and Glashow looked at them questioningly. When nothing happened, he shifted in his chair self-consciously.

“Well, I’d better go now,” he said. “It’s getting late and I wouldn’t want to outstay my welcome.”

At this, Will finally came to life again.

“Please, stay for a while longer,” he uttered, his eyes glistening in a way that Hannibal found ominous for some reason. “There is something I need to say.”

“Of course,” Glashow agreed readily, and Will poured himself a glass of wine before leaning against his chair, a strange, small smile playing on his lips.

“Hannibal and I had been together for some time,” he said finally, his eyes on Hannibal. “It was a happy time, but unfortunately, due to a certain issue, we broke up.”

“I’m… I’m sorry to hear that,” Glashow stammered, but Will didn’t even look at him, and Hannibal followed his example.

Something was happening, and right now, he couldn’t say whether it was good or bad. He still had no idea where Will was going with this, but he was intrigued. Beyond intrigued.

“One of the major problems was the imprinting,” Will continued, still smiling eerily. “Hannibal has imprinted on me, but I did not imprint back on him. Neither when we first met, nor later, after we started living together. It just didn’t happen. But then we moved here, and everything changed.”

Hannibal stilled, and then a kernel of hope that kept living in him suddenly blossomed, bloomed, filling his chest, pushing his heart against his ribcage, promising a new beginning. This hope was so sharp that he could smell it, the alluring, undeniable promise it held.

Was this what Will was implying? Was this what explained his upcoming heat? Had he imprinted on him at some point, hence his display of jealousy, his earlier protectiveness?

Hannibal had stopped thinking about imprinting since a long time ago. He still wished for it, longed for it, but having a future with Will — any kind of it, was much more important.

And now this? The imprinting finally happening, after all this time?

He was afraid to believe it. He was afraid to misinterpret it, but what else could Will mean?

And why was such an intimate, important moment being shared with Glashow?

Will watched him unblinkingly, as if absorbing everything he was seeing on his face. Hannibal licked his lips, nervous, hopeful, his stomach seized in painful anticipation, and then Will opened his mouth, and he leaned closer, desperate to catch every syllable.

“I finally experienced the imprinting,” Will said slowly, solemnly. “And I understand now what a beautiful, wonderful feeling it is. Thanks to you, Jeremy. Because I have imprinted on you.”

For a moment, all Hannibal felt was confusion. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t. Will, probably sensing it, repeated, “I have imprinted on you, Jeremy,” and all the hope that Hannibal had been
bursting with just a second ago shrank away at these words. The cold dread hit him at his very core, paralyzing him, leaving him temporarily incapacitated, unable to comprehend what had just occurred.

Will, his Will, had imprinted on Glashow? On this unworthy, incapable, lesser alpha?

All his walks outside. All the times Will had smelled like Glashow, all his dubious explanations.

His upcoming heat. All because of Glashow.

The impact of this realization gutted him. It knocked every wisp of air from his lungs, and Hannibal struggled to inhale, exhale, do anything.

Will. And Glashow.

The visceral pain and the agony it brought blinded him, left him choking… and then he stiffened. His muscles went rigid, his back straightened, and the agony was replaced by grim determination. The human part of him curled up somewhere inside his mind, too wounded and broken to react, and animal instincts resurfaced instead.

With a violent snarl, Hannibal leaped from his chair and jumped on Glashow, sending him to the floor. Before he could move, Hannibal loomed over him and bit into his throat, tearing a small chunk out of it. He did not intend to kill, not yet — he was seeking submission, and Glashow’s panicked, gurgled moan was music to his ears.

Twitching in pain, Glashow attempted to bare his injured throat further to him, to prove that he did not pose a threat, and Hannibal’s lips stretched in a wide, bloody grin.

Pathetic. Weak. Unworthy. Will was his, and no deficient creature would take him from him.

Will would see it for himself. He would see that Glashow did not deserve him.

Turning quickly, Hannibal made sure that Will was still sitting in his chair, watching them with a glass of wine in his hands, and the urge to impress, to prove his own worthiness, became overwhelming.

Focusing back on Glashow, Hannibal grabbed him by his bleeding neck and dragged him upward. The pained whimper lit his blood on fire, and he roughly pushed the dishes remaining on the table to the floor and threw the thrashing body on it.

Realizing that his submission wasn’t going to guarantee his survival, Glashow kicked him hard, and Hannibal chuckled in dark amusement.

His prey decided to fight. In other times, it could prove to be interesting, but not now. Glashow was too unworthy of an opponent, and Will needed to see it — he had to see it.

Hannibal climbed onto the table to gain better access, pinned Glashow’s hands above his head, ignoring his increasingly desperate struggles, picked a knife that was still lying near the remaining plates with one hand, and then drove it right into Glashow’s chest, piercing his boring suit and his flesh.

Glashow’s legs jerked, his lips parted silently. Hannibal twisted the knife, pressing against it, cutting to the heart, and this time, Glashow let out a choked, hoarse scream. His body twitched, jerked, then became motionless. His horrified eyes turned glassy, and Hannibal growled in satisfaction.
The knife he’d picked wasn’t the most appropriate for this task, but soon, he carved enough flesh to reveal the still-warm organ, and he clenched it in his hand, pulling it from Glashow’s chest sharply.

A gift. A gift for Will. Maybe he had thought that Glashow was a good alpha, a better alpha, but now he had to see how wrong he was. It was Hannibal who could provide best for him, it was Hannibal who could defend him if needed. What could a worm like Glashow even do? He couldn’t protect his own life — he didn’t deserve an omega, and especially not Will. No one deserved Will, not even Hannibal himself, but he could try. He could become a worthier alpha, and Will had to see it now.

Hannibal jumped back to the floor, still holding Glashow’s heart, stepped to Will, and fell to his knees in front of him, dropping his head in submission and extending his hands with his offering.

There was silence — a long, unbearable silence. Will didn’t move, and Hannibal didn’t dare to move either, wary of even breathing. He waited, and waited, and waited, and blinked when Will said in a strange, detached voice, “You love me.”

Bewildered, Hannibal looked up, unsure if it was a question or a statement.

“I do,” he said, or rather growled, confused as to why Will demanded to know what was obvious. Will nodded, looking thoughtful, and then he took the heart from him, and Hannibal’s own heart soared.

His gift was accepted. Will accepted it. Will was his. Even if he had imprinted on Glashow, it didn’t matter — Glashow was dead, Will was holding his heart, and Hannibal, as an alpha who killed him, was the only worthy choice now. Will had to choose him, even his scent screamed of it — it got hot, intense, stirring lust inside him that Hannibal wasn’t sure he could control for long.

“There is something else you should know,” Will said, just as distantly, glancing at the heart and then looking into Hannibal’s eyes again. “Do you remember the night when you killed my father?”

Frowning, Hannibal tried to concentrate, to summon his human side that held the necessary memories, but Will’s scent was only heating his blood, making him unable to think.

He tried to rub his head against Will’s knees, but Will stopped him, holding him away.

“The night when you came into my home,” he uttered, “when you started to kill my father, I walked into the room. I saw you. And I imprinted on you. So your plan was futile from the start — it has always been futile. Because I had imprinted on you much earlier than you did on me. I lived with this imprinting for years, feeling the pull to the Ripper and never understanding what it meant. Not until the night of my heat, until your words. I understood everything then, but you didn’t. You continued to wait, not realizing that what you sought has already happened. I was always yours, even when you did not want it. I continued to be yours even when I stopped wanting it myself. What an irony,” Will smiled, but his smile was brittle, shaky, sad.

A part of Hannibal understood what had been said. Another part remained confused. But then the full implications hit him, and he growled, jumping to his feet, tearing Glashow’s heart from Will’s hands and throwing it away. Will’s eyes widened, and Hannibal grabbed him by his hair, twisting his head and forcing him to bare his neck.

Then his teeth closed around the skin there, in an irreversible, mating bite.
The next chapter will open with Will's POV of the dinner and go on to show what happened next. The update is most likely to come in 2 weeks.)
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your wonderful, intense support! I'm happy to say that things got much better in RL (after they got worse again), so I was glad to go back to writing.

So, we have a heat-high, dazed Will here... and some very important decisions are going to be made soon :)

From the moment Jeremy stepped into their house… from the moment Will saw a flash of violent hostility in Hannibal’s eyes… something started to happen to him. His blood was getting hotter, a strange, twirling sensation in his stomach made him cross his legs in attempt to stop himself from following the mindless impulse to rub against the table. His limbs felt heavy, and he could hardly keep his eyes open because of irrational desire to savor this anticipation, to bask in its glow until it was distinguished.

Hannibal introduced the dish. Jeremy said something. Will forced himself to push some words out, but he didn’t really understand what they were. Anticipation kept growing, tickling his every nerve ending, and shivers kept shaking his body to the point where he became worried that it would be too obvious.

Food didn’t appeal to him, even though a part of him was pleased that Jeremy appreciated what Hannibal had cooked for them. He waited, and waited, and waited, and when Jeremy murmured about having to leave, Will nearly jumped in his chair in dark excitement. Everything within him was trembling when he poured himself a glass of wine and murmured, “Hannibal has imprinted on me, but I did not imprint back on him. Neither when we first met, nor later, after we started living together. It just didn’t happen. But then we moved here, and everything changed.”

Jeremy’s reaction didn’t interest him, so he didn’t even look in his direction. His gaze was glued to Hannibal — Hannibal, who stared at him with incredulous, vulnerable hope. Hope that Will was going to take pleasure in crushing.

He deliberated, stretching the moment further, while his heart kept hammering faster and faster. His breathing grew erratic, and strange, glowing spots started to cloud his vision when he said, “I have imprinted on you, Jeremy.”

The spots exploded when a snarl twisted Hannibal’s lips. Because he was watching him, Will saw the exact moment when human intelligence left him, replaced by animalistic, lethal rage.

Hannibal jumped on Jeremy, throwing him to the floor, going for his neck, and Will let out a trembling sigh, torn between two opposite parts of himself. His omega part was exhilarated, breathless and proud at how swiftly and efficiently Hannibal was dealing with his rival, overjoyed at the knowledge that he was the reason for the fight between two alphas.

His human part was morbidly fascinated, but soon, a pang of regret for Jeremy quickly drowned in bitter melancholy.
This was it. The end. Hannibal knew the truth now — or thought he knew it. He realized that his plan was never going to work, and it meant… it meant that there was no need to pretend any longer. No need for those fake displays of affection. No need for smiles and artificial look of desire, no need for his book and for his attempts to earn his forgiveness. No need for anything.

It was over. Jeremy was going to die first, which was hardly surprising, but then… then Will would join him. He was going to finally meet the real Hannibal, the Chesapeake Ripper — one without masks, without any motivation to lie and pretend.

The very thought of it filled Will with cold, but it also produced a sense of calmness that he had been hoping for, that he had craved all this time.

No masks. The real version of Hannibal. And then — death. The escape. Now that he had lost all value, Hannibal wasn’t going to keep wasting time on him. If he was who Will thought he was, he would kill him with his own hands, finally ending this maddening farce; finishing his long-term, unsuccessful scheme and moving on to the next one.

Luckily, Will wouldn’t be here to witness it.

Probably. Because Hannibal didn’t seem to be in a hurry.

When he looked at Will, his eyes crazed, his lips red with Jeremy’s blood, the heat in Will’s stomach intensified. He watched how Hannibal threw Jeremy onto the table and grabbed his hands in a deadly grip, reaching for the knife with his other hand.

The heat thickened, twisting his insides, and Will’s lips parted when the knife split Jeremy’s chest, when Hannibal’s growl filled the room.

It meant… what did it mean? The way Hannibal had looked at him… as if to make sure that he was watching, to present himself in all his violent glory, to show that he was a better alpha, a worthier partner.

Why would he do that?

You know why, the voice whispered, and Will shook his head, refusing to listen to it.

No. Hannibal never loved him. His feelings were never real — he used him out of sick amusement, wanting to coax the imprinting from him and then to break him, just like he had broken his father, only in a different way.

Jeremy’s scream died down, and Will shuddered when Hannibal’s hands disappeared inside his chest. A moan almost escaped his lips, and he managed to hold it back only at the last moment.

For him. It was for him. Hannibal had killed the alpha he saw as competition for Will’s affection, and now he was doing something — cutting out his heart?

Seeing the heart in Hannibal’s hand, a triumphant look on his face would have made his legs buckle if he hadn’t been already sitting. Will licked his lips, shivering, his blood singing, starting echoing through his ears when Hannibal approached him.

If he was right, Hannibal had to kill him. He had to kill him, not do this. Not bring him a courting gift, a declaration of the strength of his feelings, of his devotion. If he was right…

Could it be that he wasn’t? Could it be that every look, every smile, every gesture was real? Because there was nothing holding Hannibal back at this point — his plan was ruined. He had no
reason to pretend. None.

Will’s breath caught when Hannibal kneeled before him, offering him Jeremy’s heart — a picture of submissiveness, so uncharacteristic of alphas, possible only when strong, powerful, undeniable feelings were involved.

The stubborn part of Will, one that was rapidly shrinking in size, hissed ‘no’, but he couldn’t hold onto it any longer. By planning this, he planned his own death, almost sure that the evening was going to end with it, but Hannibal’s behavior was screaming of something else entirely. It was impossible to deny it.

By kneeling, Hannibal was pledging his devotion to him. Even now, even knowing that Will had imprinted on someone else, he was still making his offering.

It could only mean one thing.

“You love me,” Will said, and didn’t recognize his own voice.

Hannibal blinked, as if taken aback.

“I do,” he said, so genuinely and openly. His alpha part was still in control of him, and no one, not even Hannibal could lie in this state.

Will didn’t know where his glass of wine had disappeared to. Slowly, he accepted the heart, noting how Hannibal drank in this sight greedily, how his eyes lit up in hope and pleasure.

Well. There was only one test left.

Will licked his lips again, feeling hot and cold simultaneously, his mind still clouded by emotions that he didn’t even hope to decipher right now. The heart felt warm and alive in his hands, and he fought the impulse to squeeze it, to see if there would be blood.

“There is something else you should know,” he murmured.

“I was always yours, even when you did not want it,” he said.

“I continued to be yours even when I stopped wanting it myself,” he concluded, and added, “What an irony.”

Excitement and anxiety mixed, boiling on the very surface. Will leaned forward, trembling with the need to see and hear everything, to get the final proof, be that a kiss or a fatal blow.

When Hannibal jumped, tore the heart from his hands, and grabbed him by his hair, Will’s omega got ready to wail in distress, terrified that a human part of Will had been right and that Hannibal didn’t want him now that he’d gotten him. Maybe pretending to be imprinted on Jeremy wasn’t enough, maybe only admitting the truth was the final nail…

When Hannibal twisted his head backward, Will tensed, and then sharp teeth pierced his neck — but not to kill.

To mate.

Will’s eyes flew wide open, and then the moan he had been holding broke free. His back arched and he shuddered, and the heat that was growing, that had been growing this whole evening, finally pushed the human part of him to the background. The sound he let out was absolutely omegan — a
wanton, pleased purr, a whine of someone who had been finally claimed. All reason left him when he threw himself at Hannibal, covering his lips, burying his hands in his hair, moaning again when Hannibal clenched his waist in a hard, steely grip, answering his kiss with a hunger that shook him. Hannibal was kissing him like a man possessed, like he was starving, and Will lost himself in those sensations. The fire that kept licking his body suddenly intensified, and then a flood of feelings broke into his mind — feelings that did not belong to him.


They kissed again, almost desperately this time, and when Hannibal tugged at his clothes with a growl, Will purred again, baring his neck willingly and squinting in bliss when Hannibal’s lips pressed against it, followed by his tongue and teeth. Every touch sent electric current through him, made him ache for more — made him demand more in return.

Will growled in warning when Hannibal continued to lick his neck, ignoring his other parts, and Hannibal made a soothing sound, pulling away and staring at him unblinkingly. The wave of adoration directed at him made Will stagger, and Hannibal caught him immediately, hovering over him protectively. He looked so stunning like this — worried, fierce, his, and Will reached out to touch his face lovingly, unable to look away.

This time, it was Hannibal who purred, catching his fingers and kissing them. Then he captured his lips in a tender kiss, one that quickly turned into something much more wilder. For a while, they stood like this, molded together, kissing ardently, but as the air in Will’s lungs began to evaporate, he realized that it wasn’t enough.

To provoke Hannibal into action, he pushed him away abruptly, with strength that he couldn’t hope to enjoy as a human, and before Hannibal could react, he broke into a run. A threatening snarl behind his back heated his blood even more, with adrenaline and excitement making him run faster. Without turning, Will felt Hannibal getting close, and he dived to the left the second he felt Hannibal getting ready to attack him.

A loud crash and frustrated growl made him laugh, and Will stormed back into the dining room, taking a place behind the table. Hannibal appeared a second later, measuring him with a calculating, heated gaze. Suddenly, he jerked to the right, but Will danced away in the same side, sensing that the movement was misleading.

A wide grin split Hannibal’s lips in response, and he lowered his head, as if in acknowledgement. Then he jumped forward, and this time, he moved with sheer, unnatural speed. Will managed to get to the door before he was caught and thrown back, to the table where the corpse was lying. He wrinkled his nose, not sure how to feel about it, but he didn’t have time to think as Hannibal pressed him face forward to the table, rough and determined. Will pretended to be outraged, but only for a moment. As soon as Hannibal’s hand stroked his spine, he arched and moaned, his body twitching in frustrated need to be possessed.

A sharp bite on his shoulder made him jump, but Hannibal pressed him back down, snarling. There was a short pause, and then he pushed into Will’s body, filling it in one, hard stroke. Will keened, both in pain and in pleasure, but still pushing back in the hope to feel Hannibal better.

The pace Hannibal set was punishingly hard. He was ruthlessly imposing his size and strength with every push, until Will cried out, his mind split, losing himself in sensations. Shivering with pleasure, he opened his eyes briefly, and stared into the unseeing eyes of Jeremy.

For some reason, the sight of it filled his chest with dark satisfaction and pride. This was his gift,
his proof of Hannibal’s feelings. The culmination of everything. The beginning.

Hannibal held him down tightly, gripping his shoulders with one hand and pressing his face into the wooden surface with another. Will sighed, and screamed, and gasped, his wails turning into purrs and then changing into whimpers. Red haze in his head had gotten so thick that after a while, he stopped seeing entirely, his entire being focused only on the pleasure it was receiving. When he came, it was in shivering spurts and with a choked half-sob, and Hannibal followed him immediately. But it wasn’t enough — there was something else Will needed, even though he couldn’t say what. Instead, he let out a needy sound, and in the next second, teeth closed over his neck again, and a knot swelled inside him, filling and stretching him to the fullest.

He welcomed it, though he had never felt anything like this before. His body shuddered, trying to cope with sensation, but when Will shifted, restless, Hannibal bit him again, more painfully this time, making him groan.

The pain was there, but underneath it, among it, and above it, there was mindless happiness and a feeling of unity. He was mated — finally, to the person he loved desperately. Nothing would bring them apart now, they would stay together, they would be a family…

Slowly, the haze began to fade, along with a swelling of Hannibal’s knot. The waves of pleasure receded, bringing the uncomfortable and very real sensations of his cheek hurting from being scratched against the table, of his body buzzing from the awkward position it had been forced into… and of his neck screaming in pain, forever marred by a mating bite.

“Will,” Hannibal said somewhere above him, hoarsely, and Will’s eyes widened. Shocked, he tried to stand, and Hannibal tightened his grip on him instinctively before letting him go.

Will stood, wincing from pain, and stared into the equally lost eyes of his… mate.

“How…” he began, but stopped. What was he going to ask? How could Hannibal do it? It’s not like he had been in control of himself, and after all, Will was the one to provoke him. Literally.

He just didn’t think it would lead to this.

Mated, instead of killed.

What was he supposed to do now?

Like in trance, he picked up his ruined clothes and put them on. Hannibal kept staring at him, as if unable to look away — and not even at him, but at the bite on his neck.

Embarrassed and confused, Will looked around, glanced at Jeremy’s body and frowned.

Surely he had to feel something? Regardless of his personal feelings, Jeremy was a good man. An innocent man. He didn’t deserve to be dragged into this mess.

But it didn’t change the fact that Will felt nothing.

“Clean it all up,” he murmured, holding his neck — to hide the mark from Hannibal’s intense stare and to feel its swollen surface.

Hannibal didn’t reply, so Will turned and moved upstairs, determined not to look back.

In his room, he closed the door and looked around, seeking shadows, but finding none.
The shadows were gone. And the wall in his mind had been broken — now, he could sense Hannibal’s emotions without even trying. He could feel his confusion, his wonder, his shock and elation.

Hannibal was elated. Overwhelmed. In love.

In love with him.

Gritting his teeth, Will went to the bed, throwing himself on it and looking at the ceiling.

He had suspected that he could be wrong. He had noticed that some of Hannibal’s actions, expressions, words seemed too genuine to be a lie, but he had been mistaken before, so he refused to believe again. To believe, and then be crushed by the truth.

But today… it changed things. It changed everything.

What was he supposed to do with Hannibal who was in love with him? What was he supposed to do in a world where his plan proved to be meaningless, where his feelings were reciprocated?

From the moment he had learned the truth, that terrible night, the only thing he wanted was to die. When the gunshot hadn’t worked, he came up with a more intricate scheme, hoping to drive Hannibal into killing him himself, knowing that if he was right, if everything was a lie, then death would be the only option.

‘I would rather kill you than let you go.’

Hannibal was the one who spoke those words. And considering everything he knew about him, Will had taken them seriously. But Hannibal hadn’t killed him. He killed his rival, but he didn’t hurt him. And when Will confessed the actual imprinting, he hadn’t abandoned him.

Hannibal did love him. Whatever his initial plan was, for whatever reason he had been trying to set him up, it all changed at some point. He could blame Hannibal for anything, but he couldn’t blame him for not loving him. Because it wasn’t true.

Disturbed, Will touched the mating bite, trying to understand what he could do now.

Hannibal killed his father. He couldn’t forgive him for it.

But it wasn’t the main reason for his fury, for the burn of betrayal that had been poisoning him all this time. And now, with the main source of this poison gone…

Shaking his head, Will buried his face in the pillow.

Hannibal was a murderer, but after today, Will couldn’t say he was any better.

And he didn’t care. Right now, he only cared about the feelings of longing and love he could feel coming from Hannibal, and about the sting of a mating mark on his neck.

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The morning was awkward. There was no trace of Jeremy and last night activities, the dining room was shining with cleanliness, and breakfast was already on the table. Hannibal was there, too, devouring him with his gaze, staring at him as if Will was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. There was a new, bright light on his face, and it was making Will uncomfortable, hot and cold at once.

He wondered if he should say something, but he had no words, so he just silently sat on his chair. Hannibal cleared his throat, as if planning to say something as well, but then his eyes fell on Will’s mating bite and stayed there, and he remained silent.

The whole breakfast passed in this strange, tense silence. They didn’t utter a word to each other, and while a brief thought of thanking Hannibal for another delicious meal crossed Will’s mind, he quickly discarded it. He still didn’t know what to feel, not yet, and for all he knew, Hannibal had cooked Jeremy for this breakfast.

His stomach protested against such thought, but his mind stayed strangely silent.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal blurted out, and Will blinked. A sickening warmth enveloped him at the sound of Hannibal’s voice, the echoes of heat becoming clearer again, promising a second wave of it soon.

“How fine,” he said sharply, and Hannibal nodded before lowering his gaze.

Another awkward silence. Then Hannibal murmured, “I walked Winston several hours ago. Also, I have to go to work, but I will be back in several hours.”

“Fine,” Will said again.

And that was it. He waited until Hannibal left, sat motionlessly for a while, still trying to reconcile everything that was happening, and then jumped from his place.

Before Will could stop himself, he changed his clothes, grabbed the keys, some money, and left the house. Hannibal’s car was already gone, so he stopped, wondering for the first time where his own car was, whether it had been found at all.

Then he thought of Jeremy, and an idea occurred to him. Licking his lips, Will quickly moved in the direction of Jeremy’s house, hoping that now that it was getting warmer, at least one of the windows would be open.

His hopes were satisfied. Using his shirt, careful so not to leave any prints, Will opened the widow further and slipped into the house.

He needed Jeremy’s car keys.

It was dangerous, what he was doing. If the car was stopped along the way…

But instead of worry, all Will felt was a dim sense of excitement.

He would get rid of the car, driving it away from the house, to remove even the smallest of evidence that could point to him and Hannibal. With the car found in the city, the police would look there first and foremost. It was for the best — with this terrible, confusing mess, there was no time for distractions. Will had to figure everything out, and any kind of investigation would only be an obstacle.
No one stopped him, so he abandoned the car at some street and then took a cab to Hannibal’s office.

He didn’t know why. He didn’t know what he was hoping to gain by this, whether it was the heat still simmering in his blood or something else, something deeper.

He felt lost, and he saw Hannibal as his only chance to find ground again.

He had to make a decision.

Choosing a half-hidden spot, Will leaned against the tree, staring at the door of Hannibal’s office.

He had no idea how much time had passed. At some point, the door opened and a familiar person walked out of it.

Emily.

Will bristled before he could stop himself, the heat making his animosity to her even more distinguished.

He waited for her to leave, but she didn’t. She kept standing near the entrance, throwing glances at it, holding her small purse as if she was getting ready to open it and to look for something.

This woman was a thorn in his side. Her obsession with Hannibal was always bothering him, but this? This was becoming unacceptable. Was she waiting for him deliberately?

Will’s eyes narrowed when Hannibal came out in a minute and stopped at the sight of Emily. He couldn’t see his face from here, so he tugged at their renewed bond and was satisfied with annoyance he sensed there.

Well. That was something.

All satisfaction evaporated, though, when Emily reached out and touched Hannibal’s face, and the fact that he stepped away did nothing to soothe Will’s rising fury.

Clenching his fists so hard it hurt, he watched how Hannibal said something that made Emily nod and finally go to her car. She drove away under Hannibal’s watchful stare, and only when she disappeared, he hid his hands in his pockets and slowly moved forward.

Not to his car.

Interesting.

The anger was still burning brightly in him, but Will tried to ignore it and followed Hannibal, wondering where he could be going. Soon, he recognized the path, and his heart jumped.

Hannibal was going to the park where they had spent many wonderful moments together. They couldn’t have picnics or anything similarly ‘undignified’, as Hannibal had called it, but they talked about it, planned it, and simply admired the wintery park, in all its beauty. Sometimes they took Winston, and since there were less people here, he had the freedom to run around like a crazed puppy and bark and do what he pleased, without Will having to stop him.

It was a good time. An amazing time. A painful lump rose in Will’s throat whenever he remembered it.

Was this why Hannibal had come here? To remember?
Will watched him, feeling his sadness and fondness, and… hope.

Hope. Hannibal was hoping for something.

For their future?

His turmoil intensified, and Will had to turn away, unable to watch him any longer.

He wasn’t sure he could promise Hannibal a future. He wasn’t sure he could promise anything.

Deep in thoughts, Will caught another cab and went back home.

He didn’t say a word to Hannibal when he returned. The dinner passed in silence, full of furtive glances and awkwardness that Will started to hate. His body lived its own life, demanding Hannibal’s attention more and more intensely, and he knew that his heat was far from over.

How was he supposed to fight this, too? Too many things were happening at the same time, and dealing with them all seemed impossible.

Will couldn’t sleep at night. His body was burning in heat fever, his thoughts in an even deeper turmoil, and every time he closed his eyes, he saw Hannibal, or Emily, with her disgusting, arrogant grin, with her hands that constantly sought to touch what didn’t belong to her… or his father, smiling at him, but that image seemed to be getting bleaker, fading from view whenever he summoned it.

The morning only brought more confusion with it. Will endured another silent breakfast, watched Hannibal leave, and stared at the closed door. Frustration was boiling in him, reaching a dangerous point where it started to need an outlet.

What could he do? What should he do?

Dazed, Will walked to the closest mirror and looked at himself. The ugly scar in the middle of his forehead… and a huge mating bite, still fresh, as if Hannibal had bitten him just a moment before.

Will’s trembling fingers touched the mark, and he shuddered at the toe-curling pleasure that pierced him.

He wanted… he wanted Hannibal to touch it. To touch him.

Was it heat speaking? Or him?

Snarling in anger, Will grabbed the phone and called for a cab.

He needed to follow Hannibal again. It was more of an instinct than a rational desire, but in such state, Will didn’t think he could fight it.

When he stopped at Hannibal’s office, he mostly came to his senses, but the strange anger was still pulsing in his veins, frustrating him even more.

Was this the result of this mating mark? Why couldn’t he think?

His legs pushed him toward the entrance, and Will began to approach it.

Why had he come here? What was he going to discuss with Hannibal — he couldn’t even say anything when they were both at home, so what did he hope to achieve here?
He hesitated, and tensed when an infuriatingly familiar voice drawled behind his back, “Oh, it’s you. What are you doing here?”

Slowly, Will turned, burning Emily with his glare.

What was she doing here? He doubted that Hannibal had two appointments in a row with her. Why did she have to interfere every time, why was she everywhere?

“I believe I am the one who is supposed to be asking this question,” he said coldly. Emily’s eyes immediately went to his forehead, staying there, and Will fought the impulse to try and cover it up.

Pity his mating bite was hidden beneath the scarf.

“I simply wanted to invite Doctor Lecter to a party,” she said finally, a sneer twisting her pretty features, making Will almost tremble with desire to... do something. “Mr. Le Fragnt is throwing one. He expressed his most sincere wish to see Doctor Lecter there, and as he knows I meet with him regularly, he asked me to pass his invitation. He is a very respectable man. But I don’t think that you would know anything about it, would you?”

Will went still, watching her attentively, his instincts at war with each other.

Then he made a decision, and his body relaxed as the omega inside him purred in satisfaction.

“No, I don’t think I heard of him,” he said sweetly, and saw how Emily’s eyes flashed with triumph. “It’s so kind of you to bring this invitation to Hannibal personally, even when you don’t have an appointment. Let me take it, I’ll give it to him.”

Emily pouted, glancing at her purse.

“But…” she began, then sighed. “Fine. You do realize this invitation is for one person only, though? You weren’t invited.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it!” Will exclaimed. “I wouldn’t want to embarrass Hannibal. I really am so clumsy at such events.”

“I’ve noticed,” Emily announced, gleeful satisfaction ringing in her voice. “Here. Make sure to pass it to Doctor Lecter.”

“I will,” Will promised. He waited for Emily to get back to her car, taking his time to remember it, and when she disappeared, he studied the invitation attentively.

Today, six p.m.

And there was an address.

Perfect.

Checking his watch, Will walked into the building, right to Hannibal’s office, entering it without knocking.

The stunned, shocked look on Hannibal’s face was priceless. The annoyed and hurt look of Franklyn who was sitting in the patient’s chair was equally amusing.

“I need your car keys,” Will demanded without greeting. Hannibal’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“I…” he started. Will narrowed his eyes, and Hannibal instantly relented.
“Of course,” he agreed, walking to his coat, taking out his keys, and handing them to Will. His eyes lingered, searching his face. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” Will snapped. “I just need your car. I’ll return it soon.”

Hannibal said nothing else, still watching him with troubled eyes, and Will left the office before Franklyn’s resentment began to stink it.

He felt on fire. Dark, powerful excitement was enveloping him rapidly, gnawing at his patience, and when he started the car, all he could think was the evening.

And what was coming with it.

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Will spent the majority of the day in the city, sitting in Hannibal’s car. He bought himself lunch and a book to make the hours more interesting, but he could hardly focus. Foreign, predatory need was devouring him from inside, and he kept looking at the watch repeatedly, willing the time to go faster. A weak voice of consciousness tried to protest several times, but all he had to do was touch his mating bite, and confidence and excitement returned.

Two more hours to go.

Emily. Someone like Emily would be ‘fashionably late’, and she would bring some meaningless, expensive gift. She wasn’t a thoughtful or considerate person, so most likely, she would purchase something close to the house of the host, at the very last moment. A bottle of wine, or something similarly typical.

He could be wrong, but then again, he rarely made mistakes.

Ten minutes before six, Will stopped in a darkened alley, near the small, obviously expensive liquor and wine store. It was situated almost next to the address specified in invitation, so he left the car and approached the shop, coming to a halt in the shadows.

If he was wrong… well, he would wait for the party to end.

Emily’s car appeared soon after six, and anticipation flared in Will’s chest even more brightly than before. He waited for her to walk into the shop and stepped out from the shadows, watching the entrance intently.

He had no idea what to do with Hannibal and their relationship. He had no idea what to feel about their mating. But he knew that he wanted this. He craved this. He needed this. These confusing, intense feelings he was having had to be dealt with — they needed an outlet, and Emily was the most evident and accessible option, now that Jeremy was gone.

‘Stop’, a part of his mind wailed, but Will ignored it. The door opened, Emily walked out, holding a carefully wrapped package in her hands. Upon seeing Will, her brows furrowed.
“You again,” she murmured in obvious displeasure. “I think I told you that you wouldn’t be welcome? Where is Doctor Lecter?”

“I wouldn’t stay,” Will assured her. “It’s just Hannibal needed help of omega with wrapping his gift. He wanted something special, so he asked me, but I think I… I think I ruined it.”

“Why does it not surprise me,” Emily muttered, looking exasperated. Will shifted guiltily, putting on his most sheepish expression.

“I saw you and I thought, maybe you could help? Hannibal is waiting in the car. He asked me to try again, but I don’t think I will be useful in this.”

“Well, he should have come to me sooner,” Emily announced, adjusting her styled hair proudly. “Of course I will help. It is so hard to find an actual, educated omega these days.”

Will smiled at her, and then led her to the alley where Hannibal’s car was waiting.
When Will finally parked Hannibal’s car near their house, it was already after nine. Satisfaction hummed sleepily within his chest, making his movements lazy and unhurried.

Through the pleasant haze that was still clouding his mind, he wondered if he had the keys, but before he could look for them, the door flew open. Hannibal’s strong hands pulled him inside abruptly, and Will blinked, briefly disoriented.

As soon as Emily realized that there was no Hannibal in the car, she turned to him with an expression of indignant annoyance. Will couldn’t know what she saw on his face, but suddenly, she paled and started to back away, clutching the package with her gift to her chest.

“I believe I should go,” she uttered nervously. “I will help you… some other time.”

“What’s the rush?” Will purred, following her closely. The anger that craved a target had finally found it, and the only thing he felt now was the already familiar dark excitement.

“Where have you been?” Hannibal snarled at him. “I’ve been trying to reach you for hours! Why would you… what happened?” His tone changed suddenly, and Will frowned at the notes of panic he heard there. Before he could react, though, Hannibal pulled him close again, shamelessly smelling his neck. Shuddering, he closed his eyes in relief, and when he opened them, there was only confusion there.

“Will,” Hannibal murmured. “Whose blood is it?”

“Can’t you determine it by smell?” Will asked, genuinely curious. Hannibal felt warm, nice — he felt like home, and Will sighed in delight, snuggling closer to him. A belated thought came that the blood on his clothes would stain Hannibal, but Hannibal himself didn’t seem to mind — on the contrary, he wrapped his hands around Will tightly, still smelling him. Finally, a realization must have dawned on him, because when Hannibal pulled back, his face was so astonished that Will chuckled and mindlessly reached to touch him.

“Emily,” Hannibal said, and wonder in his voice filled Will with wonderful, gleeful lightness.

“Emily,” Will drawled, and whatever she heard in his voice, it shook her enough to make her turn and run.

A new wave of predatory excitement flared in him, making his stomach seize in anticipation. It didn’t take Will even two seconds to catch up with his prey and grab her by the shoulders. Emily shrieked, hitting him. She didn’t do any actual damage, but his scarf slipped away and Emily
gasped, staring at his fresh mating bite.

“I… I’m sorry!” she cried. “I didn’t know he mated you! He never gave any indication that you were his—”

“Oh really?” Will’s lips stretched in a grin. “So you didn’t get a hint when he first brought me to the opera? And all times after that?”

“I don’t… I wouldn’t… Let me go!” Emily wailed, and Will hesitated for a second, listening to himself.

Doubts flickered and disappeared, replaced by a rush of deadly rage. Will thought about his father, about Hannibal, about Hannibal killing him. Then he thought about Emily trying to steal Hannibal from him, and rage intensified, grew into something he couldn’t name.

This time, he moved to kill.

“Emily,” Will agreed, wrapping his hands around Hannibal’s neck and pressing his face into the skin there, breathing in deeply. Now that his rage was gone, he felt content, satisfied in a way he hadn’t felt for ages. His mind was still hazy, so hazy that he closed his eyes, more than happy to fall asleep like this, right on Hannibal’s shoulder.

He heard Hannibal sigh, and then felt a gentle kiss pressed against his temple.

“I knew you were going to do something reckless,” Hannibal said softly. His grip on Will’s waist was strong, but his voice was soothing, so Will let out a purr, allowing a feeling of comfort to envelop him like a blanket. “I have never felt you so strongly before. It must be because of the bond. In any other circumstances, I would cherish this opportunity to get a glimpse into your mind, to understand what is going through your head. But today… Sometimes I wonder if you enjoy being cruel,” Hannibal kissed him again, and Will shivered with pleasure. His mind was swimming, but a small part of him clung to Hannibal’s words, wanting to remember them for later.

“Cruel,” he murmured sleepily. “Yes… I suppose I was cruel today.”

“You were looking at something you didn’t have the right to look at,” Will sang, grabbing Emily’s face. Right now, the only thing he felt was violent anger — at Hannibal for being who he was, at his own father for being so greedy and reckless, at this woman who thought way too much of herself. Will let his fingers find her eyes and press into them, and Emily’s cry satisfied the corners of his soul that he had rarely allowed himself to pay attention to before.

To his chagrin, Emily’s voice lost its strength very quickly — too quickly. Her body collapsed and Will caught her, disappointed and still angry. Snarling, he threw her unconscious form against the wall, watching how she jerked strangely before dropping to the ground from the impact. Her helplessness didn’t satisfy him, but she was still alive, considering her hoarse, erratic breaths, and the alley was still deserted.

Hissing and barely recognizing his own voice, Will stepped toward the body. He couldn’t let himself stretch the moment for long — any moment now, someone could walk in, and then the risk would become too dangerous. But he also couldn’t back away. Not until he was finished.

‘Be careful,’ someone whispered, right into his mind, and Will nodded slowly. Then smiled.

“You don’t enjoy being cruel to others, Will,” Hannibal said, still holding him close, whispering into his hair. “Not that often. Torturing me, though — you seem to love it. Revel in it, even. Is that
Will murmured something unintelligibly in response.

“Admit it,” even without seeing Hannibal’s face, Will could tell he was smiling. “You love being cruel to me. To me in particular.”

“Yes,” Will said mindlessly, and Hannibal laughed shortly before pressing yet another kiss to the top of his head.

“Of course you do,” he murmured affectionately. “Do you know what utter hell you have put me through today? I could feel that something was going on. I could feel that something was wrong — I knew you were about to make a mistake, but at that time, I had no idea what mistake that would be. I thought, for a moment, that you might be trying to—” Hannibal fell silent suddenly and Will snorted, not sure that he liked what he was hearing. He pulled back to ask, but forgot all the words when he saw the look of aching tenderness in Hannibal’s eyes, directed at him.

“I would have never imagined you choosing to kill someone,” Hannibal finished softly. “You have a habit of defying all of my expectations, Will. And for that someone to be Emily… I wonder how that came to be?”

Will narrowed his eyes, dissatisfied with Hannibal mentioning this name, and Hannibal sighed.

“You will regret it,” he said evenly. “When your hormones stabilize and you start thinking rationally again, you will regret killing her. And I suppose I am to blame for this — I had to realize in time that your heat wasn’t over and that you weren’t entirely yourself yet. I let myself be distracted by my own feelings and I let you down. Again. I wonder if you are going to hold that against me, too, eventually.”

Yawning, Will pressed back to Hannibal, seeking his warmth and his calming scent. The images of Emily’s murder still flickered before his eyes, feeding the hungriest bits of him, and he would be glad to spend the night like this, seeing her torn corpse in his mind, being held by his alpha. Emily wasn’t as pretty now, was she?

“We have to clean you up,” Hannibal uttered. Will grumbled in protest, and gasped when Hannibal picked him up, shaking his head in disapproval.

“We most certainly do need to clean you up,” he said. “And then I will have to spend hours on cleaning my own car because judging from your state, you have ruined my salon.”

“Your what?” Will murmured sleepily, and Hannibal hushed him.

“We will talk tomorrow,” he promised. “If you feel ready for it.”

Will wanted to call him boring, but a flash of Emily’s bloodied face crossed his mind, and he relaxed further, smiling, letting the memories take him.

***
When Will woke up, it took him a while to understand where he was. Well, this was his room, but how did he get here?

The memories returned slowly, but steadily. Going cold with dread, Will sat up abruptly and stared at his hands, almost sure that he was going to see blood on them. However, there was nothing, which meant that his and Hannibal’s one-sided conversation had indeed happened yesterday, and that Hannibal had cleaned him and removed all the evidence.

Evidence of murder.

He killed Emily.

Will repeated it several times, trying to understand if it was real. And if it was…

If it was…

His stupor was broken by a loud banging against the front door. Will flinched, hearing it so well, as if someone was knocking on the door of his own bedroom, but when he recognized Jack’s voice, all other thoughts left his head.

He had murdered Emily last night. Brutally. And now Jack was here.

It could only mean one thing.

Almost tripping in his haste, Will jumped from the bed and rushed downstairs, his heart hammering in his chest, faster and faster, accelerating with every sound of raised voices.

When he saw Jack, it took Will one look at him to understand the inevitable fact — Jack knew. There was no denying it. His eyes were narrowed, hostile, and Will took a deep breath before squaring his shoulders and stepping closer.

“Good morning, Jack,” he said evenly. He didn’t look at Hannibal, but he could feel how his body was practically vibrating with tension.

“Where were you yesterday, between six and seven p.m.?” Jack asked. His voice sounded cold and strictly professional.

“He was with me,” Hannibal growled again, and if Jack wasn’t watching him, Will would have kicked him for presuming to speak for him. As if he was some helpless, witless omega who needed to be defended.

Although considering his yesterday’s actions… maybe he did need it. At least for now, while he was stuck in this post-heat, post-mating state where he had lapses during which he couldn’t think
rationally.

How could he be such an idiot? What had he been thinking?

“Will has taken my car to the cleaners,” Hannibal continued, calmly and certainly, and even despite knowing the truth, Will was tempted to believe him. “He has been finding the smell within the interior unpleasant for a while, and now, with his heat, this problem intensified to the point where he decided he couldn’t wait any longer. When I got home, he was already there, and I assure you he didn’t go out after my arrival. The car was delivered late in the evening, as per my personal request, so if it was spotted near the place of murder, it must have been by sheer accident.”

“By accident,” Jack repeated, his voice sounding even colder now. “Would you care to provide me with the name of your car wash company?”

“I’m afraid the name has slipped from my mind,” Hannibal drawled with such fake remorse that Will felt an absurd desire to laugh. “However, I can give you directions. They are situated several streets from my home in Baltimore. I will write down the address for you and you can go and visit them right away.”

“I’ll do that,” Jack replied, watching him with a strange half-smile on his face. “You don’t seem worried or surprised that your patient has been killed.”

“Oh, trust me, I am heartbroken,” Hannibal assured him, his serious tone belied by his feral grin.

“Yes, I can see that,” Jack tilted his head, his attention focused only on Hannibal now, as if Will wasn’t here at all. “I cannot prove much. You must know by now that my surveillance of you has not been approved officially, so everything I witnessed yesterday cannot be used as evidence. But I will not stop. I will ensure justice for the girl your little student has killed,” for a moment, Jack’s eyes flickered back to Will, fell on his neck marked by a mating bite, and widened. Suddenly, all his icy reserve melted, replaced by understanding and relief so profound that Will frowned, having no idea what caused it.

Turning to Hannibal again, Jack spat with hatred that Will found unnerving, “So this is how you decided to protect yourself? Forcing yourself on him and then forcing him to do your dirty job, to make him even more dependent on you? Do you think if you make him kill someone through this bond you formed, you will manage to come out of this mess untouched? Because let me tell you — your days are numbered and getting fewer by the moment. I will not let this go.”

Through their bond, Will could feel Hannibal’s confusion, similar to the astonishment he himself was experiencing. However, as soon as Jack made a step toward Hannibal, Will threw himself between them instinctively, baring his teeth in warning. His conscious side entwined with his omegan one, making him even more sensitive to the threat he perceived in Jack and his aggressive posturing.

One step forward… if Jack made just one more step forward…

The familiar rush of adrenaline heated his blood, but before he could let it spread through his body, Jack stepped away, without taking his eyes off him.

“You are not yourself any longer, Will,” he whispered. “Just like I feared it would happen. With the bond he forced upon you… You don’t understand it now, but your thoughts are not your own. But you don't have to worry. I promise - no, I swear… everything will be fine. I will get you out of here. I understand now.”
Will stared at him, stunned, and heard how Hannibal sighed behind his back. He moved toward the living room, leaving Will and Jack alone, but returned a moment after, holding a piece of paper in his hands.

“Here are the directions to my car wash company,” he said, pleasantly as if nothing had happened. “I apologize for not remembering their phone number. Have a nice trip. Maybe your wife and you will join me and Will for dinner sometime?”

“Can’t wait,” Jack said grimly, clenching the paper and throwing one last gaze at Will. Then he left, and Will turned to Hannibal, wondering if he still looked as shocked as he felt.

“What the hell was that?” he asked. “And what’s with this car wash company?”

“Ah, yes. Please let me make a call. I’ll be done quickly,” Hannibal went back to the living room and Will followed him with his eyes, trying to make sense of everything that happened.

Jack seemed to think that Hannibal had forced the bond on him? As if it was even possible. And then he seemed to think that through this bond, Hannibal became capable of making Will kill? Did he think he was a mindless puppet or something?

The wave of annoyance flooded him, and Will shook his head, hoping against hope that Jack would leave them alone once and for all. If he ever had to listen to this outrageous, ignorant blabbering again…

Hannibal returned, watching him attentively, and for some reason, Will immediately felt defensive.

“I have a close acquaintance in my car wash company,” Hannibal told him, stopping and leaving a considerable distance between them. “He owes me a favor, so he will tell Jack what I asked him to. Fortunately, Jack mentioned the place where Emily’s body has been found, so our story will be believable.”

“Why didn’t you give Jack his number, then?”

“To buy myself some time,” Hannibal smiled. “Jack will be making inquiries about the phone number by the address I gave him as soon as he gets into his car. It will take him at least a couple of minutes, and I have already arranged everything. You have nothing to worry about. Still… I believe we should talk. Of course, if you are feeling well.”

“I’m feeling all right,” Will lowered his eyes for a moment, not sure what else to say. He still felt the echoes of his heat — it retreated, but didn’t disappear entirely, waiting for the moment to come to the surface again, to turn his mind into jelly.

Thinking about last night was strange. Embarrassing. When he’d made the decision to go after Emily, he felt confident in his decision, but now…

She was annoying, but she did not deserve to die for it. And she most certainly did not deserve to die because Will couldn’t hurt the real target of his anger.

Jeremy. Now Emily.

Shaking his head, Will looked up, frowning when he saw how intently Hannibal was studying him.

“What?” he asked.

“What happened yesterday, Will?”
“You already know what happened,” Will tried to make his voice sound cold, but he was failing. The omegan part of him wanted to be close to Hannibal, to bask in his presence, while the human part of him remained confused.

He hadn’t made any plans for after Jeremy’s death. Even though a part of him had been refusing to believe that Hannibal felt nothing to him, he still hadn’t expected to live after creating a situation like that. Despite several days having passed, he still didn’t know how to act around Hannibal.

Hannibal, who was glowing on a constant basis since their strange bonding, in a very exasperating way.

“There isn’t much to tell,” Will said shortly. “She and I met yesterday near your office. She was insufferable and I felt… angry. Too angry, in retrospective — much more than the situation warranted.”

“You took my car in the morning,” Hannibal said thoughtfully. “It means that you have been planning it for the entire day. Waiting, making plans. It doesn’t seem impulsive to me.”

“I have no clear answer to give you,” Will turned away to hide his face, even though he knew it was useless — Hannibal could probably feel everything through their bond, just like Will was feeling foreign emotions coursing through him.

At the moment, Hannibal was wary. Curious. Protective of him. And happy — so happy that his happiness was making all of his other emotions pale in comparison. It was hot, blindingly so, and Will wanted to let himself dissolve in it, to forget everything else. Hannibal’s happiness was addictive, and his ability to fight it was getting weaker.

“Do you regret it?” Hannibal asked, and Will grimaced, turning back to him and thinking about it, recalling the moments of violence he had inflicted with such glee just yesterday.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “I don’t know if I regret my choice. But I would have done it differently if I had such option.”

A big smile that lit Hannibal’s face clearly indicated how satisfied he was with such answer.

“I wish I could see your work,” he murmured, the affection and admiration in his words sending small shivers of pleasure through Will’s body. “I wish I could have been with you then.”

Will said nothing, and Hannibal stepped closer to him — carefully, as if worrying about spooking him.

“If you ever feel like doing something like this again,” he whispered, “you should be more careful. I can teach you how.”

“I’m not a murderer!” Will exclaimed, then realized how ridiculous that sounded and scoffed. Right. “I’m not a murderer of your kind,” he tried again. “I don’t have a craving to go and maim random people, or to look for reasons to do so.”

“I am never looking for reasons — they appear by themselves,” Hannibal objected, and Will rolled his eyes.

“You know what I mean. Emily and Jeremy… they have a common catalyst — you. When it comes to you, my thinking becomes flawed. And I still have to figure out what it says about me.”

Hannibal nodded slowly, making one more step to him, and Will tensed, seeing a predatory intent
on his face.

Hannibal wanted him. Physically, emotionally, in every possible way — and when transferred through the bond, these feelings intensified the fire in Will’s already unstable body.

“Were you jealous?” Hannibal uttered, his eyes glistening brightly. “Of Emily and her signs of attention to me? I suspected you were… but to this point?”

Will bristled instantly, angry even now when thinking about it.

“What did you do to her?” Hannibal whispered. “How did you kill her?”

“Ask Jack, you psycho,” Will hissed. “Maybe he’ll share the photos with you.”

“Ah, but Jack thinks I pushed you to kill, even though I actually tried to stop you.”

“You would never be able to stop me if I didn’t want that,” Will replied, beginning to smile, and then he fell silent, ashamed of himself.

It seemed so easy to engage into this playful banter with Hannibal. To forget his anger, his father, those months of lies — to start anew and let himself be happy.

Something in him was still fighting this, though, so Will stepped away, creating another distance between them.

“I need to go,” he said, and was treated to Hannibal’s palpable disappointment. “I need to… think,” he added awkwardly. Hannibal said nothing, so he moved toward the stairs and then stopped.

“Hannibal,” Will blurted out before he could stop himself. “The book you have been reading to me. The book you are writing. Is everything you describe there true?”

Hannibal’s shock hit him with a force that Will enjoyed more than he should have. He turned to drink in the expression on Hannibal’s face, and was surprised to see how stunned and… could it be shy?.. he looked.

“That…” Hannibal started. “How did you—” Frowning, he stopped talking again, looking so uncharacteristically helpless that Will felt a surge of tenderness. Disturbed, he tried to choke it down, but when Hannibal said, “Yes,” in a quiet, unsure voice, this tenderness grew, pushing against his chest, demanding to be let out.

Knowing that his self-control was going to break any second, Will hastened to climb the stairs, fleeing back to his room.

He really did need to think.

He was a terrible person. After last night, he didn’t need any additional confirmations. Remembering the violence with which he’d attacked Emily, Will still couldn’t unite that image of himself with the one he used to have.

Did he truly have such ugliness within him? Such terrifying, greedy darkness?

He had been living with darkness ever since that fateful night. Hannibal was always with him, whether he knew it or not. His dark impulses fed Will’s own, bringing them to life again and again, and if not for Will’s obsession with the Ripper, with his desire to find his father’s killer… who knew what he could have become, and when? Maybe it would have happened sooner. Maybe not.
But in the end, it didn’t matter. What did matter was what he had already become and what he had done since then. And why.

He killed Emily because he couldn’t kill Hannibal. His fury and bitterness at Hannibal’s betrayal were still alive, still burning brightly in him — before, he’d managed to subdue them by thinking of revenge, of how he was going to hurt Hannibal and provoke him into killing himself. When it failed, that anger was left target-less because despite everything, Hannibal loved him, and Will couldn’t hate someone who did it. He couldn’t hate someone who loved him — especially someone who loved him back, not after a lifetime of loneliness and wistfulness. So he directed his rage at Emily, an annoying, but innocent bystander who should have never died like that. And Jeremy shouldn’t have died as well.

It was wrong. What he did was terrible, regardless of whether he was heat-drunk or not, regardless of whether his rage was justified. And yet he couldn’t say he regretted it.

Will closed his eyes, defeated.

He didn’t want to think what it said about him. He recognized the wrongness and horror of his actions, the remorse that he was supposed to feel — but it didn’t come. He just didn’t care enough.

And wasn’t it ironical? He had dedicated his life to the Ripper to get revenge for the death of the person he loved, but in the process, he had easily taken the lives of other people, tearing them from their own families.

Restless now, Will moved to his wardrobe and opened it mindlessly, seeking something to distract himself with. He sorted through his things without any interest, thinking of Hannibal almost making him purchase them, offering his opinion and admiring him, teaching him how to take care of them properly… then, Will’s fingers brushed against something hard and he froze. In disbelief, he leaned forward and saw a painting of a fish — the one he had drawn with his father many years ago.

What was it doing here? Had Hannibal decided to bring it here from Baltimore?

Why?

Carefully, Will took the painting out, staring at it. His eyes clouded with tears suddenly, and he closed them quickly, fighting the unwanted rush of emotions.

Misery started to expand, but then something light and soothing flowed straight into his mind, and after a startled second, Will realized that it was coming from his bond with Hannibal.

Hannibal felt that something was wrong and he was trying to comfort him.

Sighing deeply, Will clutched the painting to his chest, hanging his head and allowing Hannibal’s warmth to wash over him.

He didn’t know how long he spent like this, lost in thoughts. At some point, he went downstairs, had lunch that Hannibal had prepared — as always, and returned to his room, to his painting.

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There was worry on Hannibal’s end of bond now, but he still tried to send soothing and comforting emotions to Will. It was sweet, in a way — Will could sense that Hannibal wasn’t used to the bond yet, but he was quickly learning how to use it. For him.

No shadows came, as if they never existed in the first place, and making a decision seemed more difficult than ever. When Will finally did it, the sky outside began to darken already. Carefully, he
turned the painting to its back, took the thin, self-made canvas with the fish from the frame, and looked at it silently, caressing the rough surface.

Folding it, he stood up and left his room, whistling for Winston to come and find him.

He’d been neglecting him lately. It seemed like Hannibal had built a better relationship with his dog than Will himself by taking care of him when Will was wallowing in his own suffering.

And to think that Hannibal didn’t even like dogs… it was one more thing done for Will’s benefit only.

For him. Again.

Chuckling mirthlessly, Will walked out of the house, holding the folded canvas. He went to the beach, moving slowly, giving himself time to change his mind.

*He and his father had their little family tradition. Every Thursday, when his father returned home, they cooked fish with chips together — Will was slicing the potato with seriousness and eagerness simultaneously, making his Dad look at him and laugh, but even then, Dad never lost focus on his part of the task — dealing with fish and spices. After everything was ready, they grabbed the dishes and went to the living room where three new rented movies were waiting for them. It was a luxury they couldn’t always afford, but they still did it to preserve their tradition — one movie for Will, one for his father, and one for his mother, even if she wasn’t there any longer. They stayed up late and Dad usually had to carry Will to his bedroom. On Friday, he didn’t have to work, and though they had no new movies by then, they still spent the entire day together.*

He and Hannibal had also created several traditions in the time they lived together in Baltimore. Three times a week, they spent their evenings in front of the fireplace. Will was drinking tea, Hannibal was drinking wine; they both were reading their own books, saying nothing to each other in most cases, but Will’s head was on Hannibal’s shoulder, or on his lap, and Hannibal’s fingers were buried in his hair, tugging at it gently or simply caressing it. Sometimes, when Hannibal felt like letting his reserve break, they changed places and it was Will who got access to his relaxed and content partner, rubbing his head and grinning at the almost purring sound that escaped him. The quiet feeling of unity made him happy, and he was looking forward to these evenings with passion that few people would understand.

On Fridays and Saturdays, they cooked together, with Hannibal dragging Will shopping for ingredients, buying everything but the meat, telling him about the most unique spices, about the best ways of choosing specific things and making sure they are fresh and healthy, and so on. Will wasn’t really interested, but every Hannibal’s word had so much passion that he was fascinated, clinging to everything he heard and wishing to hear more.

It was difficult to combine these two lives. It was even more difficult to admit that one couldn’t coexist with the other.

One of them had to go because if he were to live... doing it with so much anger and bitterness inside was impossible. He was tired of it.

He wanted changes. He wanted to get out of this poisonous, vicious limbo.

Will stopped on a small cliff, looking at the dark, shifting mass of water beneath. The ocean was calm tonight, but its surface was still brimming with some internal movement, hinting at the hidden depth and life that was happening there.
Winston jumped to him, waving his tail, watching him curiously. Smiling unwillingly, Will patted his head and then let him smell the canvas, wondering if it still held the traces of sea salt and watercolors. If he tried hard enough, he could recognize a ghost of the latter, but it seemed like the former was gone for good.

His hands were trembling when Will raised the canvas and pressed his lips to it, right to the fish that looked stupid and childish, but which was also so alive and familiar. He held it like this for a while, recalling his father’s touch, and then, slowly, he crumpled its corners and started to fold them, mirroring the movements that his father had shown him a long time ago.

Soon, what was a painting once had turned into a paper boat, simple but with high, wide sides. Will traced their contours with his fingers, enjoying the familiar roughness of the paper. Then he straightened and threw his paper boat into the water, hoping that it would land properly.

It did. The water accepted it as if the little boat belonged there, and Will watched silently how it started to sail away, wobbling against the moving surface.

“What are you doing?” a quiet voice asked, and Will flinched in surprise, turning to find Hannibal behind his back. As always, he had moved soundlessly, but instead of being disturbed by it, Will only smiled.

“Saying goodbye,” he murmured. Hannibal frowned, clearly uncomprehending. His eyes widened when Will approached him, stopping several feet away, studying his face and allowing himself to feel the affection openly for the first time in forever, without being ashamed or trying to subdue it.

“Saying goodbye,” Hannibal repeated, the frown marring his forehead. “To what?”

“To whom. To my father.”

Hannibal’s mouth fell open and he stared at him with a look of such astonishment that Will’s smile widened further. Now that he didn’t attempt to stop himself from feeling, the tingling rush of emotions overwhelmed him, warming him and filling him with sensations that he hadn’t expected to feel again.

“I cannot forgive you,” Will said. “By killing my father, you stole everything from me.”

Hannibal said nothing but his face went ashen. He opened his mouth, then closed it, with no sound coming out still. His body was rigid to the point where it must have hurt. Will could almost feel how Hannibal’s heart fell, rejected, how disappointment and grief flooded him. Hannibal didn’t move, but uncontrollable, twisted facial movements reflected the hurt that Will could sense through their bond — not even hurt, but agony, hopelessness so profound that it crashed into Will’s affection, nearly shattering it with its force. Regret and self-hatred were also present, and it was more than enough to melt the remains of Will’s doubts.

“However,” he continued, “by choosing me years later, you have brought meaning into everything in my life again. You returned what you stole — not in its initial form, but you gave me what I was always looking for, what I was craving to feel again. I can’t forgive you for killing my father — I tried, but I can’t. But you love me, and to me, it means a lot. It means everything. Nothing can bring my father back, and if I have to choose between staying loyal to him, to his memory, and being with you… I will choose the latter.”

Hannibal continued to stare at him unblinkingly, the incredulity and disbelief in his eyes so strong that Will couldn’t help but feel touched and amused by it.
“I choose you,” he clarified, shivering when Hannibal’s incredulity started to change into hope slowly, slipping into him through their bond. “I can’t live with you and still think about my father — it wouldn’t be fair to him. I don’t deserve to keep him if I stay with you, not even in the form of memories. So… I want to start anew. Only you and I, getting used to each other again, building a new relationship. I will promise to never bring up the past if you promise to do the same. I don’t want to remember it. I want to try and start from the very beginning.”

Hannibal was still standing frozen, wide-eyed and stunned, looking as if he desperately wanted to believe what he was hearing, but couldn’t entirely trust it.


Will made the last step, crossing the rest of distance between them, and gently brushed his lips against Hannibal’s. For a moment, he got no response, but then Hannibal’s body came to life and he raised his hands to touch Will’s face — so carefully, as if he was scared that this moment would turn out to be an illusion and that any second, Will could disappear.

_Not again_, Will promised himself silently, leaning closer into the kiss.

His lips parted and he breathed in Hannibal’s air, choosing to believe that it tasted of a new beginning. Their beginning.

Maybe this time, it wouldn’t end.

Maybe this time, it would actually continue growing into something… if they both kept their promises.
Thank you all so much for your wonderful support - I went for vacation right after publishing last chapter and seeing all the amazing comments made me incredibly happy.

This is a rather fluffy chapter, with Hannibal and Will enjoying their long-awaited reunion. There are just 4 chapters left - however, darkness is waiting ahead still ;)

Hannibal didn’t believe it. Not at first.

Even as Will kissed him, even as he didn’t recoil when Hannibal hesitantly reached for him — he still didn’t believe it. Because it was too good to be true.

Slowly, still expecting this moment to shatter as so many of his dreams did, Hannibal slid his hands along Will’s sides, barely touching him, tracing the contours of his body. He shuddered when Will let out a painfully familiar noise, snuggling closer to him, but even as he wanted to lunge at him, to crush him in his arms — he couldn’t. All possessive instincts quietened down, succumbing to an overwhelming tenderness that seeped into every part of him, filling him with warmth and longing.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, and when Will just smiled at him, a little awkwardly, with no traces of anger that had been marring his eyes for the last months, his heart stopped entirely — before remembering its function and starting to pound, with the speed that left Hannibal breathless.

He didn’t know what he wanted more, to stare at Will’s face or to kiss him, to admire him from afar or to jerk him closer and breathe, breathe, breathe him in.

Eventually, still not entirely sure what to do, Hannibal gently pressed on Will’s waist and hid his face in his shoulder, held him very tightly, to the point where his face grew hot. Will murmured something, touching his hair, and Hannibal shuddered again, held him even tighter — shaken, lightheaded, overwhelmed.

He didn’t know how long they were standing here. He was still stuck on holding Will close, on the moment when Will kissed him, when he uttered the words of — perhaps not forgiveness, but acceptance. The most beautiful sound he had ever heard. The sound that he kept hearing even now, word by word.

A smaller part of his mind registered how Will finally pulled back, how he took his hand and led him back to their house.

How he kissed him again. How the scent of his heat flared, enveloping them both in a dizzying, maddening blanket. How their clothes fell — with no hurry, no frenzied rush they had felt in the night of the claiming. Everything was slow, gradual, tender, with endless time to savor each other.

A bigger part of Hannibal was awestruck, still reliving the moment of Will’s acceptance, still unable to fully believe it, needing to replay it to remember everything — to never forget.

Will’s skin was soft under his hands, softer than Hannibal could recall. The last time, he’d felt
crazed with desire and most basic urges, but now… now he could take his time. Because Will wasn’t going anywhere.

Maybe in a while, he would be able to believe that.

Later, after Will had fallen asleep peacefully, Hannibal continued to stare, trying to blink only when he absolutely had to so not to miss any second.

Will, sleeping. For some reason, this sight overwhelmed him even more than the intimacy between them, more than Will’s words. Words could be deceiving — who would know it better than him? But this… Will felt comfortable enough to fall asleep next to him. Safe enough. Trusting.

Trusting him again.

“Will,” Hannibal murmured, quietly so not to wake him, but loudly enough to hear it himself. “Will,” he repeated, feeling how the name blossomed on the tip of his tongue, filling him with rich, half-forgotten, unique taste.

Will. Will. Will.

He didn’t know how many times he repeated this name. He almost didn’t want tomorrow to come, so he could stretch this moment forever — just he and Will, together, away from the world, surrounded by nothing but silence. Just the two of them.

His eyes closed for a moment but Hannibal immediately jerked himself back to awareness, his gaze flying back to Will to make sure he didn’t miss any sleepy movement of his.

Every moment, even the smallest, belonged to him now. He would get them all and he would treasure them, and no one and nothing would come between them again.

Comforted by this last thought, Hannibal blinked slowly, then blinked again, holding his eyes closed for a longer time, up until they refused to open again.

He would have all this tomorrow.

Even if his mind couldn’t fully believe it, Hannibal was willing to take a chance — as long as he heard Will’s breathing next to him.

***

When he woke up, Will wasn’t in the bed with him.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Hannibal sat up, looking around in a sudden burst of panic.

Will tended to sleep in late. He always did. If he wasn’t in bed with him, then…
Had yesterday even happened? Or was it all a dream?

Hannibal licked his dry lips, clenching the sheet in his hands.

Had Will been here? Or not?

His smell was certainly present. That flowery, deadly scent that seemed to be growing stronger with each day — carnivorous plants, the combination of the most beautiful and the ugliest things this world had to offer. The whole room appeared to be soaked in it, but Will still wasn’t here and it still filled Hannibal with irrational fear.

He hastened to get up and change his clothes, choosing against taking a shower. His heart was pounding erratically as he got downstairs, and it stopped entirely, missing a beat, when he saw Will dancing around the kitchen. No, not dancing, perhaps — yet Hannibal had troubles with finding a proper word as Will’s movements were far too gracious and flowing to be classified otherwise. He was clearly cooking something, glancing into the frying pan occasionally, continuing to sway in a surprisingly stealthy manner.

Hannibal had never seen him like this. Not even when they had been living together in Baltimore.

This was… new. Unusual. Breathtaking. Hannibal wanted to mesmerize this sight, to collect it and hide it, and look at it whenever he felt the need to do it. To see Will like this again — so carefree, so confident and happy.

‘You will always be happy,’ Hannibal promised himself silently. ‘I will make sure of that.’

“Good morning,” he said, not recognizing his own voice from the gentleness that overfilled it. Will turned to glance at him and smiled widely, and Hannibal’s breath caught in his chest, like the very first time he had seen it.

“Good morning,” Will muttered, still smiling, though he averted his eyes after that, as if feeling unsure. He used to act like this in the beginning of their relationship and Hannibal had always considered it charming. Somehow, it was even more so now.

He had a feeling that from now on, he would find anything Will did or said charming. Hopelessly so.

“I’m almost finished,” Will told him. “Go sit at the table. It’s my turn to cook something for a change, even though I can’t promise the same extravagant things you are so fond of.”

“Whatever you cook, I’m sure it will be fine,” Hannibal assured him, still smiling stupidly.

So it hadn’t been a dream. Everything was real.

Hannibal moved to the living room, to the table, bathing in the glow from realization. Distantly, he wondered if there would come a moment when he would believe in Will’s choice and manage not to be struck motionless from the gravity of it.

When Will served breakfast, Hannibal hardly looked at the plate. His gaze was glued to his omega — his partner, and soon Will stopped fidgeting nervously and began to glare at him in an achingly familiar way.

“Stop that already,” he commanded. “Eat your breakfast. It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

“I’m afraid that even if I could be sure about it, it still wouldn’t stop me,” Hannibal retorted, the
corners of his lips trembling, and Will smiled in return.

Inspired, Hannibal blurted, “Would you like to go somewhere?”

“For a walk?” Will clarified. Hannibal shrugged.

“For a walk, or to the city,” he said. “Wherever you would like to go. To the restaurant, to the opera, if there is any good performance today. I’m sure I could provide us with tickets.”

“Opera,” a shadow flickered across Will’s face and Hannibal immediately realized what the problem was. He wondered if he should keep silent to not accidentally break the moment, but curiosity burned through him, urging him to ask the question he had not received answer to yet.

“How did you kill Emily?” he uttered, watching Will attentively to notice the smallest changes in his expression. To his relief, Will didn’t seem offended like he had previously. Instead, he lowered his head, shaking it as if in embarrassment, before looking up again.

“I’m not sure I want to talk about it,” he admitted. “What I did to her was violent. Too violent. She didn’t deserve it, whatever she was like. But I felt… angry. So angry that I couldn’t do anything until I poured all of that anger into something. She became my target because I disliked her intensely — and because at that moment, knowing that she wanted to replace me and make you hers was unbearable to me.”

Warmth enveloped Hannibal, coupled with wistfulness and regret that he hadn’t seen Will’s masterpiece. Oh, how he would love to have been present at that moment, watching Will in a killing mode, snarling and tearing Emily to pieces, staking his claim.

It was a courting gift, whether Will realized that or not. It seemed like when being in the middle of his heat, Will had the same impulses as Hannibal. Had he always had them, or was he affected by knowledge of who Hannibal was?

“It was reckless,” Will concluded. “Jack will not leave us alone now.”

“He cannot do anything. I have a stellar record and I have provided you with a solid alibi. Jack has nothing. If he continues to waste his time on watching us, I will complain to his superiors and he might be removed from his position. He doesn’t deserve it in the first place.”

“If Jack loses his position, he will only have more time for watching you — and me,” Will noted, frowning.

“Let him try,” Hannibal grinned, but Will only narrowed his eyes, clearly dissatisfied.

“You are not taking him seriously,” he said. “I know Jack. He will not stop now. This isn’t a game, Hannibal — this is serious. Or it has the potential to be so.”

“I don’t want you to worry,” following a sudden urge to touch, Hannibal stood up, and Will tilted his head, watching him approach curiously. “We can deal with this situation in whatever way you deem fit. We might even leave the country — to Europe… to Lithuania. I haven’t been there for years but I do have my family’s manor there. I think you would like it.”

Hannibal realized what he’d said only after the words left his mouth. Stunned, he fell silent, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he had offered to take Will to the place that he had tried not to think of for years. The place that he had been seeing in his nightmares only — and when writing his book.
As if sensing his confusion and distress, Will wrapped his hands around his neck, pushing their foreheads together.

“I thought it was a castle,” he murmured teasingly, and grayness that began to darken Hannibal’s vision retreated. Relaxing, he let out a chuckle, rubbing his forehead against Will’s.

“It is more of a manor,” he confessed quietly. “But when I was a child, it seemed vast to me. Like the entire world.”

“It probably was,” Will stroked his back lightly, drawing little circles against it. “And if you really want us to go there, I would love to see it. And I would love it if you finished reading your book to me.”

Ah. That was not what he expected.

The rest of the tension melted away, transforming into adoration so intense that a year ago, Hannibal would have laughed in derision.

“I will,” he promised. It would certainly feel strange to read when knowing that Will understood what exactly he was saying, who the characters of his story were. However… there was nothing to hide. Not anymore.

There wasn’t a part of him left that Hannibal didn’t feel ready to share.

***

He managed to procure the tickets for the performance at the Performing Arts Center. It was supposed to begin at eight, which gave them plenty of time to start enjoying their evening several hours earlier.

Entering their favorite small restaurant, one of the few located in the upscale part of Baltimore that Will liked, Hannibal felt almost dizzy with joy. Regardless of what he tried to say to himself, he still felt as if he was lost in a beautiful illusion, in the memories of the past, where he and Will often had dinners like this.

However, even if in the end it would indeed turn out to be an illusion, Hannibal intended to savor every piece of it.

He placed his hand on Will’s waist in a very familiar gesture, proud to be seen with him. Will turned his head and squinted at him, and Hannibal smiled innocently, tightening his grip.

Sighing, Will shook his head before smirking and allowing Hannibal to lead him.

As they were already seated, waiting for their order, Will glanced at the other tables, his eyes lingering there. Hannibal followed his gaze. There were several other couples — two betas, one alpha and her omega. There was nothing special about them, so he looked at Will again and caught his thoughtful expression. Touching his hand playfully, Hannibal raised his eyebrows.
“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Will smiled slowly, a little hesitantly. “It’s just strange, being here with you again. Having a date like normal people. One moment I remember how and why it happened, but the next, I can’t wrap my mind around it.”

An unwelcome pang of worry pierced him and Hannibal frowned, not wanting to ask, but knowing he had to.

“Do you have… regrets?” he murmured, and Will’s eyes widened.

“No!” he protested. “No. I don’t. But I do have to make an effort not to think at times because the thoughts just keep coming. Unpleasant, guilty thoughts. Other than that… no. I think I actually feel… liberated. However strange that might sound.”

Liberated.

Hannibal repeated the word several times in his mind, coming to conclusion that he liked how it sounded. Very much at that.

He felt similar — as if the heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. From that terrible night, he had been telling himself that he would be able to get Will back, but he couldn’t deny that his hopes were melting gradually, dissolving in fear from realization that he had no control — that whatever he did, there was no guarantee that Will would ever even look at him with warmth again.

But here they were now, sitting against each other, and Hannibal felt happy. Hannibal felt in love — felt like he was bursting with it.

He would do anything to preserve this happiness — to keep the smile on Will’s face. Anything at all.

As if sensing his thoughts, like he frequently did, Will squeezed his hand warningly.

“Never lie to me,” he said, his voice suddenly deadly. Hannibal shivered from the sound of it, disturbed and aroused, struck once again by the thought of how much he wanted this man — his love, and his violence, and everything else he had to offer.

“I won’t,” he swore.

“Not even for my supposed benefit,” Will added. “For us to work, we have to trust each other. And I’m not sure I trust you yet.”

Well, that hurt.

But it was only natural.

“I understand,” Hannibal said grimly. “And I won’t.”

The waiter brought their orders and their conversation lost its seriousness.

Hannibal already didn’t want this evening to end.
Will loved the performance. As before, Hannibal could say that Will wasn’t a fan of opera yet he could clearly appreciate it — perhaps more than half of people who gathered here, more curious about talks that ensued afterward than in the talent of the performers.

Hannibal offered to leave as soon as the performance ended, but to his surprise, Will expressed the desire to stay.

He remembered how disastrous the last time had been. For Will to want to communicate with those he undoubtedly despised…

Tension kept gathering under Hannibal’s skin, making him defensive on Will’s behalf even before anything happened. However, it all dissipated and turned into astonishment when he actually looked at Will.

Will appeared relaxed. Not confident, entirely, but absolutely uncaring. He took a glass of champagne, studying the guests calmly, smiling to his own thoughts, and Hannibal found himself blinded by him — again, staring and being unable to look away. It took all his efforts to shift his gaze and to appear friendly to these strangers.

He nodded politely at those he knew, waiting to be approached and knowing it was an inevitability. However, when it happened, Hannibal could admit he was taken aback.

Jack Crawford stepped toward them, in the company of a tall, beautiful woman, with a grimace of deep hostility on his face.

Hannibal glanced at Will briefly and was satisfied to see that he still looked completely relaxed, staring at Jack as if he was intrigued rather than worried.

“Good evening,” the woman said, smiling at Will gently. Hannibal noted how her eyes brushed against Will’s forehead and the visible scar on it before she focused on his face again, as if nothing was wrong.

“Good evening, Bella,” Will replied, and his mirroring smile did feel genuine.

“I have never taken you for someone who enjoys opera, Jack,” Hannibal commented, his smile widening when Jack’s lips twitched in obvious annoyance.

“I usually don’t,” he said curtly.

“I am a fan, though,” Bella said. “Going alone all the time is not all that interesting, so sometimes, I ask Jack to accompany me.”

“Did you enjoy the performance?” Will asked, and once again, Hannibal was astounded at how naturally he was acting. In their last visit, Will had reminded him of a trapped prey. Now, he was a predator, and Hannibal wondered at this change, at the thoughts that had to be rolling in Will’s mind. Carefully, he reached for their bond, still marveling at the solid feel of its presence.

Even through it, he couldn’t decipher Will’s emotions with absolute clarity, but he could sense the flashes of them.
He could sense indifference. Will did not care about being here, among all these people. He didn’t care about being stared at. He was genuinely calm, as if everything he had experienced rendered him unable to care about such minor things as social gatherings.

The only surge of tension that went through him was when he looked at Jack, and Hannibal found it amusing. Will seemed to take Jack more seriously than he deserved — regardless of all his efforts, he wasn’t a threat, no matter how much he wanted to look like one.

Will seemed to like Bella, so their conversation continued to flow. Jack, on the other hand, stared daggers at Hannibal, and Hannibal met his gaze with all amusement and contempt he felt.

“I will see you soon,” Jack said as they were getting ready to leave, his eyes not leaving Hannibal even for a second. Will tensed and Hannibal touched his back soothingly, baring his teeth in Jack’s direction.

“I look forward to it,” he uttered.

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Will was annoyed at him for their entire journey home, refusing to talk to him properly and sending him short glares.

“You still seem to think that you are playing a game,” was all he said. “It’s not a game. I told you, you don’t know Jack as well as I do. He will never let a monster like you go free.”

“But there are the two of us now,” Hannibal teased and was elated to see a reluctant smile on Will’s face. Small, but beautiful nonetheless.

Later, at night, they were sharing the bed again, and Hannibal was staring — again, unable to take his eyes off Will.

There was something unusual about him today. Something Hannibal couldn’t quite place. Curious, he leaned closer, rubbing against Will’s neck, inhaling his scent deeply.

It was strange — as if another component had suddenly joined Will’s usual smell. It was too subtle for Hannibal to recognize it, but it was there — undoubtedly.

Intrigued, Hannibal placed a small kiss against Will’s skin and pulled back a little, staring at him softly.

He wouldn’t sleep this night.

He wanted to watch.
Hi, everyone! I'm so sorry for the long wait - hope it won't become a tradition, especially now that we are so close to the end. The battle between wanting to read and write (and writing several stories at once) is extremely challenging :D Thank you for your wonderful support! It means everything.

Even after a week, seeing Hannibal upon waking up felt surreal.

Will watched him silently, as he did every morning, listened to his quiet breathing, and tried to understand what feelings it evoked in him.

After all this time, happiness felt foreign. Such a sweet, powerful, scary sensation — scary because he wasn’t sure if he could allow himself to get used to it again. There were no more lies left between them, nothing to threaten what they were to each other, and yet a nagging, persistent conviction that this happiness wasn’t going to last, that their days together were numbered refused to leave his mind.

Will thought about it when he went to sleep and he thought about it when he woke up — day after day, all the time. Hannibal managed to distract him — his hands, his lips, his dominance enhanced by Will’s need to submit and trust were the only things that anchored him to reality. Reality that he feared would crack under the slightest pressure.

He couldn’t determine where all these gloomy thoughts were coming from, so even though it was hopeless, he tried to think of other things — easier things. About Winston, or swimming together in summer, or leaving this house and going back to Baltimore. Of breakfast and of what Hannibal would genuinely enjoy, without having to pretend. Yesterday, Will had ruined their breakfast in the worst way possible. He managed to remake it before Hannibal came downstairs, but when cleaning up, he accidentally threw the normal meal away and served the ruined one instead. He noticed it only when they started eating, but Hannibal made all the right noises, eating with fake eagerness, and he actually finished his portion under Will’s incredulous gaze.

His mate could be utterly ridiculous and Will loved him all the more because of it. The miserable and empty years he had spent were worth having this old-fashioned and polished man eating the disaster Will had cooked and praising it. Will never wanted to put Hannibal through it again, but he would remember that scene always.

Dropping a light, gentle kiss on Hannibal’s lips, Will left the bed and crept out of the room. Winston met him with excited enthusiasm and Will chuckled, patting his head affectionately.

“Let’s go for a walk, shall we?” he murmured.

There were never any people outside, so Will used this fact to its fullest advantage. He didn’t even bother changing his night clothes — just went as he was, chasing Winston and then running from him, laughing without having to worry that someone was going to see or hear him. Apart from Jeremy, he hadn’t met any other Hannibal’s neighbors.
Four days ago, the police came, finally alerted to Jeremy’s absence. Will watched them from afar, wondering if they were going to visit his and Hannibal’s house. They did, but the questions were minimal — it was obvious that the officers didn’t take the case as seriously as they should have.

If Jack heard about it, he would.

The thought sent a wave of unease through him.

Will hoped it wouldn’t come to this. Despite Hannibal’s carefree attitude, he didn’t want to continue testing Jack’s patience. He would be more than happy if they never had to see each other again.

The walk with Winston exhausted him sooner than he’d expected. Tired but content, Will moved back to the house and was greeted by Hannibal who was standing frozen on the porch, staring at him with inscrutable, dark eyes.

“Hey,” Will said. “Are you—”

He didn’t have time to finish because Hannibal crossed the distance between them in several steps and pulled him into his arms, hugging him so tightly that Will winced. He didn’t try to step back, though. Carefully, he wrapped his hands around Hannibal’s shoulders, focusing on the bond between them. Darkness, worry, and relief crashed into him immediately, with such powerful force that Will’s breath caught.

“Hey,” he murmured again, softer this time. “What’s wrong?”

Hannibal pulled away a little, still holding him. His face was blank.

“You were gone,” he said, and Will flinched at the brittle notes he had heard in his voice.

Hannibal never lost himself like this. Even though he was obviously feeling as raw after their reunion as Will did, he managed to hold himself together. He disliked waking up alone in bed, that was true, but he never reacted this strongly before.

Then again, Will hadn’t left the house like this until today — all he did before was go to the kitchen and cook breakfast. Maybe he should have seen this coming.

“I just went outside with Winston,” he said, trying to sound as gentle as possible. He rubbed his nose against Hannibal’s throat, leaving his scent and hoping it would be enough to calm him. “You saw that Winston was also missing, didn’t you?”

“I…” Hannibal hesitated. “I didn’t notice.”

Based on bewilderment and shame underlying his words, he was coming to his senses. Will pulled back again and smiled encouragingly.

“I will leave a note next time,” he promised. “All right? So you could wake up and see it, even if I am not there.”

“You don’t have to—”

“It’s not an issue at all. Besides… I understand.” Will caressed his jaw lightly, hoping that Hannibal could feel his sincerity through their bond. “I feel the same.”

Hannibal smiled at him, but the uneasiness was still there, so Will took his hand and led him away.
from the door, toward the garden.

“Let’s dance,” he said, and Hannibal stared at him as if he was crazy.

“Here?” he asked slowly and Will nodded.

“There is no one to see us anyway,” he added mischievously, squeezing Hannibal’s hands in his and spinning them both around.

“There is no music,” Hannibal protested, but he didn’t try to break free and Will shrugged.

“We don’t need the music,” he assured, and continued to spin and jerk them chaotically until Hannibal laughed — a genuine, clear sound, before dragging Will to his chest and staring at him with so much love that Will’s heart skipped a bit.

“You couldn’t possibly be this bad at dancing,” Hannibal told him. “I see how you dance sometimes in the morning. You look gracious.”

“Well, we don’t always have to look gracious. And maybe I can dance by myself, but I never really danced together with someone — not until you.”

Hannibal was pleased to hear it — Will could see how his pupils dilated, how his teeth flashed in a possessive grin.

This was the Hannibal he recognized, the Hannibal he wanted to see every day. Not worried and panicked — never that. Only happy. Only in control. Confident in Will and in their future together — because Will lacked this confidence himself and he needed it, needed it desperately.

They swirled in a dance, awkward and funny, and Will absorbed this closeness between them.

He was thankful when worries faded from his mind, even if it wasn’t for long.

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When Emily’s parents called Hannibal and asked him for his presence at her funeral, Will was astonished. He was even more astonished when Hannibal agreed and asked if he could bring his mate with him to pay Emily respects. The parents agreed.

Will had no idea how to feel about it, and he continued to remain conflicted even when he was standing next to the closed casket, in the rows of people in dark suits and dresses. Hannibal was holding his hand firmly and on the one hand, it was comforting. On the other, it drew curious stares in their direction. Will could guess that the majority of people gathered here were more concerned with appearances’ sake rather than with Emily herself — and if they knew Emily, they probably knew Hannibal. After all, they all lived in one, expensive world that Will was only starting to get used to. He didn’t recognize anyone here, but some people actually greeted him directly, so they must have met at some point.

“My daughter,” Mrs. Sawyers moaned, pressing her hands to her eyes and leaning against her
husband blindly. “My poor, darling girl…”

Will shifted, even more uncomfortable.

He didn’t belong here. He came to terms with killing Emily and with his lack of compassion and regret, but now, surrounded by her parents and those who probably loved her, he felt awkward again. He wanted to feel guilty — he stared at the casket, then at Emily’s parents — her mother, unable to stand by herself; her father, trying to be strong but swaying dangerously from time to time… and nothing. Guilt didn’t come, no matter how hard he tried to summon it. It only intensified his feeling of awkwardness and he sighed, squeezing Hannibal’s hand.

Suddenly, a cold chill shot down his spine. Some shadowy presence entered his mind, whispering careful, danger, watch out. Will tensed, looking at Hannibal, then glancing at people around them.

No one suspicious. Nothing to justify his sudden worry.

“Are you all right?” Hannibal murmured. Will nodded silently, and slowly, his tension subsided.

“…open,” Mrs. Sawyers was saying through tears. “We couldn’t even bury our daughter properly because the FBI refused to give us her body! Only now, after she has been dead for so long… it goes against our religion, against everything we believe in, but there was nothing we could do. Nothing! They just refused to listen to us! And now Emily… oh, God…”

Will sighed again, bored and irritated. Based on the sky, it was going to rain soon, and all he wanted was to go home. Watching the burial of his own victim wasn’t satisfactory — it only added confusion to his already scattered thoughts, making him drop his opinion about himself even lower.

He was a bad person. He didn’t want additional reminders.

Another stab of concern pierced him and Will shivered, looking around again.

Something was wrong. Something was wrong. Something…

He tried to calm down by inhaling deeply, even though panic gripped his lungs in a vice.

What was happening to him? Was he going crazy?

Hannibal gave him a worried look. Then a surge of calmness and reassurance came from their bond and Will relaxed before he could consciously understand it, reacting to the silent impulses Hannibal was sending.

Maybe it was a result of his head trauma. He had been having hallucinations for the majority of time after being released from the hospital — maybe it was an extension of them? Another form of delusions? The shadows had left when he and Hannibal reunited and Will started to think that their appearance might have been triggered by his determination to work against the bond. But if they returned now… had he been wrong? Did he need a more serious help than he had thought previously?

An especially loud sob from Mrs. Sawyers made Will bare his teeth instinctively in annoyance from being disturbed, and then he remembered where he was and tried to control himself. Sill, the unnamed restlessness returned — remained. Will tried to turn again, to look at people standing behind his and Hannibal’s backs, when Hannibal cupped his nape suddenly. His grip was powerful enough to dissipate Will’s irrational thoughts and to make him focus on now and here.
This time, the results of Hannibal’s intervention lasted much longer. Anxiety didn’t return that day at all, and at night, tired from the useless, exhausting hours, Will purred in pleasure at being caressed by Hannibal’s skilful fingers. They were in bed, which was quickly becoming his favorite place in the world, and even though Will felt strangely tired for anything more than a few kisses, Hannibal didn’t seem to mind at all. It’d been half an hour already and he was still exploring Will’s hair, his neck and his shoulders, rubbing soft, lazy circles into his skin.

“You seemed worried today,” Hannibal said finally, and Will nodded, knowing that pretending wouldn’t work.

“I don’t know why,” he admitted. “I’m not sure what’s happening to me. It’s like some kind of paranoia. I feel like we are being watched.”

“Right now?”

“No. Earlier. At the funeral.”

“Well, we were watched,” Hannibal noted, smiling wryly and shifting so he could see Will’s face. “I’d say that people were more interested in you, my mysterious, contradictory mate, than in the closed casket. Pity that it was closed,” he added. “I accepted the invitation only in the hope that I would be able to see your work.”

“You should have asked me,” Will scoffed. “I would have told you that the casket would be closed. Did you really expect anything different?”


For a while, they were silent. Then Hannibal cleared his throat and said carefully, “We talked about it, but didn’t make any decision. What do you think about travelling? We could go to Lithuania, to the castle. If you want.”

“To Lithuania?” Will echoed, unable to hide his surprise.

This was the second time Hannibal voiced this idea, but still, it was the last thing Will expected. He never got the feeling that Hannibal really wanted to go back home, but if he was offering twice in a row…

“When?” he asked, and something flickered in Hannibal’s eyes — something both thoughtful and joyful.

“Whenever you want,” he promised. “We could go tomorrow, or in three days. Or in a week. I think a change of scenery would do you good. These months have been difficult for you. You need to rest.”

“All I’m doing is resting,” Will said. “I don’t remember the last time I worked.”

“You need to rest mentally,” Hannibal clarified. His caresses turned more insistent and Will closed his eyes in delight, feeling how his skin broke in goosebumps. Still, he managed to utter, “What about you? You also need to rest. Are you sure going to that place wouldn’t be a problem? Do you even want to go back there?”

Caresses ceased. Hannibal considered it for a moment before tugging Will close.

“Yes,” he said, and even though his words were quiet, determination shone in his eyes. “With you by my side — yes. I want to go back there. I had to do that a long time ago.”
“Then we will go,” it was Will’s turn to grin. “How about Friday?”

“Friday it is,” Hannibal agreed, placing a soft kiss on the tip of Will’s nose. “Before that… how do you feel about getting your car back?”

“My car?” Will hadn’t thought of it for months.

His car. Where had he even left it?

He couldn’t remember.

“I’m going to bring it back tomorrow,” Hannibal said. “I’ve been receiving calls about it for a while but I didn’t have time to deal with it. I was… distracted.”

Heartbroken, Will thought, but chose against saying it aloud.

“Why can’t I come for it myself?” he asked.

“I don’t want you to drive.”

Will narrowed his eyes, dissatisfied with Hannibal’s belief that he could order him around, but Hannibal brought their faces even closer, so that Will could feel his warm breath, and murmured, “You said yourself that you have not been feeling well. I also noticed a slight change in your smell recently. You might be coming down with something and I’d prefer it if you limited your encounters with any dangerous vehicles for the time being. It’s going to take hours to drive back here, so I’ll be the one to bring your car — and only because the company keeps pestering me about it. You will use it as soon as you yourself feel ready.”

Well, when Hannibal put it like that… Will wasn’t sure if he was ready to drive. He didn’t have headaches these days, but he couldn’t delude himself by thinking they would never happen again. And he wouldn’t want to be driving that kind of car for such a long time if he got another headache right behind the wheel.

He wanted to live — wanted it too much to risk so foolishly.

“Oh, okay,” was all he said.

Hannibal rewarded him with another kiss.

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Hannibal left early in the morning and Will was left wandering around the house. Today, his anxiety remained dormant, but boredom was quick to come to its place.

Maybe he needed to think about getting a job. He couldn’t stay in the house doing nothing indefinitely. But with his embarrassing level of education and work history, where could he go? He didn’t want to risk getting involved with the FBI again, not in any form. Not to mention that he had been working unofficially and he couldn’t point to Jack as a person to recommend him.
He could imagine what kind of recommendation Jack would write.

Hours were dragging slowly, filling Will with a new kind of restlessness. Hannibal was supposed to return after eight o’clock only, which meant that there were still at least five hours to go.

Maybe he could cook dinner. The only thing he was currently capable of. Hannibal would return tired, after an entire day on the road, probably hungry.

They were low on anything eatable, though, and unless Will was willing to risk driving to a store…

No. He wasn’t.

Nonetheless, after one more hour, this idea started to look more and more appealing.

Why not? Hannibal had left his car here today, choosing to call for a cab and then use the train to get to wherever Will’s car was being kept.

He could call for a cab himself, but then again, he wasn’t sick. The distance between here and the nearest store wasn’t that big, and if he was driving carefully and slowly, the danger would be minimal.

Maybe he could actually surprise Hannibal this time. He had plenty of hours to get everything ready, even if he ruined something and had to start over. The dinner might not be up to Hannibal’s real standards, but it would definitely be better than that disastrous breakfast that Hannibal had still eaten and praised, the lovely fool.

And when cooking, Will would be able to think — to plan. Cooking was a surprisingly soothing process. It would certainly help to kill time.

Patting Winston goodbye, Will grabbed the keys from Hannibal’s car. Then, with a sigh, he took the money Hannibal was constantly leaving on one of the shelves and left the house.

Living on Hannibal’s money didn’t really bother him per se — there was a big, mostly omegan part of Will that reveled in being taken care of, and he knew without doubt that Hannibal enjoyed taking care of him in return. However, doing nothing at all? It wasn’t for him. He didn’t have issues with being a partner who earned less — with current laws in place, few omegas could out-earn their alphas. But being a partner who stayed at home and took care of the house only? No. It would never be acceptable.

Which brought him back to the question — what could he do?

Hannibal’s car obeyed him easily, so Will got to the store without any troubles. When he was driving back, though, a strange, prickling sensation from yesterday returned, warning him about something he couldn’t decipher.

He tried to ignore it and focus on what he was going to cook instead. The backseat was full of products and ingredients, some of which he had never worked with before. The recipes sounded interesting and delicious in the Internet, but would they be so in reality?

A wave of panic swept through him suddenly and Will grabbed the wheel tightly, shocked and confused.

What were his body and his mind reacting to? What was going on?

He glanced in the rearview mirror but saw nothing. The road was empty — no danger, nothing to
explain the way his heart was pounding, the way this irrational fear kept crushing the air right out of his lungs.

Growling in frustration, Will slowed the car down. It would take him longer to get home if driving at such speed but he preferred to be safe than sorry.

With the corner of his eye, he saw something move at him from the side road. Will turned his head just in time to see a huge black car crash into him, sending him spinning uncontrollably.

Somehow, he managed to stay on the road, but the car came at him again, colliding with him violently. This time, the airbags came out, and Will cried from the impact, then cried again when another push jerked him hard enough for something in his body to snap. The pain was sharp enough to blind him for a moment, and when he opened his eyes again, he realized the car was burning and he was trapped between his seat and the airbags, with his body refusing to move.

Horror and panic were as suffocating as the smoke that was quickly filling the salon. Will tried to get himself free, but another crash — and everything darkened.

With the last bits of his fading consciousness, he thought, *I love you, I’m sorry.*

He heard how someone approached his car, stepping on the broken, crunching glass, but he couldn’t even open his eyes.

The next moment, everything was gone.
Hi! I'm endlessly sorry for such a long wait. RL has gone crazy these last 2 months. In short, I've lost a job, found 2 new ones; I've lost two creatures I loved dearly and found a new crippled one. For someone who hates changes with passion, this has been a nightmare. Still, things are getting better)

I hope you'll enjoy the new chapter and thank you so, so much for your amazing support!

The sound of the rain knocking against the window slowly pulled Will from his slumber. He opened his eyes, frowning when the breath he tried to take echoed painfully through his lungs. His legs also ached, in a weird, sharp way, and he tried to sit up to see what was wrong with them.

“Don’t,” Hannibal’s quiet voice stopped him. Startled, Will looked up and saw him sitting not far from his bed, half-hidden in the shadows.

“Hannibal? What happened?”

For a moment, Hannibal remained silent, and an unpleasant, anxious feeling started to grow inside Will.

What was wrong? What was he doing in bed, and why was Hannibal here when he was supposed to be back only—

Oh.

The car crash. Someone following him, trying to… kill him?

The impact, and the fire, and someone approaching.

He’d been trapped in his car. He was sure that he was about to die. So, how did he get here?

“There was… an accident,” Hannibal said finally. His voice sounded strange. “You have a broken rib, a concussion, and some mild burns on your legs. You have also inhaled too much smoke, but there isn’t any extensive damage. You’ll make full recovery. Though I’m worried about your head, and—” Hannibal stopped talking, taking a deep breath. Will noticed how his hands clenched into fists almost convulsively, as if he was barely keeping himself in place.

This worried him much more than his own injuries.

“I don’t remember much,” Will said carefully. “But I do remember another car deliberately crashing into me and trying to push me off the road.”

At this, Hannibal snarled, and the open fury on his face made Will shiver.

“Jack Crawford!” he hissed, and Will stared, not sure if he’d heard it right.
“I don’t think so,” he said finally. “Jack isn’t crazy. And despite our relationship, I doubt he’d attack me like that.”

“You were in my car,” Hannibal jumped to his feet, clearly unable to keep himself calm any longer. “He thought I was the one driving. He deliberately waited for your return from the city. He doesn’t have any evidence, so he thought this was the only way to free you of me.” Hannibal sneered and Will felt his fury grow, turning into something darker, something much more dangerous.

“Is this an official version?” he asked, hoping Hannibal didn’t notice the skepticism in his voice.

Apparently, it was the wrong question because Hannibal’s face went ashen.

“No,” he whispered. “According to the official version, Jack saved you. He was planning to visit us and he witnessed the crash. According to the official version, the attacker’s car was damaged, so he left it and fled to the forest, and Jack didn’t have time to go after him because you needed his help. According to the official version, he pulled you outside and called an ambulance, and only his interference saved you from being burned alive, in my own car!” Hannibal drew in a sharp breath, his body shaking subtly, and Will reached for him, ignoring the pain it caused.

“Come here,” he murmured, and Hannibal nearly fell into his arms, careful not to put too much pressure on him, hiding his face in his shoulder.

“It’s all right,” Will said, dropping a small kiss on Hannibal’s nape. “Some of it has to be true, right? Because someone did pull me out, I obviously couldn’t do that myself.”

“Oh, Jack did pull you out,” Hannibal replied, his voice nearly unrecognizable from the hatred it was filled with. “He has burns on his arms to prove it. After the crash, the windows broke and he must have seen you instead of me. He pulled you out, but it doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t change the fact that he was the one to attack you. It doesn’t change the fact that he’s lied to others about what happened, and it surely doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to make him pay!”

“Hannibal!” Now disturbed, Will tried to jerk back, but Hannibal didn’t let him. “You can’t know that he’s lying.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Hannibal hissed. “Jack just conveniently happened to be nearby when you were attacked, driving my car? When he had promised to help you by getting rid of me? And that very day, his own car happened to be broken, so he took a cab, but the cab driver can’t be questioned because he wanted to avoid the FBI’s attention and left the scene? There were two cars on that road, yours and the attacker’s, and two people, you and Jack. It’s obvious what happened and who was driving.”

Well, that did sound strange. Will couldn’t deny it. Hannibal’s words made sense.

Who else would attack him? Neither he nor Hannibal didn’t have any enemies. No one but Jack, who knew the truth and who considered Will a victim that needed to be saved.

But agreeing with Hannibal would mean justifying his intention to get revenge, and Will couldn’t let this happen.

Too dangerous. Too risky. Playing games with Jack would never end well, and if Jack was really to blame for the crash, then they could use it to their advantage.

“Maybe you’re right,” Will started. “But if so, then Jack’s already feeling guilty enough. We don’t need to do anything, Hannibal, he’ll do it himself. He’ll leave us alone now that he—”
“You nearly died,” Hannibal whispered. This time, he pulled back himself, looking at him intently. “He almost killed you. I heard… through the bond. I heard you dying.”

The words sent shiver though Will’s body.

He didn’t want to imagine it. He was used to listening to the bond, reading Hannibal’s feelings through it — he’d been doing it for years. But sensing Hannibal’s death, his fear, his pain?

It was too frightening to even consider.

Still, Will shook his head stubbornly.

“I didn’t die,” he said. “I wasn’t even injured badly, you can see it yourself.”

“You thought you were dying. You said goodbye to me.”

“I—” Will flushed, torn between empathy and embarrassment. “Maybe. I know, I remember it. But it meant nothing. As I said, I’m all right, and if Jack did this, he’ll be feeling so guilty that—”

“You’re pregnant.”

Will’s mouth fell open. He touched his throat absentmindedly, clasping it, knowing that his face was stuck in a shocked, incredulous expression.

Pregnant? No. He never even— It was never supposed to happen. He’d dreamt of having a family once, but a child, now?

A child. Now.

His and Hannibal’s child.

A shaky smile lit his face as the implications began to sink in, and suddenly, he was almost breathless with wild, unexpected joy.

“Hannibal!” he exclaimed. “Hannibal, this is—” He stopped abruptly when he saw the grave expression on Hannibal’s face.

…Oh.

Was Hannibal not happy?

Will narrowed his eyes, unsure how to react, but Hannibal grabbed his hands, squeezing them tightly.

“Jack almost killed both of you,” he said, his voice quiet and deadly. “I’m not going to let it go. When you were rushed to the hospital, you were not in an immediate danger, but the child was. They didn’t even realize it immediately. When I arrived, when they told me, I—” Hannibal pursed his lips and closed his eyes for a second. “I can’t keep doing this,” he breathed out finally. “I can’t keep losing you. Jack has to go.”

“No,” Will was surprised at how firm his words sounded. “No, Hannibal. I wasn’t going to agree to it before, but now, when I know… How can you even think of revenge? There are more important things at stake!”

“There is nothing more important than your life!” Hannibal roared, jumping back to his feet so abruptly that Will winced. “I was gone for less than two days and when I come back, I learn that
you almost died and that we nearly lost a child who I didn’t even know existed! And all because of one man, the man who’s crossed all lines this time.”

“Jack expects you to go after him, more than ever now. He’s going to be waiting for you. Would you actually risk our future because of some petty revenge? Because if there’s a child, then we have to think about it. We are… we are going to have a family.” Another involuntarily smile touched Will’s lips and he grinned, unable to stop himself. “We’re going to have a family,” he repeated, awed, and Hannibal cursed and kissed him, rough and desperate, pouring all his fear, joy, and longing into it.

“We’ve already had a family,” he murmured when he pulled back, staring at him. “Child or no child. It’s just that our family is going to be bigger now.”

“Yes,” Will agreed, grinning. “And we won’t let anything ruin it. Including Jack. Please, trust me, Hannibal. I know Jack. If he’s responsible, he’s going to feel so guilty that he’ll never bother us again. Never. I’m sure of it.”

Hannibal was silent. Will sensed his turmoil, his hesitation, and then a surge of calmness went through the bond and Hannibal nodded slightly.

“All right,” he said. “I won’t do anything.”

Will paused, wondering why the words felt like a lie when all he could feel on Hannibal’s end was calmness and sincerity. But his happiness was too overwhelming, too powerful, so he kissed Hannibal again, willing to believe and forget all about Jack.

They were going to have a child.

This was the only thing he wanted to think about.

***


Will was euphoric. His hands kept going to his stomach, trying to imagine the life developing there, the combination of his and Hannibal’s genes, alarming because of who they were, but theirs. *Theirs.*

The only thing hindering his happiness was Hannibal’s reaction. He tried to act relaxed and joyful, and to maintain the same emotions through the bond, but Will kept sensing the break here and there, the sudden rush of rage that was immediately forcefully subdued.

Hannibal was planning something. He wished he could discard these worries, but it was impossible.

Two days later, his suspicions grew true when Hannibal gave him a half-hearted kiss and said, “I’ll have to leave for tonight. One of my patients had an emergency and she asks for a session first
thing in the morning. I’ll sleep in the house in Baltimore and I’ll be back as soon as I finish.”

The house in Baltimore. Right.

Will’s heart sank but he tried to appear casual.

“Okay,” he said. Hannibal hesitated.

“Will you be all right?” he asked. “Do you feel better?”

“You keep asking this same question twelve times a day. Yes, I feel fine. Mostly. Nothing painkillers and lots of sleep won’t cure,” Will forced himself to smile, even though it proved to be difficult, especially when Hannibal sighed in obvious relief.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll try to get back as soon as I can. I promise. If something happens, call me at once.”

‘I promise’.

Yes, Will could see how well Hannibal kept his promises.

Liar.

He couldn’t reply this time so he just nodded, already trying to calculate if he’d be able to drive the car in his condition.

Pretending that he’s reading, Will watched Hannibal gather his things, including his box of death with torture tools.

How predictable.

He didn’t know what he felt more, anger or disappointment at the betrayal.

He hoped they’d made progress. After everything, he hoped Hannibal had learned from his mistakes, but no, he chose to lie and deceive him again.

And it wasn’t only Will now, was it? With his stunt, Hannibal was also betraying their child, willing to risk everything just for the sake of his pride.

Where did that even leave them? If Hannibal hadn’t lied, maybe Will could try to understand his point of view. If he’d stood up for what he wanted, maybe they could reach a compromise.

But it was too late now.

When Hannibal wasn’t looking, Will gulped down his painkillers and got his car keys ready. He tolerated another kiss, gave another forced smile, and as soon as the door slammed shut, he hastened to get up and start dressing.

After the accident, Will wasn’t comfortable driving, especially with the headlights off. However, this was his only option if he wanted to follow Hannibal and remain unnoticed with a distinctive car like his.

Five minutes later, he already hit the road.
Hannibal’s new car was temporarily and it wasn’t very good, so Will managed to catch up easily. He stayed behind, trying to subdue his own growing ire.

Bastard.

The Chesapeake Ripper was never irrational. He always planned ahead and he avoided all traps, sensing them even before they were devised. So how could he not understand that right now, he was heading straight into one?

Or was there something else going on? Maybe Will was mistaken and Hannibal wasn’t going to target Jack, after all?

They didn’t even reach the city when Hannibal’s car stopped. The headlights went off and he climbed out, holding something Will couldn’t see from here.

Intrigued, he also left his car, but didn’t risk going further.

The area was unfamiliar. Jack certainly didn’t live here, so what the hell was Hannibal planning?

Curious, Will moved after him slowly, trying to stay closer to the bushes. He couldn’t see anything apart from the small house in a distance, not even Hannibal who seemed to have merged with the darkness.

Will stopped, realizing there was no point in going further like this. Instead, he waited, and soon Hannibal reappeared, carrying something big and heavy.

Stunned, Will stared at this, clearly recognizing a shape of human body.

Did Hannibal decide to kill some random person? Was this what it was about? He just wanted to kill someone to vent his anger?

There was no time to try to figure it out. Despite the additional weight, Hannibal was moving quickly, so Will rushed back to his car, hoping Hannibal wouldn’t turn back.

He didn’t. Hannibal’s car moved forward and Will followed him. Now that he made sure that Hannibal wasn’t targeting Jack, the anger disappeared, replaced by something that felt suspiciously like excitement.

He’d seen Hannibal kill before, but it was only once, and the kill was personal. He’d never witnessed a Chesapeake Ripper kill.

Well, almost never. The exception was—

No.

Will shook his head, chasing away the thoughts. The past was in the past. He’d made his decision and he was going to stick to it.

Hannibal finally stopped on one of Baltimore streets. There were numerous buildings around and Will frowned again, feeling that he was missing something.

Surely Hannibal wasn’t going to kill his victim here, where anyone could see? It was only eleven o’clock. The majority of people were not sleeping yet.

From his place, Will watched how Hannibal dragged the body from the car and threw it on the ground, next to the wall. He bent down to arrange it slightly, then stepped back to the car, took
something Will couldn’t recognize and approached the wall. Then he began to write on it.

More and more confused, Will waited for him to finish, looking around anxiously to make sure that the streets remained empty.

What the hell was wrong with Hannibal? How did he even pick the victim’s house? He went there for a reason. And why choose such a place to dispose of the body? Why write anything? It wasn’t Hannibal’s style at all.

One minute later, Hannibal got into his car and left, and Will, unable to fight his curiosity, checked the streets once again and crept closer to the body.

It was a man in simple clothing with bright spots of paint on it. Judging from his wide-open eyes and neck that was twisted under an unnatural angle, he was dead.

So, Hannibal had killed him back at the house. By snapping his neck.

Again, this wasn’t his style. And the writing—

Will froze, staring at the red inscription. *Spray-painted* inscription.

JACK CRAWFORD. FBI.

He was ready to take his words back. It wasn’t just ‘not Hannibal’s style’, it was the opposite. Will cringed just from looking at the tacky, almost embarrassing display, at the graffiti of fake-blood color, at the deceased who was lying with his hands thrown dramatically.

No, he didn’t know what in the world this was. He wasn’t sure he wanted to find out.

Was it a prank on Jack? The safe way to take revenge? But what purpose did it serve?

Still bewildered, Will hastened to return to his car. He knew that in his shock, he’d lost the valuable time and he wouldn’t be able to locate Hannibal again, but if this joke of a murder was Hannibal’s main goal, then maybe he did return to their Baltimore house?

He had. Will stared at Hannibal’s car parked next to the house, at the lit windows, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Hannibal was absolutely crazy, but at least he hadn’t lied to him. If he wanted to drag Jack out of his bed in the middle of the night to stare at the ridiculous crime scene, then so be it. Will had been imagining much worse scenarios.

Enjoying the lightness that replaced his dark premonitions, Will pressed his hand to his stomach carefully, smiling at how strangely self-conscious it made him feel.

“Daddy is silly,” he murmured. “Isn’t he? Instead of being with us, he’s going around killing people and taunting FBI agents. Silly and reckless. But he’s ours, so I suppose we should accept him for who he is.”

It didn’t feel like he was talking to himself, even though he knew the baby couldn’t hear him.

Smiling widely, Will started the car again.

It was time to go home.
It was around one a.m. when he finally reached his bed and fell asleep, listening to his body’s complaints.

It was half past three when a loud noise woke him up.

Will sat up abruptly, ignoring his aching rib, feeling how his heart began to pound.

Someone was in the house. Someone had just broken into their living room.

He could still hear the noise, the sharp gasps that he couldn’t identify, and it only made him more frightened.

Carefully, Will left the bed and tiptoed toward the door, opening it and praying for it not to make any noise.

Now, the foreign sounds were more distinct, but while Will still failed to understand what they were, the scent hit him full-force.

Hannibal’s blood.

Gasping, he forgot about the precautions and stormed downstairs without thinking.

As he thought, it was Hannibal. He was half-sitting, half-lying on the coach, grimacing and holding his chest.

And his shirt was bloody.

“What happened?!" Will was at his side in an instant, his hands flying desperately, unsure how to help.

“Nothing,” Hannibal said through clenched teeth. One of his hands snaked around Will’s waist automatically. “It’s not dangerous. I’ve already done what’s needed.”

“It doesn’t look like that to me, you have to go to the hospital! How did you even drive here? Hannibal!”

Hannibal didn’t answer. His body tensed and a grimace twisted his face, though he made no sound this time.

“I’m calling the ambulance,” Will warned him, trying to stand up, but Hannibal shook his head.

“Can’t,” he whispered. “Not tonight.”

“Why not? What did you do, Hannibal?”

For a second, a terrible, cruel smile crossed Hannibal’s face.

“I killed Bella Crawford,” he said, and Will stepped back, unable to believe what he’d heard. For a
second, the force of shock knocked all oxygen out from his lungs and he let out a hoarse, gasping sound.

“No,” he whispered. “How?”

“I lured Jack out of his house. Left a body that the others noticed almost immediately with his name above it. As soon as he was called in, I broke into his house. Had an engaging… interaction… with his wife.”

“Bella stabbed you?” Will blinked. The shocking pieces of news were coming too quickly and he had no idea how to deal with them all, never mind accept them.

“I underestimated her,” Hannibal said reluctantly, wincing and clutching at his wound. “I was angry and I didn’t see her as a threat. By the time I killed her… by the time I stitched myself and cleaned up all traces of my blood…”

“No,” Will shook his head again. He felt like he was plunged into a nightmare that he desperately needed to wake up from. “Bella… she was innocent.”

“She was his partner.”

“Yes, and what do you think he’s going to do now? You fucking bastard!” Will raised his voice, furious and terrified. “You can’t even go to the hospital now without it being seen as suspicious, and what if Jack comes here with other agents? You won’t be able to explain your wound!”

“He has already... compromised himself. No one is going listen to him, especially in… such… state.”

“It doesn’t matter! Jack won’t need any back-up this time, he’ll come with one goal, to kill us both! Is this what you wanted?”

“I protected you!”

“You’ve endangered me! You’ve endangered me, you’ve endangered yourself, twice, and you’ve endangered our child! You lied to me!”

The next second, the lights went out. Will froze, feeling a new wave of suffocating terror.

It couldn’t be. Both of his worst scenarios couldn’t become reality in the same night, could they? Jack couldn’t be here. How much time had passed? Could he have found Bella already, could he have driven here?

If he figured out Hannibal’s ploy quickly… then maybe. Possibly.

How could Jack have figured it out when Will failed?

If only he had realized that Hannibal wouldn’t just play a cheap, meaningless joke. If only he had stayed long enough to stop him.

The front door suddenly shook under the force of someone’s blows, and then Jack’s bellowing voice screamed Hannibal’s name.

Slowly, Will looked at Hannibal who had gone quiet, staring in the direction of the door with an unusually lost, panicked expression.

Hannibal was out of the game now.
It meant that it was his turn to step in.
So sorry for the long wait! I hope all of you had a wonderful celebration and that this year will be much kinder to us. Since this chapter signifies the beginning of the finale, after long deliberation, I decided to make it from both Will's and Hannibal's points of view. Hope you'll enjoy it!

Also, this story is now being translated into Russian.

I love you. I'm sorry. Goodbye.

The words Hannibal had felt pulsating through his and Will’s bond sent a rush of icy coldness down his spine. The feelings that accompanied them, though, the fear, the despair, the resignation that Will was experiencing — they were pure venom, sipping into his blood and making his breath catch in his throat. And then even they were gone, replaced by darkness and emptiness that Hannibal found maddening.

He had lived all his life without being bonded, not attuned to anyone’s emotions. But the brief moments of connection he and Will had been sharing were enough to make him unable to imagine his life in any other way. And now, being cut off from him like that…

By the time Hannibal received the call and arrived to the hospital, he barely controlled himself. He knew he must look wild – even the nurses tried to stay away from him, but it wouldn’t have saved them, any of them, if Will was dead. Hannibal would have razed this entire hospital to the ground and only a bullet to his head would have stopped him.

But Will was fine. Almost fine, despite the car crash. And he was pregnant.

Incomprehension and stupor that followed such news lasted far longer than Hannibal was willing to admit. Shock, disbelief, timid joy, and finally full-blown elation changed into one another, filling him with happiness so profound and unexpected, he had no idea what to do with it.

But in the end, this elation only served to fuel his rage when he learned what exactly had happened to Will and who was responsible for it.

Jack Crawford reeked of guilt. His burned hands kept twitching nervously and he couldn’t look away from Will’s ward, worried to the point where he was almost sick with it. Hannibal could sense it clearly, and in that moment, he wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around Jack’s throat and squeeze the life out of him, watching and reveling in the realization that he was the last thing Jack saw in this world.

When they finally allowed him to take Will home, the rage faded to the background but hadn’t dissipated entirely. It kept boiling slowly, getting brighter and brighter, consuming his every thought until the whole world acquired red, hazy contours.

Hannibal wanted blood. He wanted revenge. He wanted safety for Will — no, not just for Will. For their family.
I won’t do anything, he had promised, making sure he emanated calmness and sincerity. After so many years, he had quite an experience in lying. He knew how to control his body and even though the bond with Will was new, he figured out how to manipulate it.

Killing Bella Crawford wasn’t supposed to be a difficult task. Hannibal had set a clear goal for himself and he intended to achieve it no matter what, ignoring the quiet whisper of stop, you can’t lie to Will again, he won’t forgive this.

However, ignoring it was growing increasingly difficult, and when Bella, who had looked abnormally calm for someone who’d found an intruder in her home, plunged the knife right into his chest, Hannibal was stunned. He’d managed to react instantly, which was why the knife passed the vital organs, but the cut was still deep and potentially dangerous. By the time he got home, he was shaking from exhaustion and blood loss. He was completely, infuriatingly helpless.

And when the lights went off, when Jack’s agonized bellow shook the walls as he began to break the front door, Hannibal was finally forced to admit it.

He’d miscalculated. Badly.

Will was right. In the end, he’d only endangered him and their child, and he had few chances to redeem himself now, both in Will’s and in his own eyes.

It was too late. Fatally late.

Grimacing from the pain and the racket Winston was causing with his angry barking, Hannibal glanced at Will. Will kept staring at the door with a cold, emotionless expression on his face. There was a calculating glint in his eyes that Hannibal would have admired recently, but now, all he felt was fear.

Because whatever Will was planning, physically, he wasn’t a match for Jack. A pregnant omega inexperienced in combat against a trained, much older alpha? An alpha who surely had a gun and could shoot them without blinking.

Not Will, though. Will could still be safe — if he played his cards right.

“Will,” Hannibal didn’t recognize his own voice. It was too hollow. “Let him in. Let him do what he came here for.”

Admitting his failure was difficult, but admitting his helplessness in front of the only person that mattered to him, the only one he ever wanted to impress? It was excruciating.

Yet even despite being a fool, Hannibal wasn’t a coward. Disregarding everything connected to Will, he always based his decisions on cold, hard facts, and facts were, he had no chances to survive this night. The wound inflicted by Bella continued to drain him every minute and in his current condition, he would not be able to even slow Jack down, never mind defeat him.

He had lost. He had lost the moment he had broken his promise to Will, and the only thing he could still do, the last thing he could do, was make his death count.

He had to protect Will.

“Tell him what he wants to hear,” Hannibal said lowly. “Ask for his help, make it look like you’re just gaining your consciousness and… Will?”

Will didn’t even look at him. He straightened, grabbed Winston by the collar and walked out of
the living room quickly, disappearing to where Hannibal couldn’t see him.

Confusion and pain at being so obviously rejected clashed, but the relief underlying them prevailed.

Whatever Will had chosen to do, the farther he was from here, the better.

Outside, Jack continued to fight with the door, and despite the situation, a small smirk briefly curled Hannibal’s lips upwards.

He knew what kind of door to order. No one could break it that simply.

In his fruitless glee, he almost missed how Will walked back in, carrying something in his hands. Hannibal squinted and frowned, realizing it was his torture tools kit. What was Will planning to do with it? It’s not like any of those things could be used against Jack directly. They were good, but they required the victim to already be incapacitated, just like—

Just like he himself was now.

Hannibal’s eyes widened in realization and he had managed to take one deep breath before Will slammed the chloroform-soaked cloth against his nose and mouth, staring at him with the same emotionless expression.

The air he’d been able to inhale helped, but it was quickly coming to an end and Will kept pressing the cloth forward, watching him intently. Hannibal closed his eyes, pretending to lose consciousness, but Will didn’t remove the cloth even then. Five seconds later, he inhaled involuntarily.

This time, his mind truly blackened.

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Will’s mind was brimming with thoughts and strategies even as he moved to execute the first step of his hasty plan.

Close Winston in the room upstairs. Take one of Hannibal’s torture kits, making sure it had what he needed, and return to the living room.

Hannibal was an obstacle right now. An obstacle thinking that he was still in control, after everything he’d done to lead to this disaster. It was ridiculous of him to think Will was going to obey him; it was even more ridiculous to believe Will would join Jack in attempt to protect himself.

There was their child, though, but Will tried not to think about it. Because if he was pushed to choose between Hannibal and the child… he knew what choice he would make.

Hannibal looked so taken aback by his actions that Will nearly smiled. He waited until Hannibal’s eyes closed, waited some more to make sure he wasn’t pretending, then grabbed him as carefully as he could and dragged him upstairs, to the same room where Winston was hidden. He could hear
gunshots — it seemed like Jack had given up on trying to break the door and decided to shoot the lock down.

Good.

Winston whined at the sight of Hannibal’s unmoving body and Will briefly touched his head in a soothing caress.

“It’s all right,” he murmured. “He’ll be fine. But we have to make sure he stays as far away from Jack as he can, got it?”

Winston wagged his tail once and Will took it as agreement. There was silence downstairs now, so he quickly pulled Hannibal’s shirt off him and pressed its bloodied part against his throat, rubbing its scent into himself. Hannibal had stitched his wound but it was clearly done too hastily because blood was still sipping through in several places. Will wiped it away with his hands, covering himself with Hannibal’s smell thoroughly. Then he put on his shirt and left the room, shutting the door firmly.

Next step involved provoking Jack into shooting again and again, until he wasted all of his bullets. The gun was giving him an unfair advantage — his and Hannibal’s chances, bad as they were, amounted to nothing at all as long as Jack could just shoot them.

Will worked long enough with Jack to know what gun he had (Beretta), how many bullets there were (16), and how many magazines he usually kept (2).

If both of Jack’s magazines were full, there were 32 bullets that Will had to force him to lose. He doubted that Jack would have taken more – undoubtedly, he wanted to kill Hannibal with his own hands, taking a gun simply to make sure he had an advantage.

Three bullets were already spent on the front door that refused to budge. 29 bullets were still to go, and this number seemed too impossible for Will’s plan to actually work. Too dangerous.

But attacking Jack directly was even more so. It would mean an automatic defeat.

Will grabbed a knife from the kitchen and crept to one of the windows. Logically, if Jack had given up on trying to break the door, this was what he would try next.

Will had to stall for time.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the window and carefully looked outside. Nothing. The backyard was empty. Wherever Jack was, it wasn’t here.

Will slipped on the wet grass, shivering from cold, and rushed to the other side of the house. He found Jack there, examining one of the windows with an enraged, wild look on his face.

Thank God Hannibal made each of his houses into a fortress. No one could get inside easily.

Will waited for Jack to raise his gun and shoot three more times into the window. Growling with frustration, he shot again, and again, and the glass finally broke. Before Jack could climb inside, though, Will laughed, a low and cold sound that wasn’t quite like Hannibal’s laughter but which also didn’t resemble his own.

Jack reacted just as he had predicted. He whipped his head around, screaming Hannibal’s name, and proceeded to shoot several times in his direction without even seeing his silhouette. Will sighed, resentful and strangely regretful.
Jack was always easy to play. He followed emotions blindly, losing all his professionalism and objectivity when the case was personal. Will knew he could use it, he knew how to use it, but a sudden unexpected surge of attachment made him pause for a second.

He and Jack had never been friends yet they’d been through a lot together. There was time when Will had craved his approval and consideration, when he was bursting with gratitude at being allowed to work on the Ripper’s case. Jack was the closest thing to a mentor he’d ever had, and before Hannibal, he was the only person Will could rely on.

Jack had dragged him out of hell. Even now, knowing Will was a murderer, he wanted to protect him, thinking that Hannibal was brainwashing him.

Would he really be able to kill him, even knowing that all Jack wanted was a justified revenge for his wife — a kind, innocent woman that was never supposed to die? Will might have had a difficult relationship with Jack but he always liked Bella. He liked listening to Jack’s stories about her and he absorbed the kindness she always bestowed on him so generously.

Will pursed his lips tightly. Rubbed some of Hannibal’s blood against the wall for Jack to find and sense.

Then he ran.

***

Hannibal woke up to gunshots. They were so occasional that at first he suspected he’d misheard, but another loud bang made him sit up and hiss from the pain.

His cut was stinging and he was… missing a shirt? Winston let out a pathetic noise, trying to lick the blood off his chest, and Hannibal winced before patting his head reluctantly.

Another gunshot made him go cold.

Gritting his teeth, he stood up, fighting dizziness and looking around for a shirt or a weapon. He found nothing, and when another gunshot tore through the silence, followed by Jack’s yelling, it lost all relevance. Hannibal opened the door and stepped into the darkened corridor, focused only on getting to Will — or to Jack.

For a brief moment, a quiet, half-forgotten sense of wonder descended, making him falter.

He had become unrecognizable. Gone was his tendency to plan everything many steps in advance, to twist the situation in the most satisfying and beneficial way. Going to face Jack in his current state was a death sentence. That was probably the reason why Will had chosen to knock him out — even now, despite the betrayal, he was trying to protect him.

But Hannibal couldn’t let him do it. The need to defend and direct Jack’s attention toward himself was too strong to fight it, so he moved again, trying to be quiet.
What was Will even planning? To make Jack pursue him? How long did he think it could last?

Another gunshot sounded, much closer than before, and Hannibal tensed, thinking rapidly.

Jack couldn’t possibly be that bad of a shooter. He also couldn’t be so idiotic so as to shoot repeatedly without having a clear target. Which meant that Will was playing a game with him, making him… waste the bullets?

So that’s why he’d taken his shirt? To mask his own scent and to cover himself with Hannibal’s for Jack to track, losing his mind in the process of the chase?

Hannibal allowed himself a second of admiration, basking in the pride he felt.

Will was stealthy and deadly when he wanted to be. He did not doubt it – he’d never doubted it. But to run around the house, to risk being shot at?

Unacceptably dangerous. And even if it worked, what then? Would Will be able to kill Jack? He had been reluctant to do so in the past, when Hannibal offered. Emily was one thing, but Will’s relationship with Jack was considerably more complex. And if he failed, the fact that he was wearing Hannibal’s shirt would tell Jack clearly whose side Will was on.

There were no guarantees in this plan, and anything that didn’t promise absolute safety for Will wasn’t worth a risk.

Silence stretched, making it impossible for Hannibal to determine where he had to move. Unsure, he crept toward the stairs, and then Jack’s smell hit him full-force. He had a second to prepare himself before Jack himself emerged from one of the rooms, without a gun, shaking with fury.

Hannibal jumped on him without wasting even a moment, inflicting a powerful blow to the middle of his throat. Gasping, Jack recoiled, and Hannibal hit him again, this time right on his face. Jack’s blood burned his fingers, but before he could deliver the final blow, the balance shifted. Jack recovered faster than he’d hoped, grabbing him by the shoulders. Hannibal kicked him in the knee, but while the force he applied was sufficient to dislocate it, Jack only grunted. His grip didn’t weaken and in the next second, he lifted him off the floor and threw him off the stairs.

His collarbone snapped, sending painful aftershocks through his body. Hannibal tried to regroup but he still landed badly — for several moments, he couldn’t breathe, briefly blinded by the pain and dizziness from the impact.

Jack followed him, breathing heavily, and his eyes promised death.

Well. He’d had a small chance to take him aback, but now it was lost. With his broken collarbone, he was utterly useless.

Hannibal bit his lip, thinking about Will and their child, about the moments they could have, the future that he had taken from himself — again.

He should have listened to Will. If he had, they would be lying in bed now, sated after a celebratory dinner, Will purring in pleasure as Hannibal stroked his hair gently, bathing in the combination of his deceptively sweet smell and the yet-undefined smell of their child.

Regret and longing that crashed into him were startlingly painful. Hannibal let himself wallow in them for a little longer before forcing his mind to focus on Jack.

He wouldn’t give up, with or without the broken collarbone. He would still fight, even without
hoping to win. He had to give Will more time to do whatever it was he was doing — and Hannibal hoped it involved staying safe.

“You took everything from me,” Jack said, and despite his situation, Hannibal still felt a pang of malicious pleasure. Jack’s voice sounded as ruined as he himself looked – just the effect Hannibal had been hoping to achieve. “My wife. She had nothing to do with it. Killing women and abusing omegas — is this the only thing you’re good at?”

“You know it’s not,” Hannibal twisted his lips in a cold smile. “And I don’t abuse omegas. That’s your prerogative.”

“I never meant for that accident to happen to Will,” Jack hissed. “I thought it was you, you bastard!” He finally reached him and before Hannibal could reply, Jack kicked him in the ribs as hard as he could. Another bone snapped and Hannibal gritted his teeth to stay quiet, continuing to stare Jack down.

“The accident was a culmination,” he said when the most intense wave of pain passed. “You know as well as I do that your abuse of Will started from the moment he came to you, so eager to take anything you threw at him for a chance to work on the Ripper’s case.”

“Look who’s talking!” Jack roared. “You killed his father and then started to court him, drove him to a suicide attempt — and you have the audacity to blame me for mistreating him?”

“I don’t pretend to be better than I am.”

Growling, Jack kicked him again. Hannibal grabbed him by his ankle, tearing into his skin with his nails, but another kick made his hold weaken. Jack said something he didn’t decipher and began to bend down, and then Will’s desperate scream pierced the darkness, making them both freeze.

For Hannibal, it felt like eternity had passed before the scream finally quieted down, and by then, every hair on his body stood on end.

He tried to get up, his own pain forgotten, feeling terrified and more vulnerable than a moment ago, when he was sure he had less than a minute left to live.

“What did you do to him?” he growled at Jack, and at this very second, Jack hissed the same words at him.

Panic and rage made Hannibal’s head spin, filling him with a new rush of fear, anger, and confusion.

Could Jack have hurt Will in that shooting spree? But if so, why would he act so scared now?

Or was it all a part of Will’s plan? But that scream had sounded so desperate and real…

There was a crash coming from upstairs and then Will stumbled from the darkness, holding his bloodied stomach.

At first, Hannibal refused to believe this. Surely it had to be some plan? Who could have hurt Will if Jack hadn’t done it?

But as Will started to come down, clutching at the railing with one hand and continuing to hold his stomach with another, doubts and renewed terror started to gnaw at his sense of self-control.

From the smell of it, Will’s wound was real and quite serious. He was wearing his own shirt this
time, and the part at his stomach was slick with blood.

“Will,” Jack stepped to him, careful to avoid turning his back to Hannibal. “What happened?”

“My child,” Will whispered. “It’s gone. He took it from me.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows rose. Slowly, he leaned back to reduce the pressure on his right hand. He was still ready to lunge forward if Will was in danger, but even though worry continued to hiss inside, urging him to do something, the intensity of it passed.

Will was definitely playing a game. He had to.

Unless he decided that the fight was lost and chose to blame Hannibal to remove suspicions from himself.

The thought was absurd but Will’s performance seemed frighteningly genuine. He was crying, his whole body shaking under the force of the sobs he tried to suppress, and the way his body kept spasming, as if failing from pain... it was unmistakably real.

Will stopped, wavered, and then fell down, with no reservations or an attempt to steady himself. Hannibal jerked forward but Jack beat him to it, catching Will just before his forehead connected with the floor, lowering him down carefully.

“Will,” Jack murmured urgently. “Will, hold on. It’s going to be fine. It’s over.”

“My child,” Will whispered again. “He... he... he didn’t want it. He took it from me.”

The words were a lie but they still hit Hannibal hard. He clenched his fists, imploring himself to stay calm, to trust Will and not act on his instincts, but it was getting harder by the moment.

What if his lie had indeed made Will change sides? What if Will truly decided that it meant he didn’t care about their child, about him?

Thinking about this, seeing Will in someone else’s protective embrace was unbearable, but Hannibal didn’t move, trying to breathe through his confusion and misery.

“It’s going to be fine,” Jack said again. He squeezed Will tighter and glanced at Hannibal briefly, probably to make sure he stayed where he was, and the next moment, Will thrust a knife into his neck.

***

Running from Jack and leading him around the house had taken long enough for Will to lose some of his anxiety and feel the first stirrings of excitement.

Jack was easy to provoke. As soon as he thought he caught a glimpse of Hannibal, he began to shoot, and Will used it in more and more creative ways, succumbing to the already familiar rush of dark pleasure.

When the last bullet was fired and nothing else followed, Will hurried to his bedroom, unable to
believe that his plan was actually working.

Knowing that Jack wasn’t far, he discarded Hannibal’s shirt and washed off his blood as quickly as he could. Then he clenched the knife in his hand and stabbed himself in the shoulder, hissing under his breath. Black dots flared behind his eyelids but he ignored them. Trying to block the pain, Will grabbed his own shirt and pressed its lower part against his shoulder, letting it absorb blood.

He wasn’t sure how Jack would treat him, but the child? The child was something all alphas reacted to strongly. If anything could slow Jack down, soothe his suspicions, it was this.

Making sure that most blood went to where he needed it, Will put the shirt on and hid the knife in his pants. There was something happening downstairs, so he rushed there, wincing from the repeated sharp stabs of pain and cursing Hannibal under his breath.

Had the stupid bastard pretended to pass out? How did he regain consciousness so quickly?

Will didn’t let himself feel anything when he saw Hannibal on the floor, one step from being killed. His entire world concentrated on Jack only.

He was strangely calm as he murmured meaningless words. His heart didn’t speed up even as he let himself fall, confident that Jack would be there to catch him.

As Jack cradled him on the floor, hunching over him protectively, Will knew it was over.

Jack had never taken him seriously. He believed in his abilities but he underestimated him in all other aspects, seeing selflessness instead of selfishness in his pursuit of the Ripper, the desire to help people in general instead of his self-focused need for revenge.

Even now, knowing what Will had done to Emily, he denied him agency. He thought he was Hannibal’s victim, someone weak and vulnerable, someone in need of protection.

He wasn’t.

Jack, predictably, looked at Hannibal, seeing him as the biggest threat in the room, and Will pulled the knife from his pants at lighting speed, sinking it into Jack’s neck before jerking it back.

Jack let out an incredulous, shocked sound as his eyes flew wide open, full of understanding and betrayal. His hands went to the wound automatically but the blood slipped through them easily, falling on Will’s face.

“You… why?” Jack wheezed out.

“I am who I am.” The son of a father who’d been violently murdered. The awkward and often ridiculed omega who despised people despite craving their acceptance. The partner of Hannibal and the mate of the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will Graham.

“He… he killed Bella.”

“I know,” Will said gently. A strange, overwhelming tenderness filled him at the sight of Jack’s paling face. It didn’t leave even as he plunged the knife back into Jack’s neck, watching how his body twitched and then collapsed backwards. Carefully, Will got up from Jack’s knees and leaned over him, watching how his eyes moved restlessly before slowing down and finally stopping entirely. They blinked for the last time and then the remains of life faded from them. Will stared,
marveling at how disappointed and bitter they still looked, but a soft noise nearby distracted him.

Hannibal.

Sighing, Will took the knife again and began to approach him.

***

Jack died beautifully, making wet, choked sounds that were music to Hannibal’s ears. He wished he could see his expression, but Will’s face, covered with Jack’s blood, was probably even more captivating in its unnatural, ethereal calmness. His eyes were alight with indulgent gentleness and Hannibal couldn’t look away, drinking him in greedily.

As Jack fell, Will peered at him, and his serene, darkly triumphant look made Hannibal’s heart skip a bit. He must have murmured something because Will turned to glance at him and his face changed, grew colder.

When he picked up the knife, Hannibal didn’t feel fear — only curiosity. He doubted Will was going to turn on him now that Jack was dead, but if he did… this was the best ending he could have imagined for himself.

Will was safe. Their child was safe. Whatever happened now, their safety was the only thing that mattered.

Will stopped next to him, looking at him with a sneer.

“Did you do that deliberately?” he asked.

“Did what?”

“Set everything up. Killed Bella to lure Jack here and push me to kill him, like you wanted to.”

That was… not what he had expected. Hannibal stared at him, watching how Will lowered himself to his knees, still clenching the knife in his hand.

How could he even think that?

“I won’t deny that I’m glad he’s dead,” Hannibal said warily. “But I would have never endangered you deliberately. You told me you don’t want to target him and I respected that.”

“Did you?” Will’s eyes narrowed as he pressed the knife against his cheek. “You lied to me. You pretended to agree with me only to go and announce war to Jack. Don’t tell me you didn’t expect him to come after what you did.”

“I expected things to go differently. I never planned for him to come like this, not after you.”

“Well, whatever it was you’ve planned, it could only have one ending. You’ve lied and you’ve put me in a position I never wanted. That’s betrayal.”

“No!” Ignoring the blade that was still pressed against his face, Hannibal leaned forward, anxious to have Will believe him. “I’d never betray you. Not again.”
“Then you and I have different definitions of this word. Do you know what this bond means, Hannibal?” Will touched the mating bite on his neck and then a similar one on Hannibal’s shoulder, pressing into it until Hannibal hissed in pain. “It marks me as yours. But it also marks you as mine. Jack thought our bond was one-way, with you controlling me, and this delusion killed him. I thought you knew he was wrong, but now it seems you have a similar problem. I’m not your weaker partner, someone you have to lie to to placate, someone for whom you can make decisions. In fact,” Will smiled mockingly, “I have half a mind to start a game of my own. To plead guilty for Bella’s death, for example. I wonder what you’d do if they arrested me for this. Would you plead guilty yourself? Would you try to break me out?”

Hannibal blinked, astonished, not knowing whether he was more worried, intimidated, or fascinated. Shivering, he had to fight his suddenly urgent desire to grab Will and pull him closer, to hide his face in his neck and ask for forgiveness, to promise anything, and mean that, only for a cold mask on Will’s face to melt.

He had no doubt that Will could come up with the craziest scheme to drive him mad, to make him regret every single thing he had ever done, but while this knowledge scared him, it also drew him in, making him helplessly addicted.

“Will,” he whispered as a wave of adoration flooded him, turning every thought in his head into a mindless desire to be forgiven and accepted again.

He didn’t know what Will read in his eyes but he chuckled, shaking his head, and the mask finally broke. The knife fell and Will snuggled closer to him, mindful of his wounds this time.

“You’re such a disaster,” he uttered, placing a careful kiss to the corner of his mouth. “I swear, Hannibal, if it wasn’t for the child, I’d make you pay for this mess. And offering me to leave before — what the hell? Are you really that big of an idiot?”

Hannibal didn’t appreciate being scolded, or called names, but right now, he absorbed each word Will gifted him with, almost purring from the joy of being near him, knowing they were safe — all of them.

“You are not even listening, are you?” Will asked.

“I am,” Hannibal objected. “I’m just being… horrified at my misdeeds. I promise to do better next time.”

“I hope there won’t be next time,” Will said sharply. “This one was more than enough.”

Hannibal smiled at him, knowing he must indeed look like a lovesick fool. Then his eyes fell on Will’s bloodied shirt and he frowned.

“You’re hurt,” he said grimly. Will rolled his eyes.

“So are you,” he retorted.

“The child?..”

“The child is fine, it was just my shoulder. Still, I think it’s time to call the police and the ambulance. You look terrible.”

“Hmm,” Hannibal agreed, grimacing as his collarbone started to wail in pain insistently. “What shall we tell them?”
A small, dark smile graced Will’s lips.

“You know what,” he replied.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Hey! :) So sorry for a huge wait. I relaxed way too much after realizing that only an epilogue is left :D It's finally completed, though. Thank you all so much for all your support and encouragement! You've made this journey so wonderful, I can't thank you enough.

The room was lit with hundreds of lights, bathing everyone in the warm, golden glow. People shifted, made small talks, drank and danced, and Will watched all of them with barely contained amusement.

He had no idea where Hannibal had found this many fluent English speakers. Considering their lack of accent, Will had a feeling that the majority had actually travelled all the way from the US just to look at their Lithuanian castle.

Not that he could blame them. Hannibal had been charming the Baltimore elite for years, nestling at its very heart, so it wasn’t surprising that the blinded fools chose to follow him to his home country for a party thrown in the celebration of their daughter’s birth.

“The castle is lovely, Mr. Graham!” a tall, blond man gushed, and Will smiled at him with genuineness he didn’t feel.

“I’m glad you think so,” he purred. “When Hannibal and I decided to move here, we had to renovate quite a lot. I hope it’s not too chilly? We had some problems with the heating system.”

The man nodded enthusiastically and proceeded to talk about heating, plumbing, and his own house, and Will listened with a mask of polite interest.

Sometimes, the easiness with which he’d adapted to Hannibal’s environment stunned him. The Will who had visited opera for the first time, tense and insecure, a subject for jokes, narrowed glances, and confusion as to why Hannibal would ever choose him would have never believed that in less than three years, he would turn into this relaxed and confident version of himself. That Will would have never imagined that he could receive the same excited and adoring glances as Hannibal did, that people would look at him and see someone so high-esteemed that they would crave a chance to talk to him.

Will still didn’t understand it. He hadn’t changed this much. Hannibal had fallen from the pedestal he’d put him on and he simply stopped caring about impressing him. And somehow, his newfound coldness and confidence pulled people in, making them construct an image of brilliance and mystery that couldn’t really apply to him.

Will enjoyed it, in a way, and he especially enjoyed how smug and gleeful Hannibal was as the result because Will might not need his approval but he still treasured it. Learning the basics of small talks turned out to be both easy and amusing because people were ready to discuss every triviality as long as it was spoken in a serious, relaxed tone of voice.

He could blend in perfectly now, and a quiet sense of thrill from it warmed his blood in the most
delicious of ways.

He didn’t regret the choices he’d made.

He would have made them again if in the end, they brought him here.

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“Could you tell us what happened, Mr. Graham?” The voice of the agent was bland, as if he wasn’t certain what to feel. Will could sense the conflict emanating from him, with confusion following closely behind, and he bit his lip, pretending that he was about to cry.

“Jack… Agent Crawford broke into our house,” he murmured. His voice trembled sufficiently, and with the corner of his eye, he could see Hannibal staring at him in rapt fascination.

Not that he had looked away even for a moment, ever since Will had killed Jack. When the paramedics arrived, Hannibal had absolutely refused to be treated until Will was looked at, despite the fact that his wounds were considerably more severe. He also insisted on staying as Will gave his statement, and since the majority of idiots bought into belief that omegas were helpless little things desolate without their alphas’ presence, no one protested.

“He sounded deranged. Almost incoherent. He kept accusing Hannibal of being the Chesapeake Ripper… he’d been stalking him before, and he attacked me just recently.”

“What?” the agent straightened abruptly. “What do you mean, he attacked you?”

“He crashed into my car on purpose,” Will shuddered, and this time, he didn’t have to pretend. The fear and panic of that moment still felt too raw. “He nearly killed me. He told everyone he was the one to help me but it’s not true. I helped myself. Jack… he just stood there, watching.”

“Then why didn’t you tell us anything sooner?” the agent’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Why not report him?”

Hannibal quirked an eyebrow, the bastard, clearly amused and curious how Will was going to spin it.

“I wanted to give him another chance,” Will said, staring at the agent wide-eyed. “He was kind to me before. He helped me, he gave me a chance to participate in the investigations, and I wanted to do something for him in return. I warned him that he was playing a dangerous game, that the real Ripper was going to be angry if Jack kept blaming another person for his crimes, and Jack looked like he finally believed me. So I… I said nothing. I thought he would leave us alone,” Will allowed his eyes to water before he drew in a sharp breath and leaned back against the pillow.

He could sense how the agent stared at him with a mixture of pity and condescension, dismissing him as an insipid creature incapable of critical thinking. The performance Will was giving now would further persuade this man and his partner that Jack had started losing it a while ago, back when he let Will join his team.

They wouldn’t believe that an omega could be actually useful in investigations. Soon, even people Will had worked with would believe it. Soon, they would start attributing the success he’d achieved to the work of others, thinking he had simply gotten lucky and Jack had been too blinded by the
chase to notice it. Even those loyal to Jack wouldn’t be able to lie — they would confirm that Jack had them watch Hannibal occasionally, and this would serve as the last nail in the already buried coffin. In several respects at once.

When the agents left, Hannibal immediately moved to his side, burying his nose in Will’s neck and inhaling deeply. Will held him, knowing that his lips were quirked in a content smile.

A twinge of remorse was still there, he knew it. A pang of sympathy, a hint of sadness and guilt. Not everything he had told the FBI was a lie. He was grateful to Jack. He understood Jack’s desire to kill Hannibal way too well, especially now, after Bella. But it didn’t change anything. Will’s loyalty would always be to his family and he would do anything to protect it.

***

“There you are, dearest,” Hannibal approached him and his interlocutor with a warm smile and Will curled his lips in an answering one, trying to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Honestly, sometimes Hannibal was overdoing it. No one who knew him at least partly would believe that he could be this saccharine.

Then again, Hannibal was unpredictable in these matters. Even Will couldn’t always tell whether his public, overly emotional displays of affection were genuine or calculated.

The blond man beamed at them.

“Congratulations on your daughter, Doctor Lecter,” he said. “I was so happy to receive the news about her birth.”

Right. As if he truly cared.

“Thank you,” Hannibal nodded gravely. “She was born three months ago but Will didn’t want to celebrate it until she got a little older.”

Will didn’t want to celebrate it period, especially in the company of strangers, but Hannibal enjoyed his parties too much to miss such an opportunity.

“It’s understandable, of course,” the man’s face became serious. “After that terrible ordeal you had to go through… and the trial…”

“Thankfully, all ended well,” Will cut him off smoothly. He had no desire to discuss the long and tedious process of the trial again. Living through it once was more than enough. “My husband and I are relieved to put the past behind us and start a new life here.”

Hannibal’s face lit up at the title and Will tried to suppress his chuckle. Sometimes, manipulating Hannibal’s reactions was altogether too funny.

“Understandable,” the man said again before smiling at them. “But Baltimore certainly misses you.”

Finally, after another three minutes of meaningless chatter, their guest left to talk to someone else,
and Hannibal’s face immediately smoothed over, became more intense, more genuine.

“Enjoying the party?” he murmured, his hands wrapping around Will’s waist, and Will leaned closer, basking in his warmth.

“Not really,” he admitted. “But you already knew it.”

“It won’t last long. Two more hours at most.”

“That is long,” Will grumbled, but a short kiss melted some of his annoyance. “Do you think she is all right?”

“Of course she is,” another besotted grin blossomed on Hannibal’s face, and this time, it was Will who kissed him.

He couldn’t get enough of how enamored with their daughter Hannibal was. He was the best and the worst father and mate at once: during pregnancy, Will couldn’t even make a step without Hannibal immediately hovering over him, asking him where he was going and what he was planning to do. It was maddening, and it was endearing, and Will was torn between hissing at him to back off and hugging him to never let him go again. After their daughter was born, Hannibal became even more unbearable, but this time, Will joined him in his overprotectiveness.

He wasn’t sure what she was going to grow up into, not with them as parents, fiercely loving but already terrified of losing her. They had both lost their family and they were both equally determined to never let that happen again.

At first, Will wasn’t sure about them moving to the castle in Lithuania indefinitely. He had fallen in love with this place at the first sight, he couldn’t deny it — it seemed frozen in time, dark, mysterious, and regal, still holding the traces of old lives, as if whispering of the happiness that had filled its rooms and corridors once. But happiness wasn’t the only thing that lived here. There was tragedy, too, and during the first several weeks, Hannibal had been strangely silent and pale. Sometimes his eyes glazed over, darkened, and Will knew what he was thinking about without needing to use their bond.

He tried not to get attached to this place, but Hannibal had noticed, and predictably, he insisted that they stay. Making a castle a home again, their home, took incredible efforts, but Will was satisfied to notice that the more they planned and designed, the faster Hannibal came back to life. Soon his smiles grew genuine and content again, and Will finally felt that they were truly starting a new life. Together.

If only the past could leave them alone entirely.

There were nightmares. There were brief, intense flares of rage. Sometimes Will looked at Hannibal and felt fury swirl in him, pouring poison into his mind. He looked and he thought, ‘He killed my father. He killed him. He made my life hell.’ But then Hannibal would look up, his face soft and unguarded, and the fury melted, leaving only love and devotion in its place.

Hannibal was haunted, too.

***
Will didn’t know when exactly it started, but soon after their daughter’s birth, Hannibal began to have nightmares. He denied it when he could, but one night, he woke up gasping, his eyes wild, his body tense, the violence brimming underneath it dark and powerful. He looked as if his world had ended, as if there was nothing else that kept him sane any longer. The snarl on his face was terrifying, crazed, and he looked like he was ready to crush everything that surrounded him, tearing it to bloody pieces. The dangerous cyanide scent that was so alluring became bitter, and the horror and rage pulsing through their bond nearly made Will choke. For a moment, Hannibal’s emotions overpowered him, but then he took hold of himself. Breathing slowly, trying to project calmness and love and sending them through the bond, Will spoke, “Hannibal. Look at me.”

Hannibal startled at the sound of his voice. His eyes snapped up to him, and then the madness coiling there began to retreat. In a single motion, Hannibal jumped to Will’s side of bed and pulled him close, into his suffocating hold, burying his face in his hair, clutching him so strongly, as if he could disappear.

“I killed you,” he whispered, and his voice sounded terrified. “I killed Mischa and I killed you.”

“Mischa’s death wasn’t your fault,” Will said immediately, drawing small, soothing circles on Hannibal’s tense back. “She would never blame you for it. And I’m not dead. I’m here, with you. Our daughter is, too.”

“I gave you the gun. If I hadn’t—”

Oh, That.

“Not your fault,” Will repeated, tightening his own grip. If not the gun, he would have found something else to use against himself, and while Hannibal was definitely responsible for the attempt, it wasn’t the right thing to say now. Not now, not ever. That part of their lives was over. Will wasn’t going to let them be dragged back, no matter what it took.

“I love you,” he added quietly, and this seemed to work because Hannibal finally relaxed, his hold loosening. There was silence for a few long minutes, but then tension returned again.

“Where is she?” Hannibal blurted out, leaning back. His eyes were wide and frightened again. “Where is our daughter?”

“She’s sleeping in her room,” Will replied soothingly. “Just next door. You know that.”

Hannibal sprang to his feet and left the room, and Will felt a strong pang of worry.

He’d never seen a dream affect Hannibal like this. He did have nightmares, especially if Will had one of his headaches during the day. They occurred rarely now and they were far from being as excruciating as when he had been trying to work against Hannibal, fighting their bond. Still, they reminded Hannibal vividly of everything that had happened, a reminder that always left him subdued and upset for the entire day. The nightmares that followed were mild and Hannibal did his best to hide them from him, but this one? The reaction to it seemed extreme. For him to be so shaken even after realizing that it’d been just a dream...

Maybe something had really happened? The castle was big. They’d secured it as much as it was humanly possible, and Winston would have definitely woken them up if someone had tried to break in, but accidents could happen, and if so...

Before Will worked himself up to the same black panic, Hannibal returned, holding their daughter
close to his chest. His face seemed much lighter and Will relaxed, smiling at them both.

“Is she awake?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannibal climbed back to bed, looking at the small, frustrated face in fascination. Will chuckled before he too stared at their child, his heart skipping an enamored beat.

They still didn’t know her gender. Based on her behavior so far, Will would peg her for an alpha, but he’d been stereotyped enough to never let it affect his judgment.

Two mismatched eyes stared back at him in rebuke, as if their daughter couldn’t understand why she’d been dragged out of her bed and brought to theirs. Hannibal began to murmur something in Lithuanian — endearments, no doubt, and Will snuggled close to them both, drinking in every word even though he understood only some of them.

Sometimes he wondered what scent their girl was going to take. Something genuinely sweet? Or something dangerous, reflecting the scents of her parents?

Whatever it was, whether she shared his worldview or that of Hannibal, or if she had an absolutely unique one, Will was going to love her. And considering how hopelessly charmed with her Hannibal was, how he was ready to drop everything at the first wrinkle of her little nose, willing to bring the world to her feet, Will actually had to be a stricter parent.

What a journey awaited them.

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Will’s thoughts were broken by a loud, excited yelp of Winston and several gasps of their guests. He looked up and barely kept his balance when Winston collided with him, pawing at his suit in his eagerness to get close.

“You didn’t lock him?” Will wondered, ignoring the perplexed, annoyed, and interested gazes as he bent over to scratch Winston’s head.

“I did,” Hannibal said, watching them with amusement. “Evidently, he got out.”

“And how did you manage that?” Will asked, chuckling when Winston licked his face. Finally, he glanced at their guests, and gleeful satisfaction welled up inside him as he absorbed their shock.

This was perfect. The best way to diversify this boring party. Maybe if these people were affronted enough, they wouldn’t return at least for a year.

“What is that?” one of the men asked, his pale face contorting in disgust.

“Why, that is our dog,” Hannibal uttered, smiling tranquilly.

“And you let him live in the castle?”
“Where else would he live?” Will inquired pleasantly. The man sneered at him and turned away, and Will resumed patting Winston. He’d have to buy something particularly delicious for him tomorrow.

Eventually, quiet voices filled the hall again, with everyone returning to what they were doing, and Will finally strengthened, brushing the hair from his face. Then he paused, seeing a smitten, wide-eyed stare of one of the guests directed at him.

The man’s look slid up his face, stopping at the scar in the middle of his forehead. Will raised his eyebrow, hoping that the reaction to it would be negative, but if anything, the man’s eyes shone even brighter.

Oh. That wasn’t good.

Hannibal tensed next to him, undoubtedly catching the stare. Darkness and coldness that started to seep through him told Will everything he needed to know, and even without looking, he could feel Hannibal thinking, plotting, imagining, every thought of his soaked in blood that was to come.

This wouldn’t do.

Sending a brief, cold smile to the man, Will turned away from him, focusing on his ridiculous and intimidating mate.

“No,” he said lightly, narrowing his eyes when Hannibal opened his mouth to protest. “No,” he repeated. “We’ve talked about it. Only really rude ones.”

“Looking like that at someone’s husband is rude,” Hannibal hissed.

“Looking can’t be rude. Knock it off.”

Hannibal growled quietly and Will touched his cheek in amusement, stroking it. Clearly reluctantly, Hannibal relaxed, and some of the darkness left his eyes.

Discussions on who they could kill had taken ages. Will wasn’t particularly thrilled with Hannibal’s choice of victims but he also couldn’t formulate who and when he himself wanted to kill. He liked to think he’d be willing to target other murderers only but his existing list of victims was dubious at best. Jeremy, Emily, and Jack certainly didn’t fit the bill, and only Tobias Budge was the exception.

In the end, they settled on people who both of them found despicable, and so far, it worked quite well.

The evening continued. Will tolerated it, happy that Hannibal decided to stay by his side instead of wandering to talk to someone else again. One of his hands was firmly wrapped around Will’s waist and Will had his own around Hannibal’s back, feeling warm and secure.

He wanted everyone to leave already. He wanted to stay with his mate and their daughter, in their home, far from others’ chatter and scrutiny. He wanted…

Winston’s whine snapped Will back to reality. It wasn’t loud but he would recognize it anywhere.

His eyes immediately found his dog, who was now baring his teeth at the same man who had questioned his presence earlier. A darkly satisfied look on his face made it very clear what had just happened. The way he glanced around quickly, as if to make sure no one saw him, cemented what Will had already figured out.
The bastard had kicked his dog. *Their* dog.

Will turned to Hannibal and found him already staring back, his eyes alight with a deadly glow.

This time, they didn’t need any discussions.

This time, they merely exchanged slow, dangerous grins.

*The End*

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