Bright Hair About The Bone

by MissDisoriental

Summary

In a world where omegas are little more than trophies to be bought and sold, Will Graham has done the unthinkable by escaping a forced bonding. Already in high demand as a profiler, Will's determined to find freedom on his own terms.

For Hannibal Lecter the outlook is far more straightforward: a slow, systematic seduction of the most uniquely captivating omega he's ever encountered.

As the shadow of a new and terrifying serial killer falls over Baltimore, the stage is set to redefine all accepted meanings of passion, temptation, horror and beauty – and to discover the ecstasy of a genuine love crime.

Fanart masterpost available here.
Podfic available here.

Notes
Hey there lovely readers, welcome to my new monster-length Hannigram fic! And here we gooooooo…
Chapter 1
Huge thanks to CrazyInLov3, Patties92, marlahanni, Lowrie and Lyceiad for the beautiful cover art.

"When my grave is broke up again, Some second guest to entertain...And he that digs it, spies a bracelet of bright hair about the bone…”

*The Relic* by John Donne

The interrogation room itself is surprisingly quiet. Just hushed held breath that’s sharp in the intake and whistles softly on the exhale, the staccato tick of the clock and the occasional rustle of papers as they’re turned over then held still again; all punctuated by the mournful whine of a tape recorder that’s recording nothing. Together the sounds swell and surge in a softly subdued whisper like feet swirling through dry leaves, but no one is actually speaking. It’s as if all the vigour and animation within their four little walls has been gently bled to death and left nothing behind but muteness as its life ebbs away and a state of suspended animation steals over the room in the same way gangrene creeps along a once healthy limb.

The real noise – *noise* as opposed to *sounds* – is coming from the corridor outside, and if the interrogation room has watched helplessly as its own soundtrack withers and dies then here there is volume in an abundance that borders on extravagant. There’s a choir of clamorous voices, the
unmistakable clicking sound of several cameras, the pounding of footsteps as yet another person runs past the door and in the midst of it all, louder than the rest, a gratingly high-pitched jabbing noise as someone (almost certainly Freddie Lounds) shrilly demands their Press Rights before adding something needlessly self-righteous about the First Amendment. But the interrogation room itself is like a cocoon of silence: a little oasis of calm amid a sea of noisy chaos...if calm can reasonably be comprised of a metal ceiling and wipe-clean tiles with a two-way mirror and a panic button. Of course the opposite should rightfully be the case in that the corridor is the place that’s respectfully quiet while the interrogation room rings out with the noble noise of justice being done, but it’s not like the switch really matters. Besides, when did anything ever work out as it should?

Will supposes that the detectives are waiting for him to speak first but he doesn’t particularly have anything else to say so just stretches his legs out beneath the table and stares fixedly at his hands instead. They look rather pale and vulnerable against the dark wood of the table top, almost as if they don’t belong to him, and there’s a circle of purple bruises blooming on his left wrist that he doesn’t remember getting. They seem so frail though; surely his hands ought to be more robust and capable than these slim useless-looking things? The handcuffs don’t help of course, even though they’re actually fairly discreet as handcuffs go: when he glances at them the flash of metal could almost be a bangle, a silver one to match the amethyst of the bruises. He supposes it would be easy enough to slip them if he really wanted to, although there hardly seems any point.

“The public has a right to know,” the voice is now insisting (it’s definitely Freddie Lounds). “The FBI always tries and covers these things up. How many times have I said he’s crazy...?”

Will shifts slightly in his chair and wonders if Jack’s watching through the two-way mirror. “No thank you,” he replies evenly. “I’m fine.”

Breaking the silence...yet another thing that’s brittle and breakable, then. Just another thing to add to the all the bones and promises and pledges and hearts that are there in the world right now, poised to shatter and crumble and likewise refusing to endure. Not that it really matters; not really. Not in the grand scheme of things.

“You know you’d be better off just telling us what happened. You know that right?” The detective’s voice is pitched deliberately low, soft and inviting, and Will doesn’t need to look at him to know that his features will be arranged into an expression of carefully cultivated concern (eyes softly supplicating, mouth quirked into a hopeful smile...no doubt he practices it in the two-way mirror during his lunch breaks). “We can’t help you if you don’t tell us the truth.”

Will tries not to sigh too audibly. It’s the classic routine, text-book in fact: a display of consideration and understanding that gently invites the suspect to unburden themselves until confessions start fluttering from their mouths like confetti. Despite the gravity of the situation Will can’t help feeling faintly insulted that they think he’d fall for something so obvious. Then he realises he’s started staring at his hands again, and that it’s getting boring, so shifts his gaze to the table top instead and begins to track along the eddying ink stains that billow and swirl across the surface amidst a clutter of
pockmarks, scars and scratches that act as wordless testimony to years of other people’s frustration. There’s a particularly large mark to the left that looks like the outline of California…

“Why not just tell us how you did it?” the detective is now saying. “Start at the beginning. How’d that be?”

Why not let me punch that fake-concern right off your face? thinks Will irritably. How’d that be? “I didn’t,” is all he replies, and can’t help feeling proud of how steady he manages to make his voice sound.

“There were extenuating circumstances,” insists the detective as if Will hasn’t spoken. “You weren’t yourself at the time. People would understand; they wouldn’t judge you. They wouldn’t blame you for it.” Will quirks an eyebrow and the detective clears his throat again. “Well, yes, obviously there’d be consequences, but…you know what I mean. Let us help you Mr Graham. People here have got your back; they care about your wellbeing.”

“It’s probably a bit late for that,” replies Will in the same level tone as before. “I think that particular ship has sailed.” Yeah…sailed and sunk in the fucking harbour. “I told you – I didn’t do it. I know what it looks like but you need to believe me.” Then he pauses in spite of himself because of course they don’t need to believe him; and to be honest he wouldn’t believe it either if it was him on the other side of the desk and the detective with the fake smile was sat here with the handcuffs and the bracelet of bruises. Nevertheless he can’t stop himself adding: “You’ve got the wrong person.” Through some miraculous force of effort, he manages to stop the desperation leaking into his voice.

This time they don’t even bother dignifying the denial with a response and Will sees the blatant scepticism on their faces and feels like giving up. “You asked me if I wanted anything,” he says instead. “I do. I want my phone call.”

The older detective gives a heavy sigh at this then holds up his hands in a distinctly over-the-top imitation of someone who’s reached the end of their patience, rather as if Will’s being an impossible diva and demanding Cristal champagne and a basket of kittens as opposed to simply requesting his legal rights. “Okay then,” he says wearily. “Okay Mr Graham. You want me to call your attorney?”

It’s a simple enough question – of course it is – but the response is complex, and so Will doesn’t answer immediately because now the time has come it’s difficult to commit to the decision. He isn’t even entirely sure what the source of the delay is. Shame, probably. Or maybe it’s more like pride: a reluctance to acknowledge a need for help or assistance, or to even acknowledge a need exists; as if naming it is going to confirm the nightmare is real and he’s not merely dreaming while he’s awake. But where else can he possibly go after all? And where else would he even want to…? Nevertheless for a few more seconds he still says nothing: just stares at the ink and the bruises and his too-pale hands and says nothing.

“Mr Graham?”

The abruptness of the tone makes Will jump and it’s then that he realises he’s not quite sure how long he’s been silent for: how long he’s been staring at the pock-marked desk and the swirling ink stains that look like California. But he has to do something now; it’s now or never. The time is now. Now, now. So he takes a deep breath before finally raising his head.

“No,” he says, calm yet firm. “Not my attorney.”

“Who then?”

For the first time Will looks the detective straight in the eye: pale, strained yet still oddly defiant.
“No,” he repeats, slow and clear so there can be no mistake. “Not my attorney. I want to speak with Dr Hannibal Lecter.”

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SIX MONTHS EARLIER

FBI Training Academy; Quantico, VA.

The winter sun is starting to set, streaking the sky the same purple-vermillion as bruises and blood while the shadows lengthen and one by one the lights flicker on around the Academy building in an attempt to chase the darkness away. Outside the main auditorium a crowd swells and multiplies as assorted trainees begin to gather together: some casually nonchalant, others in a haze of intrigue and anticipation and a few more with barely concealed impatience. In fact the lecture was due to start ten minutes ago, but as of yet the doors haven’t even been unlocked and no one has appeared to explain the delay.

“Have you ever met him in person?” one of the trainees is asking her neighbour.

“No. I mean I’ve seen him around, but I wasn’t in his class last semester.”

“Me neither. I’m curious though, I’ll admit. They say he’s supposed to be some kind of genius.”

“Who says that?” demands the other trainee, who prides himself on being duly sceptical of other people’s good opinions.

The girl shrugs then shifts her gum to the other side of her cheek. “I don’t know…everyone.”

“Yeah but who exactly says it?”

“You talking about Will Graham?” asks a third, unashamedly eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Yeah,” confirms the male trainee. “Nina here seems to be getting a bit of a crush. Him being such a genius and all.”

“Oh shut up Alex, seriously. I do not.”

“Everyone has crushes on him,” replies the third student, leaning over to steal a piece of Nina’s gum. “And then they all get cured the same way.”

“What’s that?”

“They meet him.”

“That’s rather unkind,” says Alex, laughing heartily.

“Well it’s true. Let’s just say he lends himself a bit more to long-distance devotion.”

Nina gives a wry smile then turns and inspects Will’s photograph which, despite his relatively recent appointment, has already been added to the collection of prestigious staff members displayed along the foyer wall. Jack Crawford, two places to the right, glares back disapprovingly: his gaze, not unlike the Mona Lisa, seems to possess an uncanny ability to track the observers round the room. “Mr Graham’s certainly very easy on the eye,” she says in a thoughtful voice.
“And absolute hell on the ears,” replies the third trainee firmly. “You haven’t experienced true public humiliation until Will Graham has caught you passing notes in his class and chewed you out in front of 30 other students. Not that he even needs to say anything; that little bastard has a glare that could quell a lump of granite.”

“Passing notes? How old are you – 12?”

“I was trying to organise a ride,” says the third trainee, miming wounded dignity.

“To a seminar?”

“To a bar, as it happens. How many 12 years olds go to bars? Oh I forgot you’re from Detroit aren’t you? They probably all do.” Nina rolls her eyes and he grins before adding, much more seriously: “God knows we need the occasional bit of downtime. Especially at the moment.”

There’s an ominous pause as the three of them exchange glances. “This evening,” says Nina finally, deliberately lowering her voice. “Do you think Mr Graham’s going to talk about…him?”

“Assuming he turns up to talk about anything? No – no way. Jack Crawford is maintaining a blackout for as long as he can. No one’s talking about it.”

“Why? That makes no sense.”

“Because no one’s ever seen anything like this,” replies Alex bleakly. “They’ll be trying to prevent a public panic.”

“But that’s my point; if people are aware they can protect themselves.”

“But how? All they know is that he targets omegas. That’s it; there’s no other pattern at all. They don’t know how he picks them up, how he chooses them – even the location keeps changing. They won’t go public until they have a proper profile.”

“And how do you know so much about it?”

Alex clears his throat and suddenly looks awkward. “I was reading the roster near Mr Graham’s office,” he says after a pause. “The, um, the walls are pretty thin.”

“Oh my God, you’ve been listening at his door!” crows the third trainee triumphantly. “Now who’s crushing on Will Graham?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Been waiting to leap to his assistance have you? Hovering hopefully in the corridor for a chance to carry his briefcase?”

“It wasn’t like that at all…”

“Oh Mr Graham,” says the third trainee in an exaggeratedly falsetto voice. “Your angelically grumpy face undoes me Mr Graham. I’d swap my badge for the chance to polish your spectacles. The sight of your little beard…”

“All right, that’s enough,” snaps Alex in a pompous voice. “You’re being completely inappropriate. A serial killer is hardly a laughing matter.”

“Agreed; you’re the laughing matter. You and your Will Graham fetish.”
“For the last time, I have not…”

But the rest of sentence is lost amid the sudden swirl of activity at the back of the foyer as the doors swing open and Will and Jack Crawford walk in. Jack’s presence at a trainee lecture is unusual enough in itself to immediately provoke a buzz of intrigue, although it’s the sight of Will that creates the greatest stir: incredibly bleak and pale with a grim set around his eyes and mouth. “Something’s happened,” says Nina, abruptly sobering up. “Look at his face.”

As if it’s something contagious, the ominous severity radiating from Will and Jack has a powerfully sedative effect on the assembled students who quickly grow silent and subdued until finally one, more daring than the rest, calls out: “Mr Graham!”

“There’ll be time for questions later,” replies Will tersely, neither slowing his pace or even turning round to look at the speaker. “Hurry up please. Take your seats.” Then for a few seconds he pauses, exchanging glances with Jack as beyond the window comes the unmistakable whine of sirens: high-pitched and wailing like something in pain. Simultaneously a new sound begins to break out in the foyer itself and which, unlike the sirens, is low and muffled with the same rhythmic quality of a metronome: the result of a group of human voices repeating the same thing over and over again in an undertone. Initially it seems as meaningless as the sirens themselves, yet listen carefully and the throb of syllables gradually clarifies and disconnects in order to form actual words: There’s been another one; there’s been another one. Will and Jack exchange another loaded glance then disappear into the cavernous black of the auditorium as one-by-one the trainees follow behind at a respectful distance, eyes all cast to the floor like pallbearers at a funeral.

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Will clears his throat for what feels like the twentieth time then stares out into the sea of faces, all of which are bleached eerily pale from the light of the projector while gazing up at him with glittering eyes and eager hopefulness as a possessor of knowledge that he might deign to share with them. He wishes he could tell them not to bother – not least because it’s the type of knowledge that no one in their right mind should want. And perhaps it’s an illusion created by the eerie light and the eagerness but somehow they all look so young, even though of course they’re not; not really. Maybe it’s just that he himself is starting to feel so old. ‘Careworn’ – that’s the word for it: like his assorted anxieties and apprehensions have begun to literally chip away at him and grind off slivers and fragments as they go. Although in this precise moment he doesn’t even feel old or worn as opposed to bizarrely absent, as if he’s watching a bad replication of himself that’s been unleashed into the world without any clear instructions about how to behave. A miswired robot perhaps…a malfunctioning android from one of those ridiculous sci-fi films that are always being advertised on late night television when only the insomniacs are awake to watch them.

Will blinks a few times, trying to focus as the sharp spike of a headache begins to pincer at the side of his skull. This evening’s scene was a particularly bad one – although aren’t they always? – and the afterimages of it keep flickering at the edge of his vision. Many more like this and Jack Crawford’s attempts to limit the press exposure will be blown to smithereens; though admittedly the idea of keeping it quiet is already a bit of a joke because nearly everyone knows by now that a new serial killer is at large. The only thing that isn’t common knowledge is the extent of it, but his existence itself can no longer be plausibly denied. Even the nicknames have begun to circulate: all flashily alliterative and theatrical sounding as these things generally tend to be, rather as if it’s a thrash metal singer that’s seeking a nom-de-plume as opposed to a deranged and vicious thief of human life. The Baltimore Butcher. The Monster of Maryland. The Reaper. Freddie Lounds is clearly hoping that the Sculptor is going to gain traction and has been going to a great deal of trouble to adorn the home page of The TattleCrime to successfully advance the cause.
“I don’t get it,” Will had said to Jack regarding the last one.

“Well… I suppose it’s because he carves them up.”

“He doesn’t carve them,” Will had snapped irritably. “He hacks them.”

The image of the most recent victim now promptly veers into Will’s peripheral vision and he determinedly blinks again to try and banish her. “And so,” he says firmly. “you can clearly see that this is another critical distinction between organized and disorganized offenders. The former is more likely to be geographically and occupationally mobile, whereas the latter…” Oh Christ, someone’s trying to ask a question: he can see the arm waving determinedly in the air from side to side as if the stupid fucker thinks they’re brandishing a lighter at a rock concert. “Yes,” says Will with barely concealed impatience.

“Mr Graham, do you consider the Sculptor to be an example of the organized or disorganized type?”

The sound of the forbidden words prompt a sharp intake of breath amongst the audience, although whether it’s from admiration that someone has dared to speak the unspeakable or condemnation for the same is impossible to say. From the corner of his eye, Will can see Jack stiffen in his seat. “I’m sorry, I’m not prepared to discuss that,” he replies now, in the sort of voice that clearly indicates he’s not remotely sorry. “This isn’t a lecture concerning an individual case study.”

“But sir…”

This time Will doesn’t answer at all but merely glares at the offending questioner over the top of his glasses. “Lump of granite,” mutters the third trainee in an undertone to Nina.

Will irritably shuffles his notes then gives the PowerPoint slide a determined click. “The organized offender generally kills at one site and then disposes of the body at another,” he says tersely. “He’s likely to be in careful control of every aspect of the scene, and this includes leaving very minimal physical evidence behind.” He pauses then stares intensely into the sea of faces as if daring anyone else to interrupt him and in the resulting silence there’s a soft creaking sound as the door to the auditorium swings open. The shaft of light briefly illuminates Will’s face and shoulders as if he’s been granted his own personal spotlight, and those who are expecting him to explode at the interruption are surprised to see him glance up then give a small but undeniably sincere smile. A few of the more curious students swivel round in their seats to try and identify who the usually inscrutable Will Graham could have been gazing at so warmly, but by that time the tall dark figure has already discreetly vanished into the shadows and there’s nothing to see but blackness.

“Of course this all has major implications for how these individuals respond to police interview,” adds Will as the next slide appears on the screen. He pauses again then frowns, his eyes suddenly piercing and forceful within his pale face. “If the disorganized offender requires a more counselling-type approach the opposite is true of the organized type. Direct questions are preferable because he wants to affirm his personal sense of superiority.” For a few seconds he shifts position on the stage and the scenes of carnage from the projector are fleetingly imposed straight over him: stripes of scarlet and seared skin that give him the look of a sacrificial offering – a young martyr, preparing to be beatified. “This includes attempting to subvert investigators,” adds Will. He waits a few more moments, slowly tracking his gaze across the audience. “I hope I hardly need to remind you that your job is not to let him.”

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Once the lecture is over Will practically dives off the stage in order to do what he always does at this point in proceedings, which is to escape into one of the disused classrooms at the back of the
auditorium and conceal himself there (and which is not hiding or, God forbid, lurking – definitely not) until the crowd has dispersed and he can emerge again and make his way to the carpark without getting swamped by overeager trainees. Will is extremely fond of this strategy as a general rule, because unless one or two trainees are particularly overeager and insist on breaking into his dark hiding place (not that it is hiding) it has an excellent track record for effectiveness. Nevertheless he knows it’s destined to be thwarted this evening, seeing that this evening also happens to be the date of a social event arranged by Jack in order for the newly assembled task force assigned to the Sculptor case to get to know each other. Will isn’t even sure how appropriate it is to stand around drinking warm wine and eating canapes given the circumstances, but Jack was determined. “It’s like team bonding,” he’d said, before remembering the double meaning of the word ‘bonding’ and looking faintly awkward. “It’s good for morale.”

“You got that from a government seminar,” Will had said accusingly. “Didn’t you Jack?”

“What difference does that make?” Jack had replied, visibly casting his mind back to whatever management training he’d been forced to attend in order to regurgitate this crap. “Occupational wellbeing is paramount. Mental and physical comfort is the key to a happy, successful workplace.”

Will had given up then, partly because Jack was coming treacherously close to sounding like a rambling old hippy that was going to stand over them all and make them sing Kum Ba Yah, but mostly because his own mental and physical comfort is such a rare intangible thing that it’s impossible to quantify in any meaningful way – beyond the fact that whatever there is that’s left of it is certainly destined to be crushed to death by being forced to wade through an evening of stilted small talk and social niceties. “Dr Lecter will be there,” Jack had added, obviously thinking this would be a point of reassurance. “You can talk to him if you start feeling uncomfortable.”

In fact this hadn’t been quite the consolation Jack was anticipating it to be. Admittedly Will is pleased that Hannibal’s going to be present, yet he’d simultaneously felt dismayed by it because he likes Hannibal to see him in environments where Will is reasonably competent and in control as opposed to ones in which he’ll be gauche and awkward and entirely out of his element: in other words, situations which serve to highlight the differences between them in a way that puts Will at an enormous disadvantage. Because Hannibal – of course – has impeccable social presence and indelible poise, all doubtlessly acquired from a privileged aristocratic upbringing, from medical school, and possibly from a courteously patrician father or resolutely well-bred mother…although somehow it’s hard to imagine Hannibal having something as commonplace as a mother and father, the same as anybody else. Not that any of this can change the fact that Will’s starting to feel his own social capacities should be renamed Schrödinger’s Social Skills on the grounds that there’s only a 50% chance of whether they’ll exist or not depending on whether Hannibal happens to be nearby.

Through the thin walls of the classroom Will can already hear a low hum of voices from where the guests have begun assembling, most of whom he knows will have also attended his lecture beforehand as a courtesy. Realms and realms of them no doubt, glassy-eyed and judgemental – and all waiting for him to appear. Will sighs unhappily into the dim silence then briefly pictures his own house, serene and solitary except for the pack of dogs, and has a sudden yearning to be there that’s so strong it’s almost physically painful. Only that it’s not the real source of the pain, which is in fact coming from his abdomen – and has been for several days now – and which he’s desperately trying to ignore out of a half-formed hope that if he doesn’t give it any attention it’ll give up and slink away in the manner of a schoolyard bully who loses interest when the hoped-for reaction fails to materialise. In an effort to dismiss it he tries to reorient his attention by focusing on the thrum of voices through the wall: and oh God, now he can definitely hear Jack booming something unfathomable about budgetary constraints, then shortly after the unmistakably smoky vowels of Hannibal’s voice which forms a rather rhythmic counterpoint to Jack’s in the manner of a double bass and a cello. They both sound so confident and assured, and Will feels a sudden surge of
contempt for himself at his reluctance to leave the safeness of his own solitude and join them.
Anyway, it’s surely better to get it over with because he has to go at some point – he can hardly stay
here all evening (if only).

Will gives a final gloomy sigh for good measure then pushes the door open and emerges into the
bright light, blinking like a cave dweller before realising that Hannibal will almost certainly have
seen him doing it and that this is something which can be considered as Not Good. Then for a few
awkward seconds he realises he has no idea where he’s supposed to go and is uncomfortably aware
of several people staring at him before Jack materialises and begins to steer him towards the buffet
table; kindly yet mindlessly officious in a way that reminds Will of those large alpine dogs that rescue
hapless assholes that get lost on mountains. “Excellent lecture,” says Jack warmly. “Although they
always are, aren’t they?” Will, unsure of whether a response is actually expected to this, just grunts
non-committedly. “You’re very good at it,” Jack persists.

“Thanks,” replies Will, who really doesn’t care much one way or the other. Jack nods approvingly
then glances over before hesitating in his task of pouring out a glass of wine. “What?” says Will with
a hint of irritation.

“What?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? You look like a bag of nerves.”

Will grimaces slightly. A bag of nerves… it’s such a gruesome expression. If he thinks too hard he
can almost imagine it: the nerves squirming wetly in their burlap wrapping like as many worms.
“Honestly,” he says, more firmly this time. “I’m fine.” And then, because it’s actually quite nice to
have someone show concern over him, even if it’s only Jack who’s pretty much paid to do so:
“Thank you.”

“Well at least have some something to eat,” urges Jack. “You’re very pale.”

Will promptly feels the flare of irritation rekindling, not least because of the way Jack seems
incapable of acknowledging his assurances and is sliding into protective alpha mode at a rather
appalling rate (for God’s sake). Nevertheless it’s hardly worth arguing over so he just nods vaguely
then picks up a nearby slice of quiche; not because he particularly wants it but in the hope that it
might shut Jack up. The quiche is unpleasantly slippery and requires Will to hold it in both hands in
order to nibble on it half-heartedly before becoming anxious that the gesture makes him look like a
large rodent (and that Hannibal will have seen this too, which can likewise be considered as Not
Good) so puts it down again. Jack’s now launched into some new anecdote about the budget for
Behavioral Sciences – occasionally referring to the latter as BS and seemingly oblivious that this is
also an acronym for bullshit – so Will pretends to listen whilst working equally hard not to eavesdrop
too obviously on Hannibal’s conversation with one of the federal representatives, despite the fact it
appears to be about wine and is not remotely interesting. “The decline of the malbecs,” Hannibal is
saying in sonorous tones, rather as if The Malbecs are some doomed aristocrats or a branch of ruined
royalty who’ve fallen on hard times. The woman he’s speaking with lowers her head in solemn
agreement, and Will sighs to himself all over again and can’t help wondering how it’s possible that
he can be so hopelessly drawn to a person who says ‘The decline of the malbecs’ in the course of a
normal conversation as if it means something (quite easily, it would seem).

Jack’s speech about Behavioral Science, or budgets, or BS – or whatever – has now reached its
agonised conclusion and there’s a brief pause before he suddenly announces “Will!” then falls silent
again. From the tone it’s impossible to deduce whether he means ‘Will! We’re done here – fuck off!’
or ‘Will! Give me your opinion on BS budgetary’; or possibly both, or maybe neither, or most likely
something else entirely – and the fact that Will wasn’t listening in the run-up does nothing at all to help rescue the situation. Fleetingly he catches Hannibal’s eye and for a few seconds finds it impossible to look away before Jack says “Will!” (recurring) and he forces himself to re-focus and reply “Yes, Jack?” in a carefully neutral way that can hopefully cater for whichever of the both/neither/none of the above scenarios is about to transpire.

“There’s some people I’d like you to meet,” Jack is now saying. “Or, more to the point, they want to meet you.”

So, option 3: something else entirely. “Yeah?” replies Will, trying not to sound too depressed about it.

“Yeah. They were at the lecture and they’ve read about you beforehand.” And then, when Will doesn’t reply: “You’re getting famous Will, whether you like it or not.”

Will frowns and then for want of anything better to do begins inspecting the tray of petit-fours spread out in front of him: the walnuts in the salad look like tiny, bisected brains. “It’s only a brief introduction,” urges Jack. “Anyway they’re attachés from DC so it’s in your interests to keep them happy.” The tone of the last part is unmistakably insinuating and Will sighs again for what feels like the fortieth time. “The tall one on the left is Denton Skinner and the little one next to him is Adam Siemens.”

“Skinner and Siemens?” repeats Will incredulously. “What sort of names are those?” Well apart from fucking stupid ones, obviously. Although while the former might get something of a pass on the grounds of being German (as well as on charitable grounds, given that its unfortunate bearer no doubt has to endure eternal sniggering every time he introduces himself) the former just sounds vaguely creepy. He takes a covert glance at where the two men are stood; Siemens actually waves at him. Christ. Will turns back to Jack and gives him a beseeching look that he intends to be translated as: Please don’t make me do this. Jack’s answering frown implies: Are you kidding me? Get over there right now – and be nice about it.

Will opens his eyes a bit wider: But look at them. They’re so lame.

To which Jack’s eyebrows respond with: Will Graham, I’ll count to three and then I’ll kick your ass.

Will defiantly knits his own eyebrows: Come on Jack. Don’t be a dick.

Jack takes a step forward: One…two…

“Okay, fine,” says Will. His tone comes out more petulant than intended; sometimes he thinks he’d make a good adolescent.

“That’s my boy,” replies Jack sardonically as if reading Will’s mind, before adding in an undertone: “And be nice.”

Will briefly fantasizes about sticking his arms and legs out like one of his dogs when it doesn’t want to go to the vet before ultimately conceding the inevitable and allowing Jack to shepherd him across the room to where the two men are waiting. Even Will, who doesn’t normally notice or care about people’s appearances, can’t help thinking that they look particularly unpromising. Skinner is as thin and gaunt as a tapeworm with the same raw bones, flaring nostrils and prominent teeth of a rocking horse whereas Siemens has a pouting pink mouth like a disappointed baby and, for all his small stature, manages to give the impression of possessing acres of shiny white skin that rolls around in waxy folds and seem to extend in hillocks and tufts for as far as the eye can see. Will, remembering Jack’s remarks about ‘bonding’, feels a strong rush of certainty that he’d rather gnaw off his own feet
than approach anything resembling a bonded state with either of these two. He wouldn’t want to go within ten feet of them given the choice…in fact there’s an expression about that isn’t there? Price sometimes says it when confronted with an especially objectionable lab assistant: ‘I wouldn’t touch him with a ten foot pole.’ Will wouldn’t touch them with a ten foot shitty stick, unless it was to hit them over the…

“Mr Graham!” shrieks Siemens, charging towards Will like a small bull elephant.

Will knows that it’s probably rather rude to step aside so obviously, but the thought of being in close vicinity with all that oily skin (possibly even hugged) is too appalling to contemplate so he does it anyway; at which point Siemens misses the target and obligingly goes bouncing off one of the wall slats instead. Jack clears his throat irritably.

“So – Mr Graham,” says Skinner after a decidedly awkward pause. His skin is so thin that the veins in his temples are clearly visible, blue and livid as a biology diagram in a textbook, and contrary to Jack’s assurances he doesn’t look remotely pleased to meet Will; more as if he wants to punch him (although why not? Virtually everyone else does). After another pause he extends a hand, the fingers as gnarled and bony as some kind of prehistoric being and gives Will’s a fastidious shake. “You look rather different from your photographs.”

“A pleasure Mr Graham,” adds Siemens, who’s now rebounded from the wall like a true champion and is vigorously shaking Will’s other hand. His fingers are incredibly soft and limp, like balloons filled with tepid water. “A real pleasure.”

Will wants to reply that it’s a pleasure to meet them likewise but is concerned there’s no possible way of doing it that’ll sound sincere, so instead asks them how long they’re intending to stay in Virginia and then not look too dismayed by the response (several months apparently – fuck) while simultaneously trying not to bristle with irritation at the fussy way Skinner is smoothing down the lapels of his jacket and twizzling his tie into place. In this respect he’s clearly the type of person who leads an incredibly methodical and well-ordered life, evident in everything from the impeccably starched shirt to the row of pens arranged in descending order of size in his breast pocket like some kind of bureaucratic medal (Christ). No doubt he packs his briefcase and lays his clothes out on a chair the night before for added efficiency. Will’s idea of efficiency is to sleep in his clothes.

“…very excited to meet you,” concludes Siemens. “Of course we read all about your work in Minnesota. Very impressive Mr Graham; very impressive indeed. No wonder they were so keen to get you here.”

Will repeats the same vague smile as before but doesn’t actually reply; not least because he suspects that saying ‘Mr Siemens’ out loud without being overcome with an urge to laugh requires a level of moral courage that he doesn’t actually possess. Jack, on the other hand, nods appreciatively then gives Will a hearty clap on the back that nearly sends him flying. “Will is certainly an asset,” he says cheerfully.

Will is now so delirious with boredom – and guiltily preoccupied with watching Hannibal from the corner of his eye and reassuring himself that he’s too busy lamenting The End of the Malbecs to be aware of Will being publically bound in comradeship with these two stupid bastards – that he briefly mishears ‘asset’ as ‘ass’ and opens his mouth to protest before Skinner interrupts to ask Jack what contingencies he has in place for when the extent of the Sculptor case goes public. Will, who’s already heard this at length, promptly tunes out again and forces himself to stop gazing at Hannibal and pretend to listen instead; only to get distracted once more by the sight of Skinner’s prominent Adam’s apple, which seems to crawl up and down his throat like a large flesh coloured beetle every time he speaks.
“Are you all right Mr Graham?” says Skinner abruptly in his nasal voice. “You seem a little preoccupied.”

Seeing that he can’t admit ‘Yeah actually, I’m just transfixed by your repellent neck – sorry about that,’ Will apoloises and explains that he has a slight headache. In fact the pain continues to be in his stomach rather than his head, but it’s still the wrong thing to say because Jack immediately reverts to the enormously irritating protective mode of before and which he’s recently been showing an alarming tendency to indulge in. It drives Will half insane with irritation: he hates being treated as if he’s delicate or fragile, even if in some ways it’s actually true. And of course Jack’s still looking dissatisfied with Will’s reply…oh Christ, any minute now he’s going to suggest fetching Hannibal over.

“You do look pale,” Jack says now, right on cue. “Dr Lecter’s just over there, maybe I could…”

Will makes an irritated noise that’s intended to sound assertively resolute, but out of alarm comes out more as a sort of screech (like an angry pterodactyl thinks Will with gloomy relish). “I’m fine,” he says, rather more sharply than intended. “Thank you. I’ll just take some aspirin when I get home and crash out.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” replies Jack uncertainly.

“I’m sure.” He has a fleeting image of Hannibal being summoned over to dispense medical advice as if Will is some sort of sickly feeble-minded creature that can’t be reliably trusted to act in its own interests. God, the idea. “So what are the autopsy arrangements going to be?” he says now in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

“Tuesday most likely. You’re going to attend yourself?”

“Of course.”

“And the profile? Any progress?”

This time Will hesitates before responding. “I’m not sure yet. There’re still some features that seem a bit…off. I don’t know. It’s the staging aspects; they’re almost too staged.”

“Then surely that’s an attribute for the profile?” says Skinner in an officious voice; Jack and Will turn round and look at him in vague surprise. “I know a little about this kind of stuff,” adds Skinner smugly. “Just because we focus on the legal side doesn’t mean we’re completely ignorant about forensics.”

With considerable effort Will subdues the contemptuous snorting sound he’s desperate to make and says “Thank you, I’ll bear it in mind.” Then Skinner gives another self-important smile and it’s so grating he can’t stop himself adding: “But if the perpetrator is deliberately trying to make the scene look a certain way to mislead investigators then it has significant implications for his motive.”

“Itsn’t there a possibility you’re overthinking it? The motive seems fairly clear – he hates omegas.”

“Well it’s hardly as simple as just that,” says Jack irritably before Will has a chance to respond. “The nature of the victims is only one aspect of his pathology.”

“How much more complicated does it really need to be?”

“Considerably more,” says Will. “Since you asked.”

Skinner’s cheeks begin to inflate like an outraged bullfrog. “So you’re saying that the staging aspects
are too simplistic yet the perpetrator himself is too complicated – and in the meantime we all just sit here instead of going public with a profile? If you’ll excuse me saying so Mr Graham, you sound like someone who wants to have their cake and eat it.”

Will can feel his fragile patience about to snap entirely and is about to open his mouth to reply that he certainly does want to have his cake and eat it – and then have a portrait of the cake made, and then eat that as well – when Siemens reaches out with one of his little doughy hands and actually pats Will’s shoulder and announces “I’m sure Mr Graham has good reasons for thinking what he does,” before appearing to forget to remove the hand in the process and just standing there like Will’s a bench that he’s decided to lean on. Will doesn’t quite dare tell Siemens to fuck off with Jack standing right there so discreetly twists out the way instead; at which point a tall shadow suddenly falls over them and on turning round he sees that Hannibal has approached with the usual silent tread and is now standing directly opposite. He doesn’t actually say or do anything beyond regard the four of them with a typically inscrutable Sphinx-like smile; yet such is the force of his presence that everyone falls silent anyway.

“Ah, right on schedule,” says Jack, who recovers himself first. Only he doesn’t immediately clarify exactly what Hannibal’s supposed to be on schedule for, and Will promptly has a surge of terror that it’s going to relate to himself in some way. Possibly as in ‘Ah, Dr Lecter, Will is being more than unusually pale and feeble – take him away and sort him out’ or even some variant of ‘Gentlemen, you’re right on schedule to meet Mr Graham’s babysitter. It’s a shit job, God knows, but someone’s got to do it.’

Will catches Hannibal’s eye (again…in fact the number of eye meets are actually getting a bit ridiculous; what if someone notices?) and Jack proceeds to introduce Hannibal to Siemens and Skinner in excessively fulsome terms in which Will counts two uses of ‘expertise’ one of ‘renowned’ and an unspecified number of alternatives of grateful/happy/delighted to reflect the rapture of Behavioral Sciences (BS) to be in receipt of his medical and psychiatric input. Hannibal’s faint smile grows slightly broader in a way that Will suspects, but can’t confirm, might be rather derisive; but he still lets Jack run on, subtly flicking his eyes across both men’s faces the entire time, before holding out a hand and allowing them to take turns in shaking it. In this respect Will is secretly and rather childishly gratified to note that Skinner is shorter than Hannibal and therefore has to tilt his head back to make eye contact – and, even better, is obviously extremely annoyed about it. Hannibal, in turn, has somehow managed to position himself directly in between Will and Siemens, which means the latter is now bobbing about on the periphery with his pale little hands dangling forlornly at his sides.

“Dr Lecter,” says Skinner after a short pause. “Happy to meet you.” He emphasises the last syllable with an odd clicking noise – Lec-ter – and just as before with Will he doesn’t sound remotely sincere about his professed happiness; although whether it stems from some personal animosity or is simply the result of a temperament that’s indiscriminately hostile with everyone is difficult to tell. Not that it matters of course: in fact Will half wants to advise Skinner to save his time and not to bother, seeing that as a general rule it’s actually pretty impossible to measure the amount of fucks Hannibal couldn’t give on the grounds that science has yet to invent a device capable of detecting such a miniscule amount.

“Youre reputation precedes you, of course,” adds Skinner in the same flat voice, upon which Jack makes an approving noise and Will allows himself to begin gently tuning out again because he generally finds recitals of how incredibly impressive Hannibal is to be faintly demoralising and it’s not the sort of thing he’s currently got the energy for. Instead he stares at the vase of lilies on the table, which are of the white waxy variety that could be presented to either a bride in a chapel or a cadaver in a casket, and is only jolted back into the conversation when he hears Hannibal say his name and realises that he’s in the process of explaining how many new insights he feels he’s gained from working alongside Will. Will, in turn, can’t quite let himself believe that Hannibal genuinely
means this, but thinks it’s nice of him to say it anyway so musters a smile in response that’s intended to be suitably modest yet appreciative.

“The art of the investigator,” Siemens is now announcing to no one in particular. “Or, indeed, the investigative art.”

“Although they do say that the purpose of Art is to convey the truth of a thing,” says Hannibal smoothly, looking straight at Will. “Not to be the truth itself.”

Will darts Hannibal a quick glance in response, uncertain whether or not he’s being made fun of. Probably he is…in fact almost certainly he is. It’s scarcely feasible, after all, that Hannibal could be genuinely proposing there to be anything artistic about him; although admittedly there’s no obvious trace of mockery in his expression. Skinner, in turn, is staring at Hannibal and now Hannibal is staring back – and Will strongly suspects that there’s something going on but is too tired to work out what it might be. In fact he suddenly feels exhausted. This often happens around Hannibal; they haven’t even exchanged a direct word with one another and yet it’s somehow as if they’ve been communicating in furtive silence the entire evening: a speechless language of no words that nobody beyond themselves could ever detect or decipher.

“I’ll leave you to it,” says Will abruptly. “I’m heading off.” Jack looks a little disapproving so Will adds “I hope you all have a nice evening,” even though he doesn’t really care if they do. Anyway, he’s done his duty here: he’s allowed Jack to patronise him with minimal complaint, he’s smiled and nodded at assorted dignitaries, answered questions and overall done a fairly convincing impression of being polite to Siemens and Skinner (S&S…shit and shite?); what more can anyone reasonably expect of him? Hannibal moves round at the same time as Will does then stares at him consideringly for a few seconds before raising a hand and very quickly – so quickly Will is barely even sure he’s done it – brushes his thumb against the edge of Will’s cheekbone. Will can feel his eyes widening with something like shock before taking an automatic step backwards and Hannibal’s inscrutable smile briefly reappears.

“You had something on your face,” he says in calm explanation as he holds up his hand for Will to inspect. “Pollen, I suppose. Those lilies are already dying.”

“Oh,” replies Will, aware of a bizarre combination of both relief and disappointment. “Right, yeah. Thanks.”

“I’m sorry I arrived so late to the lecture; I hope it wasn’t distracting.”

“It’s fine,” says Will. “I’m glad you could make it.” Then he has a sudden insane urge to enquire after the wellbeing of the Malbecs but manages to stop himself on the grounds that it’s the type of thing he’d be destined to wake up in the middle of the night cringing over. So in the end he just waits in silence because he’s expecting Hannibal to say something else anyway; only he doesn’t, merely continues to regard Will with a serenity that manages to be both alarmingly intense yet invitingly casual. Will, in turn, finds himself unhappily dwelling on the ever-sharper pain in his abdomen and the emergency doctor’s appointment it’s almost certainly going to require and so eventually blurts out: “I’m not sure if I’ll be able to make my session tomorrow. I might have to rearrange. I’ll let you know though…I’ll let you know if I can’t make it.”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry,” adds Will, even though he knows he hasn’t done anything wrong.

“It’s your time Will, you should use it however you need to.” Hannibal pauses then smiles very faintly again as if reflecting on some private joke. “The so-called ‘therapeutic hour.’ It’s been so
sanctified yet I’d be the first to admit there’s more to wellbeing then merely sat in a room trading
confidences with a psychiatrist.”

“Careful with that,” says Will lightly. “You’re going to end up talking yourself out of a job.”

“And yet my entire job is premised on talking.”

“Well, I look forward to talking my way towards wellbeing,” replies Will, completely deadpan.

“Very good,” says Hannibal with another small smile. “Although you really mean talking your way
into it. Don’t you Will? I know you’re sceptical about the benefits; or at least the probability of
benefit for someone as….singular as yourself.” Will shrugs irritably, suddenly defensive, and
Hannibal smiles once more then takes a slow step closer. “A sleight of hand of the mind,” he adds,
and there’s an undertone of gentleness to his voice that’s sufficiently unusual to make Will glance up.
“The mind gives up so easily doesn’t it? It’s so persuadable and inconsistent – so susceptible to each
passing influence.”

“Of course,” says Will, briefly looking pale and hollow-eyed all over again. “It’s like that expression:
The mind’s its own place...”

“...and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven,” replies Hannibal, neatly completing the
quotation. “I know. Every transgression, both literal and imagined, takes place in the mind. And
yours gives you no respite at all, does it?” His dark eyes are now boring directly into Will’s:
implacable, somewhat soulless, and in the shadow of the lamplight almost appearing to gleam as if
his skull is lit up from within. “It is – merciless.”

“Yes,” replies Will in an odd mechanical voice that doesn’t sound entirely like his. He wants to turn
away now but can’t, and decides that it’s because there’s something vaguely hypnotic about
Hannibal’s gaze. Or maybe it’s his eyes themselves, so deep and fathomless as they are: bright-edged
flints, the colour of dark amber...

“Because it understands that great cruelty requires great empathy,” says Hannibal caressingly without
breaking the stare. But Will just darts his tongue over his lips and refuses to answer so Hannibal
merely smiles again, abruptly casual once more as if the last few seconds didn’t happen. “At any rate
I hope to see you tomorrow,” he says and for a few seconds Will thinks and even, perhaps, hopes
that he’s about to touch him again. But in the end Hannibal just flicks his gaze up and down Will’s
face as if committing his features to memory before turning round and leaving just as silently as he
arrived.

Will watches him as he’s walking away until his entire body gives another stabbing scream of pain
and he can feel himself go pale with the effort of trying not to wince too obviously. Oh God, don’t
let it be that, he thinks rather wildly. Please, please. Please God. Then he wonders, not for the first
time, why he seems to spend so much time making increasingly desperate pleas with God when he
doesn’t even believe in him.

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Will drives home afterwards in a state of unhappy preoccupation, barely noticing as the city lights
grow sparser and finally give way to the tangled thickets and raw stretching solitude of the
countryside where everything’s illuminated by a flinty slice of moon that bleaches the landscape
varying shades of spectral silver and icy blue. As he pulls into the driveway he makes sure to check
(as usual) that no one’s following him before quickly reassuring himself (also as usual) that it’s fine,
and that if Andrew were going to turn up he would have done so by now. In this respect Will knows
that living on your own in the middle of nowhere can’t be considered the smartest move if you’re
concerned about being hunted down; but really, it would almost be a relief if Andrew followed him here. Here the situation is simplified: distillable into its simplest rawest edges and therefore resolvable the old-fashioned way in terms of a shotgun and a shovel, with no witnesses and therefore no problem. Not that I’d really kill him, Will hastily amends. Or at least…only in self-defence. And that’s hardly a likely scenario either because Andrew, whilst undeniably cruel and vindictive, has never shown either a potential or appetite for lethal violence. Quite the opposite in fact: he wants to possess Will, not destroy him (even though, ironically, the two factors pretty much amount to the same) and which is why what’s scaring Will most of all is the idea of Andrew coming after him in the city. And it’s so very easy to imagine: ostensibly urbane and civilised, and somehow all the more primitive for acting in such modern surroundings, then pointing a long pale finger in Will’s direction (the tips yellowed with nicotine and the nails always a little too long) and shrieking for his property to be returned to him. Andrew…flanked by lawyers, shrouded in righteous indignation and with nothing that anyone can do to stop him as he shrilly evokes his rights. And what singular rights they are: not only in being utterly wrong but also fatally acid-like in their ability to completely neutralise Will’s. Not that Will really has any rights to speak of. The right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right to own property (to an extent), the right to freedom of speech (also to an extent) – and which are all very well – but somehow become a whole lot less meaningful when you have virtually no rights over your own body and what happens to it.

Despite the internal reassurances Will still walks quicker than necessary from the car to the house, where he triple-locks the door before greeting the dogs and beginning the comforting routine of feeding them and letting them outside for a moonlit run. Only after they’ve been attended to does he finally remember to arrange some kind of meal for himself, and which he eats distracted and one-handed while propped up by the window. There’s nothing much to do now except go to bed, but Will’s well aware that as soon as his head touches the pillow his tiredness will evaporate and he’ll be wide awake again, so he eventually wanders over to his desk and roots around for a while until he finally finds what he’s looking for: a photograph clipped from the local paper that it’s somehow become his custom to gaze at occasionally when he wants to try and calm down. Will can’t even remember now how this odd tradition started, only that there’s never been any way of performing it which doesn’t make him feel impossibly guilty and self-conscious (and that therein, probably, lies the benefit because there’s something about the relief of giving into temptation that seems to exert a sort of sedative effect).

It’s not even a particularly good picture. Hannibal is surrounded by a group of other doctors and his face is too small to make out the features clearly; although it’s also true that even when rendered in grainy newprint the dark eyes and sculptured cheekbones remain fully apparent. The other doctors look faintly feeble in comparison: pastel-clad and paunchy whereas Hannibal is dressed in dark clothes and is as lithie and statuesque as they are insipidly bland. It’s obvious that the photographer didn’t arrange them in a way to indicate greater status to any particular member, yet Hannibal still draws the eye and commands a share of attention that should rightfully have been more evenly distributed across the entire group. Hannibal who is glamorous and charismatic and clearly lives a full life: in stark contrast to Will, who merely endures his. He half wants to touch the black and white face but this seems like going a step too far and in the end he just does what he always does: which is to replace the paper in his desk (folded over into a small square and carelessly tossed amongst everything else) and which means he’ll struggle to locate it again when the times comes for another yearningly covert glance but – far more importantly – means it’s less likely that someone else will ever find it and guess. In this respect Will’s well aware how mournful and morbid it is to organise your living space with the idea of dying unexpectedly and someone sifting through all your belongings afterwards; but, like so many other things, it’s become a habit and not one he feels any particular motivation to break.

On this occasion the scrap of newspaper ends up hidden beneath a copy of the latest bestselling
thriller which everyone at work has been reading and that Jack had finished then obligingly passed onto Will. “See if you can guess who the murderer is,” he’d said. “It drove me crazy. Thank God they’re not as clever as that in real life.” The novel received hysterically glowing reviews and is apparently being optioned for movie rights, yet it’s still unopened and destined to remain so because Will doesn’t particularly care for crime stories. Mostly because they imply that murders are like jigsaw puzzles, with each piece neatly marked out and just waiting for an enterprising detective (who’s inevitably lantern jawed and charismatic as opposed to sad and lonely and socially awkward) to saunter in and slot it into place. Bullshit, in other words, because in real life it’s more like a puzzle where most of the pieces are missing and the remaining ones have lost some of their edges or are printed on both sides – and even when you’ve assembled it there’s always a few left over that can’t be made to fit. But mostly Will just doesn’t like novels, period, because they lie to their readers by presenting a deceptive version of life in which things finally finish and come to an end whereas the truth is that there are no endings, ever. Things like pain and fear and dread and doubt…they never end in a neat finale and they never go away. Just wear on incessantly with no release in sight.

As if on cue Will feels a twinge in his abdomen even shaper than the last one and gasps at the intensity of it before staggering to the kitchen and dry-swallowing some painkillers with hands that have begun to shake slightly. You’re fine, he mutters under his breath, you’re going to be fine. And he likes the way it sounds so says it again, reciting it over and over like it’s a mantra, an article of faith: as if by repeating it enough times he can conjure it into reality. Magical thinking. I’m fine, I’m fine, everything’s fine. Perhaps Hannibal would tell him that too if he were here and Will spends a few guilty seconds trying to imagine it: the dark eyes softening with sympathy and the angular face breaking into a faint smile. Not that he can really imagine anything more than a display of consideration and kindness. He can’t imagine any substantial intimacy…certainly he can’t imagine them as lovers (which is a stupid word anyway: vaguely courtly sounding and antiquated, like something people from the 18th century ought to have). Will’s sole experience is that people either want to fuck you or fuck you over with nothing in between; impossible to envisage something as quaintly sentimental as a lover, even if he wanted one – which he doesn’t. But a friend would be nice. An ally, or a comrade, or whatever else you want to call it: those kinds of hearty terms with overtones of combat and camaraderie that men are supposed to show towards one another – even aloof, introverted, unlovable men like Will. For Hannibal to come wandering in now with his shirtsleeves rolled up, casual and fully at home amongst Will’s clutter, pouring out a glass of wine for them both before standing behind Will at the window and putting a hand on his shoulder and saying “It’s all right Will, everything’s going to be fine.” Even though nothing is fine and it would be a huge, spectacular lie…but it would be so reassuring to hear it all the same.

But then how can it possibly be fine, either for Will himself or anyone else? Fleetingly he thinks about the Sculptor, dripping and gore-stained and lying in wait in some tenement or basement room with his collection of knives and cleavers gleaming wet with someone else’s blood. How can that ever be fine? The fear is so palpable now, although there’s still no guarantee it’ll spiral into a Major Incident. Most of these bastards never get the chance to grow truly notorious because they lose their nerve first, or they can’t access victims, or they get caught by people like Will. He’s hoping now, he knows he is, but it’s because he wants to hope – he wants it so badly, for so many things – even though he feels like he’s tempting fate in doing so. Even though hope is avoidant and escapist and complacent. Even though it lies to you. Because while none of these kinds of cases could ever be reasonably described as ‘good’, there’s something different about this one that promises it’s going to turn out to be more than unusually bad.

It’s so quiet now: serene and still in the moonlight with nothing to break the silence except the whining of one of the dogs as it rolls over in its sleep. Will turns back to the window again and gazes out wordlessly into the blackness. The stars are vaporous and indistinct courtesy of a ragged string of clouds although he can still see Orion, trudging through the night sky with his pack of dogs. Their
presence has always made it Will’s favourite constellation so he fixes his eyes on it, fantasising that someone else – an ally, a comrade – is also staring at it now and that the mutual star gazing forms a point of symmetry between them as in those few moments their stars become the same. Jack, perhaps, or even Hannibal (unlikely). And then, oh God, there’s that pain again. Will takes a deep shuddering breath then presses his burning forehead against the cooling glass of the windowpane and tries to focus on the stars. Tomorrow…he knows he can’t put it off any longer. Tomorrow he’ll go and see the doctor.

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Unknown to Will Hannibal is, in fact, staring at the exact same stars at the exact same moment, and likewise from the window of his bedroom – although there the similarity ends, because Hannibal is not remotely fraught or anxious as opposed to coolly poised and contemplative. Neither is he concerned with brooding over the recent spate of murders (much as Jack Crawford is currently doing from his own bedroom window several miles away) for the simple fact that they aren’t particularly interesting in themselves. If he were to think about them at all it would be to dismiss them as graceless – or artless, or pointless; just as less – because they lack even the most elementary hint of flair or purpose as opposed to being mindlessly brutal and therefore boring. Hannibal’s mouth quirks very slightly: to be boring is a sin of almost unforgivably severe proportions. Almost as much as to be rude.

In this respect his mind is far more pleasantly engaged, and with a subject that’s recently begun to take up an increasing amount of time: the problem of What To Do About Will Graham. Or maybe not so much to do about Will as opposed to what should be done with him. Hannibal actually finds his preoccupation with this topic to be rather interesting, not least because of the way it seems to have prowled up on him and then, having established itself, refused to go away again until attention and nurturing have made it blossom into tenfold its original size. His initial reaction to this fascination was to deem it somewhat singular – amusing, even, like someone with an eccentric hobby – although lately it’s begun to take on far more sincere, serious overtones. Yet at no point has he experienced anything approaching guilt or self-consciousness about it; and likewise the awareness that Will would probably be uncomfortable if he knew the extent of Hannibal’s preoccupation with him has never been a source of concern either. Because the simple truth is that Will is captivating; almost perfect, in fact, in his extreme and excessive imperfection. A volatile, questing collection of foibles and uncertainties and consequence and principles, with a boldness that’s tempered by timidity and a recklessness restrained by caution. A hint of luminously lethal beauty with a dark slender soul…and which taken together is both wild and wary and precious and audacious, and seemingly designed purely for Hannibal’s express enjoyment in terms of its breathless capacity to fascinate, intrigue and inspire. In a world that’s rankly rife and teeming with dull, blind, mechanical people, Will is a peerless specimen that’s imbued with a sublime kind of energy, sense and unconscious sensuality: a voltage that thrums and pulses, and which deserves (indeed – demands) to be wrestled and deconstructed before breathed in and savoured.

In turn, it’s now become Hannibal’s habit to spend these reflective sessions considering various aspects of Will – and there are so many to choose from – in which each fragment is inspected then turned over in his mind as if Will is a human puzzle box; a Pythagorean enigma comprised of warm breath and fragile bone and pale skin. There’s the moral, the intellectual, the emotional, the corporeal…all representing a different aspect of Will and all of whom speak and behave within Hannibal’s mind slightly differently from the others. A great composite of identities, none of them ever entirely capturing the whole (and this in itself is an interesting conundrum in terms of whether they would have any degree of understanding if they sat down together – all these versions of Will. Whether they would like each other; whether they’d even recognize each other if they met in the street?). So Hannibal tenderly curates them all and corrals them around within his Memory Palace, attempting to excise different slivers of information from each one whenever he can persuade it to...
allow itself to be held still long enough for him to stroke his palms across it – so skittish and spirited as all these versions are.

Tonight, after some consideration, he decides he’s going to opt for the aesthetic and so coils himself into the large chair by the window and spends some time re-envisaging the way Will appeared this evening, both during the lecture and after it. In this respect the fact that Will is physically beautiful undoubtedly adds to his appeal and Hannibal, who is an admirer and connoisseur of beauty in all its forms, has no difficulty in acknowledging to himself that if Will were less wide-eyed and willowy then he could hardly be fascinating in quite the same way. Meticulously he now catalogues the various aspects which are especially deserving of appreciation and notice. Will’s face and Will’s figure: the way he moves and holds himself, the curve of his mouth with its full upper lip, the slim neck (distressingly easy to snap – mentally Hannibal runs a protective hand across the back of it) and his hair, which is very lustrous and soft-looking and has a silken quality to it that would probably feel extremely pleasing against one’s lips or forehead. Will’s eyes, in particular, are extremely striking and it’s rather a shame they’re so firmly and selfishly secured in his skull and therefore can’t be removed and cherished – folded neatly within the palm of the hand like pieces of opal or caressed in the manner of Rosary beads. If one were painting them it would require a blend of Delft blue and Payne’s grey to capture the precise tint, although their real appeal is less in the shape or shade, or even the excessively charming way his hair tumbles into them and tangles in his eyelashes, but rather in their expression. Will’s eyes are…what? Hannibal frowns slightly. English is such an ugly language; none of the dash or delicate nuance of the Roman tongues. Will’s eyes would be triste in French or luttuoso in Italian, whereas English would deem them something cumbersome and inelegant like ‘dismal’ or ‘gloomy’ – and yet there is such dark beauty in Will’s sadness. Which is exactly as it should be, of course, because beauty in distress is always more picturesque than any other kind.

At the memory of the lecture Hannibal’s face arranges itself into the faintest flicker of a smile because he’s been looking forward to reimagining Will’s response to being touched: something delectable was expected, and of course Will did not disappoint. How he’d quivered very slightly then gone still; how his breath had hitched, the faint dilation of his pupils; the way the long slender column of throat had swayed. It’s endlessly interesting how physical signs of desire and fear can be so similar: two entirely contrary states, yet eliciting such comparable responses. Likewise it’s irritating that Hannibal can’t identify the precise causes with any degree of reliability. Normally his talents for intuiting a reaction are flawless, yet Will is clearly incredibly skilled at dissembling and is therefore difficult to read in the same way. His responses are so rarely what one would anticipate as typical and virtually never conform to what would be expected for someone of his age, education, status or, for that matter, gender. Omegas – because of course he is one, for all that he tries to hide it – are supposed to be tactile and passive. Hannibal now frowns very slightly as he tries to imagine Will in this unlikely role, because while there are aspects of it that are pleasing it hardly seems plausible: Will walking into the bedroom now, wearing the same expression of forlorn weariness from earlier in the evening, then curling his long slender limbs into the chair so he can nestle onto Hannibal’s lap and tuck his head against his chest. No, not really plausible at all – although it hardly matters because while Will would be undeniably charming when wan and needy, he’s infinitely more interesting when fiery and agile. Hannibal sighs with satisfaction at the thought of it. Will has so much restless energy, like a finely coiled spring. Beneath his clothes his body is no doubt covered in bruises from colliding with the planes and edges of various objects in a constant rush to be doing something other than what he’s currently engaged in. Bruises and scrapes and a lot of very pale skin – which would be soft to the touch, yet also firm and wiry from the muscles underneath – and delicate bones rather too near the surface from where Will forgets to feed himself…all currently hidden away beneath layers of plaid and denim and dog hairs. Hannibal now frowns again for a third time because he’s actually in the middle of conducting something of a love-hate relationship with Will’s clothes – which on one hand he despises for their disfiguring cheapness and ugliness
whilst also (given that it’s Will’s beautiful body they happen to be covering) acknowledging there to be something about their simplicity and lack of pretentiousness that’s faintly endearing. Most likely the offensively dowdy garments are part of Will’s veneer of pretending to be a beta, much like that appalling pheromone spray he insists on smothering himself with. Presented with even half the chance Hannibal would like to lift Will into his arms (impervious to the inevitable wild struggling) then force him under a showerhead until it’s all been washed away before adorning him in suitably splendid articles specifically curated to Hannibal’s far superior taste.

Not that you would ever tolerate that, amends Hannibal ruefully as his mental version of Will begins to hiss with outrage at the idea. Smiling slightly to himself he reaches out to smooth away the frown line on its face with his thumb. So protective of yourself, he thinks with admiration; even though you have no idea of your true value. Although perhaps – one day – you might be persuaded. The imaginary Will looks unconvinced and Hannibal muses over how he would rather like to press his lips against the back of Will’s hand just to see how he would react. Needless to say most alphas would be horrified at the idea of this gesture on the grounds that it would be shameful and unbecoming to indicate such submission to an omega, irrespective of how captivating the omega in question might be. But of course to Hannibal that doesn’t signify in the slightest – what other alphas might do.

The chiming of the grandfather clock in the hall now sounds out as a reminder to Hannibal that the hour is extremely late – and that he has to begin next morning inconveniently early – so rather regretfully he prepares to stow away his mental versions of Will, gently yet firmly entrapping them within various rooms of his Memory Palace until such times as they’re required again in the future. There’s a certain frisson in the way he can hold them all captive while the true version roams around the world – wild and wary, yet ultimately free – and his feelings about this are somewhat mixed because it creates an undeniable sense of ownership but also of obligation: that Will has somehow become his possession to influence, control and manoeuvre, yet also his responsibility to cultivate, protect and take care of. Just – his. In turn the awareness of this makes Hannibal realise how reluctant he is to relinquish Will quite yet, so finally decides to indulge himself by recalling the version that represent the most sensuous aspects – and which in real life is one of the hardest to detect, although it’s definitely there on occasion – so he can pull it close to him and spend some time caressing its face and hair until it’s grown pliant and responsive enough to be embraced and softly kissed along the jaw and cheekbone. Although even this version is rebellious and requires endless patience to win it over, so Hannibal concentrates on smoothing his palms across its back and shoulders, only very gradually allowing the touch to become a little more suggestive and a little less innocent and migrating lower and lower with each stroke until this ghost Will begins to quiver and rock its hips against Hannibal’s. My beautiful boy, thinks Hannibal with calm deliberation. How you overpower me. For now we must be patient, but I promise you that very soon I shall have you laid out underneath me: passionate and desperate and calling out my name. And that you are going to love every single moment of it.

The image of Will stares back – aloof and stunning and giving nothing away – and Hannibal smiles affectionately at its reserve before starting to reflect, by no means for the first time, on the different imperatives that merge together in this train of thought; and which appear to be a recurring motif where Will is concerned. Because on one hand there’s the wish to see what depths of dark artistry and depravity Will might be encouraged to descend to, yet on the other there’s simply a desire to take care of him. Possession one moment and protection the next. Not, of course, that such aims couldn’t be occasionally combined. If Will were here now for example then Hannibal would wish to gather him into his arms and hold him close whilst simultaneously murmuring words of dark, hypnotic suggestion into his ear. It’s so easy to imagine it too: Will with crimson splashes of blood on his face, fiercely resilient and always resolute. Ecstasy and agony. Triumphant. ‘William,’ from the Old German Wilhelm… a war deity and warrior. And the name of artists and wordsmiths and kings – of
Blake and Shakespeare and William the Conquerer – but most of all Hannibal’s own Will, who manages to be infinitely more fascinating on a day to day basis than any of the others.

Yet there’s also no denying that the fervent desire to discover another human being in this way – from a spirit of pleasure and appreciation rather than raw desecration or destruction – is deeply unfamiliar; and this in and of itself is…interesting. What’s even more interesting is that while Will has unknowingly subverted Hannibal’s expectations about himself, he finds that he can’t quite bring himself to resent Will for it, or even to begrudge him the success. This should be concerning. It is concerning. In fact it’s the type of speculation that he would normally avoid on the grounds that such entanglements are a hazardous waste of time; and squandering time is something to which Hannibal, on principle, is usually strongly opposed. Yet the situation exists as it is. It is irrefutable; elemental, even – to claim anything else would likewise be a waste of time. So despite being acutely aware that allowing himself to be so preoccupied with Will could have a whole range of unanticipated consequences, his deliberations still end as they always do: which is that it no longer feels feasible to simply relinquish Will and allow him to walk away into the life of someone else.

And in this respect the next few months are undoubtedly going to be very revealing, given that Will has grown increasingly wary and preoccupied in a way that indicates substantial inner turmoil and a corresponding desire to make himself untouchable – and completely unaware that it simply compels Hannibal to want to touch him even more. There’s even a certain pleasure in it, and if anything Will’s unobtainability enhances his value in the same way that jewellery preserved in glass cases is more desirable than the cheaper pieces that can be groped and fumbled over in trays on the counter. Even more interesting is that Will’s rather exquisite unhappiness has coincided with the appearance of a new and unusually vicious killer…whose sole target is omegas. Briefly Hannibal thinks of the festering panic that underlay every interaction at Jack Crawford’s otherwise tedious gathering. Undoubtedly there’s a genuine fear and apprehension over how extreme this particular reign of terror is going to become. A killer’s sovereignty: slicing and hacking his way to infamy as the world watches on in a simmering brew of terror and ignorance. And then there’s Will, caught in the middle of it all with his sad eyes and anxious hands and stunningly dark mind; a reluctant actor in a story being slashed and carved by someone else.

Hannibal now leans back in the chair and steeples his fingers beneath his face, trying to imagine what sort of narrative Will tells about himself in the recesses of his own mind and what raw materials he might draw upon in doing so. Fiction so often makes a more convincing display of truth, but Hannibal doubts Will has fully discovered his own truth yet. He’s more like a fresh page begging to be written on: a beautiful blank slate. Will knows how he begun – the wifeless father with the motherless son, the boatyards in the simmering summers and stifling winters of the south and a mind too sharp and a soul too uncompromising to be contained within them – but what Will doesn’t know yet is how he’s going to end. But a life is itself a narrative and therefore an exercise in reconstruction wherein the beginning exists and the conclusion is waiting, and in between are all the fragments of all the stories.

*So many possible stories,* thinks Hannibal tenderly as he reflects on his ambitions for the two of them. *And this, Agent Will Graham, is going to be one of ours.*

Centre stage. Curtain up. *Go.*
Huge collective thanks to everyone who left such kind feedback on Chapter 1. I’m still not past the stage of feeling self-conscious when I put my stuff online and got a massive case of cold feet over this story prior to posting it, so your lovely response has been a big confidence boost :-)

**SCULPTOR CARVES UP FOURTH**

*By Freddie Lounds*

Late last night a badly mutilated body was discovered in the Baltimore area that bears all the hallmarks of the killer known only as the Sculptor. At this point details are scarce, although it’s been confirmed the victim was an omega women in her late 30s and that the extent of her injuries were so extreme as to delay attempts at identification. Combined with the recent deaths of one other woman and two men in the Maryland region, this new killing means the Sculptor’s toll now stands at four victims in as many months.

A statement issued on behalf of Agent Jack Crawford has insisted there’s no need for panic and that the Bureau is currently pursuing several active lines of enquiry. It was further implied that experts in behavioral profiling remain unconvinced that the four deaths link together as a series. However, on reviewing the evidence, The TattleCrime suggests the exact opposite is true and that the FBI – not for the first time – is not only unwilling to admit that it’s out of its depth but almost certainly has a new and terrifying serial killer on its hands…

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Will wakes up next morning in the usual wild confusion of bedclothes and spends a few seconds disentangling himself before gazing numbly into space as he attempts to inventory the various tasks that need to be accomplished that day and arrange them into some kind of order of importance. In this respect ‘importance’ effectively means ‘awfulness,’ and the immediate flare of pain serves as a reminder that his body isn’t prepared to be ignored any longer – which means arranging medical attention is going to have to take priority on the list of Awful Yet Important Things To See To. Will groans out loud then reluctantly fights his way out of the remaining clinging, clammy sheets and wraps a blanket round his shoulders before stumbling into the living room so he can rummage around and locate the necessary phone number. He hasn’t used it for so long it takes a while to retrieve it, although it eventually turns up on a scribbled scrap of paper in his desk drawer where it’s been stowed away along with other assorted ephemera he never has any use for but can’t quite bring himself to dispose of – all the travel brochures for trips he never has time to take and the adverts for dating websites he never has the energy or confidence to pursue. Then he sits down and turns it over in his hands a few times, twitching and folding the edges like an approximation of origami while trying to work up the impulse to put it to use.

On the shelf directly opposite is a photograph of his mother – the only one he has – and Will briefly gazes at it now, partly as another way of prevaricating and partly with the usual sense of confused melancholy. His mother stares back at him from behind the glass, serene and unknowable with the large eyes and delicately moulded features that Will always admires as beautiful without having ever
once recognised how the same qualities are beautiful in himself. In this respect he doesn’t actually remember the living version and often feels guilty at not being able to summon more sentimental feelings towards the picture, which is why he makes a point of displaying it prominently as a form of penance (occasionally with a few flowers next to it as if it’s a shrine). Performing this duty makes him feel self-conscious at some times and hypocritical at others; but someone has to do it because he knows his father never will, and a lack of any real feeling doesn’t change the fact that he hates the idea of his mother being so un-mourned and disregarded that there’s no one to even keep a pointless vigil by her picture – despite the fact she’s dead and long past caring, and even though he feels a similar fate of being no one’s dearly departed is almost certainly in store for himself. Perhaps that’s partly why he does it at all, as if he thinks he’ll be rewarded for his diligence by being commemorated by someone else after he’s dead – as if such tributes are a baton that gets passed from one conscientious mourner to another. Will frowns again, mulling this over. It reminds him of a poem he had to study at school: 

"Remember me when I am gone away; gone far away into the silent land, although he’s forgotten now how the rest of it goes. It’s the sort of thing Hannibal would probably know."

Will makes himself a coffee then spends several seconds aimlessly stirring it despite the fact he takes it without sugar or milk and there’s nothing much to stir. Then he dutifully locates his phone to ring the clinic and make the obligatory yes-no-yes responses to the receptionist at the other end until the deed is done and the appointment is made and he can cut off the call as quick as possible before there’s any chance he might change his mind and take it back again. Afterwards he replaces the phone on the table, carefully and cautiously as if it’s made of glass and harsh treatment might cause it shatter, when from the corner of his eye he catches sight of The TattleCrime headline flickering on his open laptop. Once noticed it’s impossible to tear his eyes away and despite his best efforts he can’t help giving a wince of distaste: "SCULPTOR CARVES UP FOURTH. Because yes, here it is now – it’s definitely starting. Only a matter of time before the national then international press gets holds of it, after which a whole new level of hell will get let loose. The story will run and run, breathlessly announcing each new atrocity as the Sculptor carves up the fifth and sixth and God knows how many others, and the fear and hysteria will make a complicated job even worse for the FBI. But it’ll happen anyway and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop it, because it’s not just the nature of the murders themselves, gruesomely extreme as they are, but the nature of the actual victims which will ensure the story ignites. For this is a killer who’s opted to target omegas; and even a child murderer wouldn’t attract a greater level of shock and condemnation.

Will’s frown now reappears as he silently reviews the reasons for this. Not that they’re especially complicated: he’s fully aware that the agenda of outrage, just as with so much else, has been driven and dictated by alphas; and not only – perhaps not even mainly – for moral reasons, but from resentment. "Who dares to interfere with what belongs to us? For while omegas aren’t as rare today as they were a few generations ago they’re still by no means common, and it’s not unheard of for less elite alphas to go their entire lives without ever getting within touching distance of one, let alone acquiring one with which to bond. It’s why they’re accorded such special protected status, why alphas compete so fiercely over them, and why betas are so pleased to have one in their family – betas just like Will’s own father – because of the astronomical sums for which they can be traded. The days of alphas fighting to the death over omegas may now be nothing more than an historical curiosity but the nature of the rivalry remains equally ferocious in modern times, albeit in a more refined form: the power of money. An attractive female omega can change hands for five figure sums, and if she’s from a well-established and reputable family then her price can as much as double. Even a less winsome one be she barrel-chested or thick-waisted enough to fall below the preposterous alpha standards of beauty – can easily go for not much less. Male omegas, being even rarer still, are more variable in their prestige, with some alphas liking them to the point of fetish while others view them as inferior to females due to their less reliable fertility. But even a supposedly unattractive male omega faced with an indifferent alpha can still fetch more money than most people
Nevertheless, and despite his first-hand experience of it, Will still finds it difficult to connect such a concept to himself in any meaningful way: that in biological terms he’s considered something scarce and precious and desirable. Maybe it’s because the realities of it have brought him nothing but stress and hardship; although his own aversions aside, it remains undeniably true that omegas are not typical in the way that betas are and that their mere existence causes utter internal chaos for alphas. In this respect the recent crime scenes were a particularly powerful example in that most of the alphas on the team literally couldn’t handle being in the vicinity of a dead omega. Even ones like Jack and Hannibal – clearly made of sterner stuff than the rest – had been visibly uncomfortable at first and required a few seconds to ground themselves before forcibly moving back into professional mode.

“It’s hard to explain why,” Jack had said to Will afterwards. “It’s like it’s something instinctive – it just hits you right in your gut. And logic’s got nothing to do with it so it doesn’t matter that you never knew them personally, you still can’t stop it happening.”

“But what happens?”

“I told you, it’s hard to explain. It’s like…I don’t know. Grief? Guilt? It’s as if it hurts you that something bad happened to them.” Will had looked sceptical and Jack had waved his hands around in frustration at his inability to make it clearer. “You should ask Dr Lecter,” he’d eventually added. “He’s better at describing things than I am. He probably knows the biochemistry behind it as well.” Only Will hadn’t wanted to ask Hannibal, and in the end the subject was dropped when one of the younger pathologists had begun questioning Jack over whether he’d ever met a live omega, and if so what was it like? At this point Will had unconsciously put his hand in his pocket to grasp onto the bottle of beta pheromone spray that he carries around as religiously as any asthmatic with an inhaler, and Jack had launched into a series of anecdotes about Omegas I Have Known while another CSI agent had added in a lascivious undertone to his neighbour “have you ever smelt one when it was in heat?”

“Never,” the man had replied. “I should be so lucky. What can I tell you? I’m not wealthy enough to get that close.”

“It’s supposed to be like nothing else. Like, it’ll blow your head off. Seriously, I saw a porno this one time: they’d got an alpha, this big sonofabitch, and then there was this cute little omega who…”

Will had turned away then and gone to talk to Price instead, but the memory of the whole exchange still rankles like something stuck in his teeth and he as remembers it now he screws his eyes closed in an attempt to drive it away again. Then he takes a few cautious sips of his coffee and, on discovering it’s still too scalding hot to drink, ferries it over to the window instead so he can prop himself against the glass and stand there nursing the mug while gazing out across the bleak blackened fields that are already rimey with an early winter frost. The day looks set to be a spectacularly grey and dismal one and on the horizon he can see a group of crows beginning to circle: little black flecks that covetously weave and dive over what’s certainly the mangled remains of some animal or other. The collective noun for crows is a murder, although he’s not sure how he knows this. Perhaps he’s seen it on TV sometime? It’s the kind of pointless information beloved of crossword puzzles and general knowledge quizzes; murders of crows competing for space alongside the other quaintly named avian gatherings. All those exhalations of larks and parliaments of owls. Not that there are any parliaments round here, and certainly no exhalation.

The crows, oblivious to Will’s scrutiny, continue to swirl and plunge and there’s something about the sight of so many swarming pitch black bodies with their ragged feathers and scavenging manner that he finds unsettling and sinister. It’s why they’re called a murder after all. When there’s been death –
that’s when the crows come. With a small shudder he forces himself to ignore them then walks back into the bedroom instead and begins to get dressed: slow and methodical, one button after another, pretending the entire time that it’s just a regular day and there’s nothing to worry about because it’s fine. All of it, everything: it’s fine. It sounds fairly persuasive too as these things go; and standing there in the empty lonely silence and the pale winter sun, he can almost convince himself that he genuinely believes it to be true.

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The waiting room of the doctor’s office has clearly been done up according to some designer’s idea of what calmness would look like. ‘Calmness,’ this asshole had clearly said to themselves, ‘is pallid blue paint, Claude Monet prints and pot plants. And plush, goddammit. Lots of plush. All the plush – as far as the eye can see.’ As it happens the plush – blue and pallid, naturally – that upholsters the chairs has an unfortunate precedent because it’s the exact same shade as the lividity of a corpse that’s been pulled out the water; only clearly no one thought to point that out. In fact Will’s quite tempted to do the honours himself after being patronised by the receptionist for a full five minutes about why he hasn’t made an appointment for so long, and has he been completing online health checks, and “did you know, sir, there’s a support group for male omegas that’s taking new referrals?” ‘And did you know that your vile chairs are the colour of rigor mortis?’ Will wants to reply – although of course doesn’t – so just nods vapidly instead until the stupid bastard realises he’s not going to get anywhere and eventually tells Will to go and take a seat on one of the corpse chairs in the manner of someone who’s being banished; despite the fact that’s all he actually wanted to do in the first place.

With the exception of the receptionist and two alphas who are clearly accompanying their omegas, Will is the only man in the waiting room. The latter both stare at him with unashamed curiosity, so Will stubbornly stares back even though he knows there’s no way there’ll ever drop their eyes first. Besides a staring contest is as a good a way as any to pass the time, considering that the only reading material on offer are the type of glossily vacuous magazines that the designer of the rotting carcass chairs obviously thought omegas would be interested in: fashion and beauty advice, a surfeit of simpering celebrities with teeth as flat and shiny as slabs of tombstone, tips on creating ‘a beautiful home’ and – Will’s eyes widen slightly in disbelief – ‘Crafts for the holidays! Make a beautiful table centrepiece with glitter and pinecones!’ Will shifts around irritably then digs into his briefcase and pulls out a stack of CSI reports and proceeds to sit there reading them, to the obvious disapproval of the receptionist who keeps darting critical glances over the top of his computer screen. Will catches his eye on the third glance so gives them a defiant rustle – then makes a few appreciative noises over them for good measure – as across from him one of the omega women stands up to go to her appointment and obligingly takes her alpha with her (one down, one to go) while the other omega leans over and murmurs something in an undertone to her own alpha; at which point he pats her hand and finally stops staring at Will (two down: victory attained. Like a boss).

After a few more minutes have passed this second couple also vanish through the swing doors leaving Will on his own amidst all the pale blue and the pot plants (and who, because he’s starting to feel vaguely theatrical, decides to consider it somewhat sinister that while everyone goes in through the doors no one ever comes out again). A few more minutes limp by: a new female omega arrives and glances nervously at Will’s reports; the receptionist clears his throat disapprovingly and Will gives them another rebellious rustle in response. He wants to open a window now because the room’s starting to feel so stifling but they’re of the wide plate-glass variety that don’t have a catch. It really is unbearable though: as if every possible aspect of ‘patronising’ has been distilled into a sweltering pale blue box of plush and condescension. The crate of plastic toys in the corner, for example – while obviously meant for any children the patients might bring with them – still manages to cooly imply that the designer intended them for the adult omegas. Even the pictures on the opposite wall feature an assortment of simpering furry beasts of the type you might choose to decorate a child’s bedroom and he stares at them now with numb incomprehension: those Australian

ones with the pouches and the improbable-sounding names. Wombats? Wallabies? Oh God. *I want to go home,* thinks Will with a brief flare of anguish. Then he stretches his legs out in front of him and tries not to sigh too loudly and obviously before glancing up and seeing that the receptionist is bearing down on him with a grimly determined expression on his face. Will initially suspects that he’s going to try and confiscate the reports by force (and is revving up for a skirmish to retain ownership, possibly culminating in a Charlton Heston-esque ‘I’ll give you my reports when you prise them from my cold dead hands’) but it turns out that he’s only there to inform Will that Dr Reynolds is ready to see him now. “I’ll show you through,” adds the receptionist, then darts another fastidious glare at the reports before chasing it up with an expression that can clearly be interpreted as: *Good riddance too, you little antisocial shit.*

“How hold these for me for a minute would you?” says Will as punishment, then stands up and pretends to rifle around in his briefcase in the most laborious and time-consuming way possible. The receptionist looks appalled at the thought but clearly can’t say no, so stands there instead dangling them between two fingers with a configuration of resigned suffering on his face more suited to a martyr lashed to a stake. “Thank you so much,” says Will sweetly.

“You’re welcome, sir,” replies the receptionist. Fed through a translator, the remark would almost certainly come out as: *you’re a bastard, sir.*

Will smiles again, even more beatifically than before, then reclaims the reports and allows himself to be herded through the swinging doors into a long stretching corridor that’s as coldly gleaming with white and chrome as the waiting room is dull and insipid with ugly corpse-coloured plush. Dr Reynolds’ room is the third on the left and she stands up to greet him when he comes in: a brisk, cheerful woman in her late fifties with a kind face and a slightly hectoring, motherly tone (Will absorbs all this in an instant then mentally sets up a countdown for how long it’ll be before she calls him ‘young man’.) “Sorry to keep you waiting Mr Graham,” she says as he sits down. “I’m afraid we’re running a bit behind schedule today.” She sighs then waves her hands around rather aimlessly. “You know how it is.”

“It’s fine,” replies Will. “I’m not in any hurry.” Even though it’s not, and he is; and it’s only when Dr Reynolds begins nodding appreciatively at such forbearance that he realises he’s entered a surreal state of wishful thinking which seems to believe that if he’s nice to her she’ll somehow be more likely to give him the news he wants to hear.

“So…” says Dr Reynolds, who obviously feels that these little social delicacies have gone on long enough and it’s time to get straight to the point. “Abdominal pain?” She begins flicking through the notes in front of her, quick and deft as a croupier with a deck of cards before pausing and frowning. “And you’ve been taking heat suppressants for how long?” Will folds his arms and refuses to answer; it’s there right in front of her after all – why does she need to hear him say it? “That’s too long Mr Graham. You know that right? Much longer than would be medically advisable.”

Will carefully pushes his glasses up with a forefinger as the image of the croupier fleetingly comes back to mind: *The house always wins.* “I guess,” is all he says.

“You’ve been touristing?” adds Dr Reynolds gently; which Will knows full well is a euphemism for ‘you’ve been seeing a series of different doctors to get the prescription and lying to all of them for why you want it.’ Technically this is not allowed but everyone does it; everyone has to do it, because no doctor would risk their license by consistently prescribing heat suppressants to the same patient. The official line is that chronic use of the tablets is dangerous, but Will is convinced that this isn’t the true reason as opposed to a wider alpha conspiracy to erode their reproductive rights. It’s the alphas that make the laws after all; and it’s hardly in their interests if all the omegas have an unrestricted power to stop having heats. He can’t help sighing fretfully at the thought of this long-standing
injustice and Dr Reynolds darts him a sympathetic look and says: “Might I ask why you made a decision like that?”

“No,” replies Will politely. “Not really.”

Dr Reynolds gives a brisk nod then tucks her pen behind her ear and returns to the folder of notes. “All right then. Any headaches? Disorientation?”

“No.”

“Any other symptoms?”

“No.”

Beneath the desk, Dr Reynolds’ feet are beginning to tap. “No mood swings? Hallucinations?”

“No.”

“Okay. Just the stomach pain?”

“Just that.”

Dr Reynolds pauses then peers owlishly over the top of her glasses; Will recognises it as a gesture he often performs himself and immediately resolves to stop doing it. “And how bad is the pain? On a scale of one to ten?”

“I’m not sure. It varies.”

“How bad is it at its worst?”

Will bites his lip and then glances at the floor. “Probably an eight. Maybe a nine.”

Dr Reynolds nods again then retrieves the pen and makes a few brief notes before pushing her chair back from the desk and gesturing towards a gown that’s hanging limply from a hook by the door. “All right then young man,” she says (Christ). “Let’s take a look at you. If you could just get undressed…” Will’s face promptly falls with dismay and she gives a little sigh of impatience. “An examination really is unavoidable Mr Graham. There’s no male doctor in the clinic today, but if you prefer…”

“No, I’m sorry, it’s fine,” says Will quickly. And there’s that fucking word again: fine. Fine-fine-fine…it’s as if he thinks that saying it often enough can conjure it into reality. For some reason he finds himself briefly thinking of Hannibal – probably because it’s the sort of term that permanently hovers over him, even though in his case the meaning is different and it’s not about desperation at all but rather luxury and sufficiency. Fine wine. A fine meal. ‘The first violin with the Baltimore Philharmonic is very fine.’ Will blinks a few times then forces himself to stand up and face Dr Reynolds. “I’m sorry,” he says again. “What do I need to do?”

“No, I’m sorry, it’s fine,” says Will quickly. And there’s that fucking word again: fine. Fine-fine-fine…it’s as if he thinks that saying it often enough can conjure it into reality. For some reason he finds himself briefly thinking of Hannibal – probably because it’s the sort of term that permanently hovers over him, even though in his case the meaning is different and it’s not about desperation at all but rather luxury and sufficiency. Fine wine. A fine meal. ‘The first violin with the Baltimore Philharmonic is very fine.’ Will blinks a few times then forces himself to stand up and face Dr Reynolds. “I’m sorry,” he says again. “What do I need to do?”

“Everything off, please, and put this on. Then hop on the table and lie on your side.” She begins to draw back the curtain round the examination cubicle then pauses halfway through and gives him a sympathetic look. “Please try not to be so nervous Mr Graham,” she says kindly. “I’ll be as gentle with you as I possibly can. Most of the time these symptoms don’t mean anything serious. And if there does turn out to be something wrong…” She pauses again then gives another smile: briskly bright and clinical. “Well, you’re in the right place aren’t you? We can do our best to fix it.”

Will nods in numb acquiescence then waits until she’s gone before tugging on the gown and
carefully folding himself onto the table and drawing his knees up to his chest. It’s not exactly what her instructions were, but it’s a position he remembers lying in before: a default pose when vulnerable or frightened. Protect the vital organs, then make yourself as small as possible in the hope they won’t see you…even though they usually do.

“Yes,” he replies mechanically when Dr Reynolds reappears. “Yes, I know. It’s fine.”

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Reflecting on it afterwards Will is convinced that she felt sorry for him. Or maybe that’s just how doctors behave towards omegas as standard? It’s been so long since he visited one he can’t actually remember if they were always that way, although it’s admittedly impossible to imagine any of the doctors he knows acting in such a protective patronising manner that surely couldn’t be entirely professional. No way Hannibal or Price would ever pat anyone’s hand or murmur soothing nonsense at intervals – at one point Will had gasped with discomfort and she’d actually placed her palm on his hair like she was giving him a benediction. Or, more accurately, like he was a child that required coddling and comfort. “It’s all right Mr Graham,” she’d said. “Not long now.”

This time Will didn’t reply that it was fine because it was too far beyond the point of pain and humiliation to do anything except stare numbly at the tiles on the wall and imagine striding through the fields with the dogs; free, uninhibited and most importantly miles and miles away from here. “Does that hurt?” said Dr Reynolds, forcing him back into the room again and Will had given a second gasp in response at which point she’d made another soothing noise through her teeth. “All right we’re done,” she said a few seconds later. Pause. Sigh. Another pat on Will’s hand. “Come through whenever you’re ready.”

For a few seconds Will had just laid there overcome with a horrific urge to cry before forcibly pulling himself together and replacing his clothes one-by-one with the same mindlessly mechanical efficiency of the morning. On the other side of the curtain Dr Reynold’s briskly clinical manner now appears fully restored and she gestures at Will to sit down without showing any further desire to pat his hand or hair. “All right Mr Graham. Well, the good news is that there are no signs of swellings, contusions or lesions. Your bloods are mostly normal. You could do with gaining a bit of weight but otherwise you’re actually very healthy.” Then she pauses and Will’s heart, tentatively on the rise, promptly sinks again because he immediately knows there’s a ‘but’ charging towards the conversation with all the shambling, destructive determination of a maddened bull. “But,” adds Dr Reynolds, “there’s no question you need to stop taking your suppressants.” She raises her eyebrows then pauses for a second time, at which point Will realises he’s begun frantically shaking his head. “Mr Graham…”

“No,” says Will, suddenly desperate. “No, I can’t.”

“Mr Graham, I’m sorry, but there’s really no other option. You must understand that the abdominal pain is just the beginning. Carry on like this and you’re going to cause yourself some very serious problems: fever, loss of coordination and eventually neurological effects. It’s why I asked you earlier about mood swings and hallucinations.”

“Maybe if I tried a different type?” says Will, his voice disturbingly low and intense. “I mean, people do don’t they? I know they do. I’ve read about them – I looked at the journals.”

“I know Mr Graham,” says Dr Reynolds gently, “but it’s more difficult for male omegas than female ones. And it’s particularly difficult for you because from the look of your blood chart you’re missing three of the fibrose chromosomes that regulate these kinds of hormonal effects. It’s not unusual in male omegas, and normally wouldn’t cause any problems for someone of your age.” She pauses again and gives him a significant glance. “At least it wouldn’t if you were letting your body go
through its natural cycle.”

Will has a sudden surreal image of the three missing chromosomes with suitcases and matching grins calling out to one another: ‘come on boys – fuck this guy. Let’s go!’ “There must be something else,” he says in the same urgent tone. “Please; anything. Even if it’s experimental – I don’t care.”

“I can’t possibly prescribe you experimental drugs,” says Dr Reynolds sharply. “And even if I could, your insurance wouldn’t begin to cover the cost.”

“I could find a way to get the money.”

Dr Reynolds frowns again then begins to tap her pen against the desktop in a restless, fidgety gesture that makes Will want to scream with irritation. “Mr Graham, forgive me, but I don’t quite understand your reaction. It’s as if I’ve told you that you’re seriously ill. All you need to do is stop taking the tablets and you’ll be fine.”

“I can’t.”

Dr Reynolds takes a slow breath like someone struggling not to let their exasperation show. “Why not?” she says with deliberate patience; and then, when Will doesn’t reply, “If you don’t tell me I can’t help you.”

At this Will seems to visibly shrink. “You wouldn’t be able to help me anyway,” he says quietly. “It’s not a medical issue.”

Dr Reynolds sighs herself at this then leans forward across her desk, the penny having clearly started to drop. “Are you bonded?”

Will opens his mouth then closes it again and she raises her eyebrows expectantly. “It’s complicated,” he finally says. Christ, is it ever. “No, I’m not. But I was supposed to be. I was…”

Then he hesitates because he wants to say ‘sold’ but it sounds so melodramatic, even if it’s essentially true. “I was meant to be bonded with someone; my father signed ownership over to him. But I left nearly straight away. He was…” An array of inappropriate adjectives veer into mind and he shakes his head again to dismiss them. “He wasn’t very kind to me. I can’t go back. It’d be like going to prison.” Not that this is even a good comparison, because at least a prison term would come to an end whereas a life with Andrew would be eternal enslavement with no possible prospect of parole: forever and ever ‘til death do us part. “He’d force me to start a family,” adds Will with mounting desperation. “I wouldn’t be allowed to work, to even go out on my own…to have any independence; I wouldn’t be allowed to do anything. And so far he hasn’t managed to get me back, but if I started having heats again…Oh God, it would change everything. Do you understand Dr Reynolds? Please tell me that you understand.”

Will abruptly falls silent, suddenly overcome with the miserable inevitability of it all, and Dr Reynolds gives a long sympathetic sigh in response. “I understand,” she says quietly. “You’re thinking of Randell vs. Wilson aren’t you? I’m sorry Mr Graham, I really am. The laws in that respect are barbaric.” Then she pauses and lowers her voice even further in a way that Will can’t help but find slightly sinister – as if she believes that even in the privacy of a medical clinic, the alphas are somehow going to find out she’s been criticising them and punish her accordingly. “Those ownership rules have been overturned now in much of Europe,” adds Dr Reynolds in the same low tone. “In Canada too, I believe.” Then she clears her throat and looks awkward, having obviously realised that extolling the better circumstances of foreign omegas is hardly very helpful. “Honestly though Mr Graham, we meet a number of people in situations like yours and I’ve only ever seen Randell applied in a couple of cases. It’s extremely rare that it gets that far and in nearly every instance the parties were able to come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement without getting the law
involved.”

Until this point Will has been staring numbly at the floor but he now raises his head rather sharply.
“What about the others?”

“How? Excuse me?”

“You said in a couple of case it didn’t work out. So – what happened to them?”

“Oh. Um, well, the omega was made to return to the alpha by force.”

“They lost the rights to their property?”

“I’m not sure. I suppose they must have done.”

“House arrest on behalf of their alphas?”

“No…no I’m fairly certain it didn’t go as far as that.”

“But it might have? In theory?”

“Well, it’s possible in theory…”

“Because the alpha retains guardianship and legal rights over any omega with an active heat cycle.”

“Yes…yes they do have those rights, but I’m sure they didn’t apply them in such an extreme way. The omegas’ families would have intervened.”

“I don’t have any family,” says Will abruptly.

Dr Reynolds gives another low sigh of sympathy; at one point she actually seems to be wringing her hands. “If he did try and reclaim you…perhaps it might be possible to negotiate with him?” Will shakes his head and she adds, rather hopefully: “But if you got a third party involved as a mediator? I’d be happy to do it myself if necessary. I mean, if you’re so strongly opposed he might decide he’d prefer a mate who’s more compatible.”

Will gives a short laugh: bitter and humourless. “No. He won’t.”

“You’re certain?”

“If I was willing he’d probably lose interest,” replies Will in a flat, toneless voice. “What he likes is the resistance.”

“Oh Mr Graham,” says Dr Reynolds, and it’s clear from the expression on her face that she’s thinking: ‘one of those alphas.’ “I’m so sorry.” He’s lost count of how many times she’s said it now – how sorry she is – although it’s not like he can really blame her. What else does she have to offer him except sympathy, after all? “Maybe he won’t come for you?” adds Dr Reynolds. “Your medical status might give him a legal case to force you to come back, but if he hasn’t attempted it so far perhaps he won’t bother? They often don’t you know. There’s such a stigma attached to omegas escaping…” She pauses, seeming to regret the dramatic choice of word. “I mean, leaving their alphas.”

“I know,” says Will in the same mechanical voice.

“They see you as their most prized possessions; it’s a matter of pride. In fact I believe it’s not uncommon for them to simply tell people that the missing omega died, then just quietly buy a new
one a few months later to save face. Yours may have done the same."

“I can’t take that chance.”

“But even so,” persists Dr Reynolds. “It may be that this makes no difference?” She’s clearly at the point where the reassurances are more to alleviate her rescuing urge than they are about honestly representing the situation and while it’s kindly meant it still feels invalidating – like she’s minimising the extent of his problems because to acknowledge them would make her feel too uncomfortably powerless in her inability to fix them. In other words, Will needs to feel better so that she can feel better. But it’s hardly worth arguing over so in the end he just nods, numb and defeated looking, while she reaches across the desk again and gives him a light pat on the hand. “We have good counsellors here,” she says gently. “If you need someone to talk to?”

“It’s fine,” repeats Will automatically. And it doesn’t sound remotely convincing but he says it anyway – then says it again – because he’s still got his pride and is determined to cling onto the shreds of it, even if the world has just taken one step closer to caving in. So he forces himself to dole out a faint smile as a shield against any more of her evident pity and then says it again for a third time; says it loud and clear, despite the fact it’s clearly not – that it’s anything but. Despite the fact the light from the sun will take several years to reach it, because that’s how very far from being fine it is.

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Will doesn’t entirely remember how he got home – how he walked down that gleaming corridor and got into his car and drove across the yawning miles of empty road – although of course he must have done because here he is performing the usual routine of triple-checking the locks, shrugging off his coat and then feeding and stroking the dogs; taking care, as ever, to distribute the affection equally across the entire pack so that no one feels left out. Afterwards, also as usual, he forgets to arrange a proper meal for himself and instead goes and sits at his desk again where he catches his mother’s eye in the photo and feels a sudden pang of guilt that he’s been neglecting her seeing how he’s forgotten, for the fifth day in a row, to acquire any flowers to keep her company in her lonely black-and-white vigil from behind the glass of the frame. On his wrist he writes F for flowers, then pulls open the bottom drawer to locate what he wanted in the first place: which is a small leather-bound book that’s stashed away along with all the holiday brochures and dating websites as another relic whose good intentions have never come to fruition.

In this respect Will had originally acquired the book with the aim of turning it into a journal after once hearing diary-keeping being recommended as somewhat therapeutic. He can’t actually remember now who’s idea it was; possibly Hannibal’s, although maybe someone else – or maybe he’d read it somewhere – but it had been presented as a simple yet effective way of expressing and processing distressing feelings. Cathartic, that was the word which was used; writing about how you felt was meant to be cathartic. In spite of himself Will had been rather taken with the idea, not least because there seemed something vaguely romantic, if not outright heroic, about sitting down in an age of laptops and tablets and scratching away with pen and ink until your innermost thoughts are coaxied out your mind and come tumbling onto the page in glistening hand-written strokes of wisdom, insight and creative possibility. In this respect Will had deliberately chosen a book that was up to the task of bearing such weighty expectations (thick creamy paper, slightly yellowed with age on the fore-edge, and bound in glossy leather the same deep vermillion as blood) because it looked like something from the desk of a Renaissance Old Master and surely only profound and compelling information would ever find a home in a book like this? But in the end he’d found himself barely using it and in the last year there’s only been a handful of entries. Mostly this had been because there was something so lonely and dismal about confiding his own pain to himself, and it’s for that reason he’s abruptly decided that from now on he’s going to address each entry to Hannibal instead. Not, of course, that Hannibal will ever have the opportunity to read it; but even though the words are
destined to remain private, Will still feels that there might be a sense of solidarity in having a correspondent, albeit an absent one. Even so, he can’t quite bring himself to use Hannibal’s name; and in the end just writes the date at the top of the page and then follows it up with: Dear You.

It’s not much of a beginning, but at least it is one; and faintly encouraged, Will resumes writing again – awkwardly aware of the way he’s sticking the tip of his tongue through his teeth like a child struggling to master such an unfamiliar tool as a pen – until a sudden crippling spasm of pain makes him draw in his breath before letting it out in a raspingly agonised gasp. He screws his eyes closed, trying to ride out the worst of it, then makes an involuntary whining noise until he’s finally able to ease them open again. Oh God, it’s almost unbearable; why didn’t she prescribe him any pain relief. Why didn’t he ask for some? He should have done that… he should have asked. Then for want of anything better to do he glances down at what he’s written, even though it doesn’t take very long because there are only eight words which scramble across the page in jerky cramped handwriting that doesn’t really look like his yet somehow still manage to be faintly impressive in their capacity to summarise a sprawling, complex nightmare with such extreme brevity: I don’t know what I’m going to do.

Will stares at them for a while longer then carefully replaces the pen on the table and pushes back the chair before retrieving his coat and slipping outside, quiet and cautious the whole time so as not to disturb the dogs. The air is crisp on his face, slightly smoky and damp-smelling, and he turns up his collar against the cold then thrusts his hands into his pockets and strides out across the dying cornfields looking neither left nor right. The shadows are lengthening the whole time, rather as if the world is melting into pools of purple and grey, and in this respect it somehow feels fitting that the sky is bleeding scarlet as the sun sinks away – as the wind sighs and the trees sway with straggling naked limbs; and as Will goes to the far corner of the meadow where there’s no one to hear him except the murder of crows and then screams and screams and screams.

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The next day begins just as the previous one did, with Will fighting his way out of bed and aimlessly stirring the coffee while gazing out the window before getting into his car to begin the lonely pilgrimage to work (and where, unbeknown to him, he’s once again destined to forget about the flowers). There’s a swarm of reporters out front demanding updates on the Sculptor case, so Will parks in the rear lot to avoid them – only to find Skinner and Siemens loitering in the foyer which means he has to duck round the back to avoid them too, and as result nearly bowls straight into Jack who’s striding down the corridor in his usual determined way.

“Easy now,” says Jack good-naturedly. “Where are you off in such a hurry?”

Away, thinks Will; although of course he can’t possibly say this, even if he really understood himself what he meant by it. He just shrugs instead and Jack pauses then peers closer. “Are you all right Will? You look a bit…”

“A bit what?”

Jack frowns, clearly undecided of the best way to describe it, before eventually settling for: “A bit pale.”

“Oh,” says Will vaguely. “Do I?”

“You do, yeah. Even more than usual.” Will shrugs again and Jack leans back on his heels and regards him with one of his intense stares that he always intends to be confiding without realising that it has exactly the opposite effect. “Will? Seriously – you know you can tell me. Is anything wrong?”
Everything's wrong, thinks Will desperately. And nothing is right; and it's only just the beginning before it all gets worse. Jack gazes back, his kindly face creasing slightly with concern, and Will feels submerged with a fresh wave of hopelessness that the scale of the problems is so profound that it's not even something a top official in the FBI can help him with. Because what can Jack do? If he could change the laws, if he could change Will's biology; beyond that there's nothing. It's like one of those impossible tasks in fairy tales: count out grains of sand, carry water in a sieve...solve the insoluble. Then he hears Jack repeating his name and for a fraction of a second is overcome by an insane urge to cry before gritting his teeth and forcing himself to look up with a brave approximation of a smile.

“No,” he says. “It's nothing Jack; nothing at all. I'm fine.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear You,

I’ve been thinking about this.

There are so many things I want to tell you. Yet wanting isn’t enough – it’s never enough – so when it comes down to it I find that I can’t actually tell you any of them because I don’t have the words for it. You wouldn’t understand that I don’t think: you always have as many words as you need. There’s that expression isn’t there, ‘a man of few words’, and in many ways it’s perfect for you because there’s a sense that everything you say is to the point and for a purpose. You don’t use words just for the sake of it. In fact that’s another expression isn’t it: ‘never a wasted word.’ Although there’s also no doubt that the ones you do have are completely at your command and are always going to behave however you want them to. You’re lucky in that respect; my own words have never obeyed me in the same way.

So I want to tell you that I’m frightened and feeling too full yet far too empty and that I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. I want to tell you about all of it; all the things I don’t know. Like what I’ll do when the tablets run out and how I can get any more, or how I can stop Andrew tracking me down and what to do if he does. I want to tell you that the way I feel about myself and the thoughts I’m having horrify me. And I want to tell you that the reason for this is because I keep thinking ‘I could kill him’ and that it’s there all the time. It’s like a dripping tap in the middle of the night, like a pulse in the background: I-could-kill-him-I-could-kill-him. And it’s not just rhetoric because I know that I could, even though there’s no question that I can’t.

There are no right words to tell you something like that.

I actually find it easier to imagine telling Jack. Does that sound odd to you? Perhaps it does, but the reason is really quite simple: it’s because he wouldn’t believe me. He wouldn’t think I was serious, he’d think it was just the frustration talking: a figure of speech. Like when people say something theatrical and exaggerated that they don’t really mean; when Price throws his pen on the table and says ‘I could kill that judge.’ But you wouldn’t think that, would you? You’d only have to look at me and you’d know that I meant it.

So – no. I can’t imagine telling you. Although to be honest it’s not easy to imagine all that much where you’re concerned, even with an imagination like mine’s supposed to be. My mental version of you likes to remain in control – unrelentingly so – and it makes you a human hall of mirrors even in my head. I actually find it much simpler to imagine myself. I suppose that makes you curious; you want to hear an example don’t you? Okay: I keep imagining what it would be like to touch you. Just something casual, something that could be disguised as an accident; just a hand on your forearm or shoulder – something like that. You see, that part of it is fairly easy to imagine but what I can’t envisage is what your reaction would be. Whether you’d be pleased, or surprised, or irritated, or whether you’d even notice at all…it’s so difficult to tell. I’ve never been able to read you in the same way I can other people. In the way that you seem to be able to read me.

It’s kind of frustrating to be honest.

So what, then? I could just stop I suppose. But then I’d miss the idea of not touching you, even though it’s just in my head. I’d miss it, I know I would; I’d miss you. I don’t know any more how not
to be around you. I no longer know what my life is like without you in it.

God knows what you’d say if you knew – it’s just one more thing I can’t imagine. Although maybe you wouldn’t say anything at all? That’s also an option I suppose. Maybe you’d just sit there with that faint smile on your face, watching and thinking and withholding: master of all the silence in the gaps between your words.

A few days later Jack gathers everyone together and announces the first official meeting of The Sculptor Taskforce in the same solemnly portentous manner of someone announcing election results. And even though – not unlike election results – everyone knew it was coming and that the outcome might not be to their liking but remains unavoidable, there’s still an audible groaning sound that ripples around the room in a little gloomy chorus of reluctance. “Any questions?” says Jack, glaring round the office in order to quell the groans one by one.

“Yes,” says Price. “I have, as it happens.”

“Which is?”

“The name.”

Jack’s eyes begin to narrow. “What about the name?”

“Why are we calling ourselves that?” replies Price in disgust. “Taskforce makes us sound like army commandos. And the acronym: TST? It sounds ridiculous. Like the Tuberculin Skin Test.”

“If you say it fast it sounds like ‘testy’,” adds Zeller to no one in particular.

“Well you think of something better then,” snaps Jack. Only no one appears willing or able to think of anything better, and in the end TST seems to stick.

“Heesté, Heesté,” chants Price into his microscope on the day of the meeting itself. “It could be a budget line of Italian sport cars; those incredibly vile ones that middle-aged men buy when they’re having a mid-life crisis.” Zeller gives a discreet cough into his own microscope. “Not that I’d know about such things of course,” adds Price with dignity. “What time are we due to start again?”

“Four o’clock,” replies Siemens, who’s arrived extremely early and proceeded to loiter around the lab getting in everyone’s way. “I’m fairly sure Agent Crawford said four.”

“That’s not for a while yet,” says Price pointedly. “Why not wait in the cafeteria? The coffee’s fairly passable and it’s certainly more comfortable than here.”

“Thanks, I’m fine,” replies Siemens, oblivious to the hint and now preoccupied with peering intensely at a series of print-out charts pinned to the wall by Price’s desk: each one neatly labelled according to assorted legal infringements along with the number that have occurred in the Baltimore area in the past month. “Why have you got these in here?”

“It was Ms Purnells’s idea. It’s for…what it’s for again Zeller?”

“It’s for holism,” replies Zeller, pronouncing the word with relish. “It’s to remind us that we’re part of a wider organisational effort and a larger prerogative for preserving law and order.”

“Yes, whatever. What he said,” says Price vaguely.
Siemens nods appreciatively then peers closer at the nearest chart. “1038 traffic violations in the past month,” he adds in a tone that seems to be approaching something like wonder. “Who’d have thought?”

Price exchanges an agonised grimace with Zeller then returns to his microscope just as Siemens makes a subdued cooing noise at the number of breaking and entering offences (312: ‘boo hoo’ written underneath in an unidentified hand) before the door swings open with an unpleasant scraping sound and Skinner come loping though. He hovers on the threshold for a few seconds, seemingly unsure of what to do or where to go, before spotting Siemens and heading over to converse with him in a low voice without bothering to greet anyone else. “If either of you gentlemen would care for a coffee,” says Price rather desperately, “I can recommend the cafeteria very wholeheartedly.”

“I’m good,” replies Skinner, seemingly unaware of the irony that he has shadows smudged under both eyes and a generally lean, hungry look that can’t reasonably be described as anything remotely approaching a state of goodness. Price rolls his eyes again, even more extravagantly than before. “Which is not what Kade Purnell’s going to be when she finds out what some asshole has done to her Merc,” adds Skinner with morbid satisfaction. “I saw it just now when I arrived – big scrape all down the side.”


“Reckless,” confirms Skinner who appears unaware of the sarcasm. “Although on a more positive note I must remember to congratulate her on these charts; very proactive.”

“Well I suppose that’s one word for them,” replies Price from the depths of his microscope. “Do you happen to know if she’s TST-ing with us today?”

“I’m pretty sure she isn’t,” says Skinner who’s now joined Siemens in tutting over the number of financial frauds (32: ‘who cares?’ added underneath in further Handwriting Unknown). “It’s a disappointment to be honest; I’d like an opportunity to work together more closely. I admire her hugely.”

“How very nice for you,” replies Price in the same undertone. “Zeller, get those samples ready can you? I want to show them to Will before the meeting.”

Zeller gives a grunt of acquiescence and begins to assemble the relevant items when Will appears a few moments later, clutching a cup of take-out coffee in one hand and his briefcase in the other with his pale cheeks whipped pink by the cold. He nods in greeting to everyone then heads over to the charts and fishes around in his briefcase to locate a marker pen before proceeding to draw a large line through ‘1038 traffic violations’ and scribbling 1039 over the top.

Price gives a snort of laughter. “Been tarnishing the FBI’s good name again have you?”

“It was entirely their fault,” says Will in an exaggeratedly virtuous tone. “They were straddling two whole bays and it was impossible to get in. I’m going to be charitable and assume that either their guide dog or their ego did the parking for them.”

Price gives a second, even louder snort just as Zeller adds: “It wasn’t a Merc was it?”

“Yeah, it was. How did you know?”

“That’s Ms Prunell’s car,” announces Price gleefully.

“Oh God,” says Will.
Siemens emits an abrupt giggling noise which is oddly high-pitched and seems to go on and on and on. “You’re wild Mr Graham,” he says admiringly.

Will darts him a glance but in the end doesn’t reply, instead subtly removing himself around the desk so they’re no longer in touching distance. “Well I for one don’t think it’s a laughing matter,” says Skinner waspishly. “That’s criminal damage. I hope you’re going to offer to reimburse her?”

“Of course,” replies Will in a bored voice.

“Money won’t be enough,” says Price. “I bet she’ll make him fix it himself as a form of penance. In public. She’ll probably hire a load of trainees to stand round the car and chant ‘Shame!’”

“Probably,” agrees Will, beginning to leaf through a nearby stack of reports. “Have you seen Jack this morning?”

“No, he’s not been in yet. I imagine he’ll be setting the room up for the meeting.”

“Agent Crawford is an alpha isn’t he,” says Skinner apropos of nothing. “I’m rather surprised he has so many omegas about the place. It’s hardly typical, after all.” He pauses then makes a play of inspecting his fingernails before shooting a distinctly malevolent glance at Will from underneath his eyelashes. Will, in turn, has an unpleasant suspicion that he’s just been subtly accused of sleeping his way to the top (and which as insults go is actually rather novel, considering that the way he’s going he’s far more likely to sleep his way to the bottom). Then he unconsciously grips the pheromone spray in his pocket and reminds himself that Skinner is just being an asshole and that there’s no way he can actually know. It’s probably because Will’s features aren’t quite coarse enough to look like a typical beta; in fact no doubt pretending to mistake people for omegas is Skinner’s idea of an insult.

“This field office is unusual in that respect,” adds Skinner, determined to labour the point.

“Seen a lot of different ones, have you?” asks Siemens politely.

“Quite a lot yes. I can’t say I’m very impressed with the standards of hospitality here either – the hotel is shocking. Absolutely shocking. In fact I’m going to write a complaint to the manager. You’ll never guess what I found in the swimming pool this morning.”

“Cthulu?” asks Price without looking up from his microscope.

“Legionnaire’s Disease?” adds Will. “Oh hell, look – the lid’s come off the sample.”

“Was it Atlantis?” suggests Zeller. “Or was it Aquaman?”

“It was confetti,” replies Skinner stiffly. “Everywhere. It had broken the filter; the goddamn pool was choked with it.”

“I was so sure it was going to be Cthulu,” replies Price mildly before turning back to Will. “Well stop tugging it then. Have you got hands or paws?”

“Oh no, it’s fine, I’ve got it now.” Will pauses then holds the container up to the light, squinting from one side to the other. “Is it the same as last time?”

“Exactly the same.”

“Is that not good for your theory then Mr Graham?” asks Siemens, who’s noticed Will beginning to frown.
Will yearns to snap back that he doesn’t have theories (which tend to be vague, speculative, unsubstantiated things) as opposed to evidence that needs interpreting in view of the facts (which tend to be on the side of all that’s suitably robust and scientific); but then he catches sight of Siemens’s expression – which has the same pitiful expectancy of a dog hoping for a kind word – so in the end just gives a small shrug as a kind of diplomatic compromise and says that there are still numerous aspects of the case which don’t make total sense. Siemens begins nodding eagerly before he’s even finished speaking (metaphorical tail wagging away) and Will sighs to himself and wonders why he feels so compelled to stand here being nice to Siemens when all he really wants him to do is fuck off. The problem, fundamentally, seems to be that Will is a shit person trapped in a nice person’s body. In fact it’s probably something else to add to the scrolling list of psychological hang-ups. ‘Social masochist’ perhaps, or ‘bastard in non-bastard body’…”

“What exactly is it that you do Mr Graham?” demands Skinner, abruptly cutting into this interesting bit of self-diagnosis. “If you don’t mind me asking? I mean you have this reputation but I’m still not entirely clear what it’s for. You’re not a medical professional are you?”

“No,” replies Will who’s trying, with some effort, not to let his irritation show. “You know I’m not. I interpret forensic evidence.”

“But from where?” persists Skinner. “You don’t have formal pathology training.”

*From myself,* Will wants to say, although of course he doesn’t. “From a behavioural perspective.”

“But you’re not a doctor? Or a psychologist?”

“N-o-o-o,” says Will, who’s begun to speak very slowly and clearly as if dictating to some half-witted secretary.

“So your expertise isn’t in people – *per se*?”

“No,” repeats Will. “Not *per se.* More like the crime scenes themselves.”

“And yet you used the term ‘behaviour?’”

Will shrugs again, suddenly tiring of this game. He knows to an outsider it probably seems odd – a behaviourist with no tangible behaviour to examine – but it’s hard to explain it in a way that someone like Skinner could possibly understand: how Will sets to work *before* a perpetrator is apprehended rather than afterwards, examining all the fragments and traces they’ve left behind them in order to construe a narrative as to their procedure and purpose. Their design. Fleetingly he imagines Skinner’s reaction if he just blurted it out: *I intuit depravity from the point of view of the depraved.* It would take someone infinitely more sophisticated to truly be able to fathom it. Someone like Hannibal. Then he realises Skinner’s still staring, so merely shrugs again. “Surely you’re familiar with the concept of profiling?”

“I *am,*” replies Skinner, with an obvious dash of disdain. “But not from someone without an obvious professional skill set.”

“Will is extremely skilled,” says Price sharply.

Skinner barks out a laugh then holds up both hands, palms upward, in a pantomime of someone conceding defeat. “So it would seem,” he says. “Good for you Mr Graham – good for you man. Extremely skilled: good for you.”

This time Will doesn’t bother replying at all, merely leans back against the side of the desk with his arms folded and coolly regards Skinner from over the top of his glasses. A strained silence then
ensues that seems to go on and on like something stretched out on the rack until Siemens clears his
throat with a nervous scraping sound and jerks his head towards the door. “Well, perhaps we should
leave them to it,” he says to Skinner. “You think that coffee’s good then, Dr Price?”

“Well, okay then,” says Siemens feebly. “Anything for you guys?”

Price and Zeller shake their heads in silent unison. Siemens shuffles his feet in a heartfelt display of
anguished awkwardness and Will, who’s grateful for his unexpected display of tact, takes pity on
him and gives him a small smile. Siemens’s mournful round face breaks into a smile of its own, just
as Will adds: “No thanks. I’m good.”

“You certainly are, aren’t you?” says Skinner thoughtfully. Retrieving his jacket from the back of the
chair he slings it over his shoulder and begins to follow Siemens out into the corridor. “I’ll see you all
at the TST meeting,” he adds, and his lips twist into a ghoulish contortion that seems intended to act
as a smile. “Have fun in the meantime, won’t you?”

Price lets out a long sigh when they’re gone that’s so low it’s almost a hiss. “What on earth,” he says
contemptuously, “is that guy’s problem?”

Will can see both Price and Zeller beginning to stare at him, so just shrugs lightly as if he doesn’t
really care. Nevertheless he can feel his heart starting to sink, because he knows intuitively that
Skinner doesn’t merely dislike him, he seems to hate him; and that while a trivial thing like
professional envy might be the kindling, the accelerant comes from somewhere much murkier and
rawer. Will supposes he should be used to it by now: to being hated. Yet no matter how many times
it happens, and despite his best efforts to the contrary, it’s never enough to fully quash the frail
hopeful part of him that just wants to be liked and accepted and believes that one day it might finally
happen. Other people manage it, the part forlornly says to itself, surely it’s not that much to ask?

Briefly he thinks back to the chronic, ambivalent nihilism he experienced after his first few meetings
with Hannibal: the wretched sense that he would inevitability catch on to the wary mistrust that
everyone else seemed to feel around Will and not want anything more to do with him coupled with a
faintly hopeful optimism that maybe – just maybe, just this once – it might not be the case.

Price and Zeller are still looking at him, now with something that seems perilously close to sympathy,
so Will forces himself to shrug again before beginning to shuffle a stack of papers together like
someone without a care in the world. “I don’t know,” he says. “It’s probably nothing.” Although
even as he’s speaking he has no doubt at all that it’s going to turn out to be something; and that he’s
destined to discover exactly what that something is, whether he wants to or not.

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The TST meeting starts badly and ends worse with Jack insisting on giving an interminable
PowerPoint presentation (for which, as far as Will can tell, there appears to be pretty much No Point
at all) before forcing everyone to go round the room and introduce themselves to one another.

“Rather as if,” says Price in an undertone to Will, “he thinks it’s a Tupperware party.”

“At least he didn’t make us do one of those grizzly corporate ice breaker exercises,” replies Will in
the same low voice.

“Or a grizzly elementary school one,” agrees Price. “Like throwing bean bags at each other and
yelling our names when we catch it.”
“Oh I don’t know. We could have put a brick in the bean bag.”

“Very true,” agrees Price, joining Will in staring over to where Skinner is vigorously reciting his entire resume to one of the CSI photographers, completely oblivious to the way her eyes are starting to glaze over. “Or a landmine. Or a pipe bomb – I know how to make those, did I ever tell you? – or a…oh hello, it’s Agent Mayhew isn’t it? Pleasure to meet you ma’am. How are you enjoying Baltimore?”

Will smiles vaguely in Agent Mayhew’s direction then leaves her and Price to it and shuffles his feet slightly into a position that allows his gaze to slide irresistibly across the room to where Hannibal is talking to one of the new field agents. Her mouth is opening and closing at an alarmingly rapid rate and Hannibal doesn’t appear to be saying anything in return, merely nodding at appropriately spaced intervals intercut with the occasional inscrutable smile. Will wonders if he’s bored? Surely he must be, although if so he’s doing a flawless job at hiding it: listening intently with an expression of polite interest that’s enough to be compelling without seeming insincere. In fact his whole stance is deeply familiar, and the awareness of this fills Will with a sense of gloomy foreboding of whether Hannibal assumes an expression of equally polite interest during their own conversations despite secretly withering with tedium inside. Do I bore you? he thinks bleakly. Would you tell me if I did? The woman is smiling as well now, obviously gravitating towards the magnetic pull of Hannibal’s charm, and Will struggles with an impulse to glare at her before sighing slightly and forcing himself to look away before anyone catches him staring.

“…and so participating very enthusiastically,” concludes Agent Mayhew with a little flourish.

“Right,” says Will, who hasn’t heard a single word. “Yeah, that’s great.”

“And of course it’s an honour to be working with you Mr Graham. I guess you hear that all the time?”

Will, who certainly doesn’t hear it all the time, gives another vague smile and struggles to substitute the wave of wary scepticism that he’s being made fun of with a reply that’s the right combination of modest yet appreciative. Only he can’t quite think of anything beyond a cautious “Thank you”…at which point it feels like the hours pass and the seasons change, and Agent Mayhew is still just stood there beaming at him like a gameshow host. Fortunately an unlikely rescue arrives in the form of Jack (or, more specifically, the sound of Jack’s throat being noisily cleared in advance of revving up to reconvene the meeting) which means that Agent Mayhew is obliged to move off towards the row of desks and take her admiration-of-undermined-sincerity with her. Will follows behind, idly wondering if there’s any possible way to arrange sitting beside Hannibal that won’t look too obvious before feeling rather contemptuous towards himself for even caring (as if he’s some high school freshman pining over the football captain…for God’s sake) and deliberately pulls out a random chair instead without paying any attention to who’s nearby. He’s therefore slightly taken aback when Hannibal walks over – not that walking is entirely the right term for it; he’s so agile and loose-limbed he almost seems to glide – and sits next to Will without evincing even the slightest hint of deliberation or self-consciousness. Will darts him a quick smile then tries and fails to think of anything to say before the moment is lost and Jack has commanded everyone’s attention again to begin playing some video footage of an analyst from Washington who seems determined to explain (in torturously longwinded detail) why the Sculptor is on a self-destructive trajectory and most likely on the verge of turning himself in. His beard is so big it practically fills the screen. Will sighs irritably and struggles against the temptation to scribble ‘bullshit’ on the back of his PowerPoint handout.

“Extraordinary beard,” whispers Price to Zeller. “It almost looks like it might be self-aware.”

On the screen the analyst is trying, and failing, to bring up a series of graphs on his laptop. “Ask the
beard to help you out,” advises Zeller, before adding in a louder voice: “Can I ask why we’re having to watch this?”

“Professor Barnes is a colleague of Kade Purnell,” replies Jack. He sighs heavily then lets his eyes trawl round the room in an obvious invitation for everyone to draw their own conclusions. “She was very explicit about having his input included. She rates his, um, expertise extremely highly.”

“I rate his beard extremely highly,” mutters Price. “Not to mention its input. Look at the lustre. You could use it to stuff many pillows.”

On the screen the bearded figure has abandoned the graphs and instead begun to earnestly describe why the Sculptor fits his recently published theory about ‘Cry for Help Killers.’

“Just wait,” whispers Zeller. “Any minute now he’ll name drop the journal.”

“…recently accepted by the European Review of Forensic Psychology,” says Professor Barnes. A few seconds silence follow this announcement, presumably for the expected gasps of admiration.


“…a cardinal feature of which,” ploughs on Professor Barnes, “is that such individuals subconsciously want to be caught.”

At the back of the room, Hannibal and Will have given a simultaneous eye roll and begun discussing why this can’t possibly be the case in extremely loud voices. “Can’t you two behave yourselves?” hisses Skinner. “You’re supposed to be paying attention. And stop making all that noise.”

Hannibal’s eyes, which have been fixed on Will, now abruptly swivel in Skinner’s direction and linger there; at which point the latter begins to look uncomfortable before self-consciously clearing his throat. “Yeah, well, just give him a chance,” Skinner finally says, gesturing towards the screen. “I know this guy, he’s good.” Hannibal quirks an eyebrow. “Yeah, well…” repeats Skinner before clearing his throat again. “Nevertheless, I apologise for my tone.” Hannibal nods graciously. “By the way Dr Lecter, that’s a nice jacket. I was meaning to say earlier.”

“Thank you,” says Hannibal very gravely before catching Will’s eye with the ghost of a smile; and who in turn is overcome with a slightly absurd conspiratorial urge to start giggling, rather as if he’s one of his own students. “I’m fond of blended wool myself,” lumbers on Skinner. “It’s hard to find a good fit.”

Hannibal begins to levitate the second eyebrow then asks: “Is it?” in a completely deadpan tone.

“Yeah, well…” says Skinner (recurring).

On the screen Professor Barnes is drawing his monologue to a close with all the dramatic relish of someone declaiming monologues from Hamlet. “I of course intend to make myself fully available to my colleagues at the Bureau,” he says solemnly. “I’m here for you guys. Just reach out for any help or advice you might need.”

“Thank you,” says Price loudly. “Both of you. Is the beard pro bono as well?”

Jack gives another irritated sigh then flicks a button at the screen so that Professor Barnes freezes mid-sentence, eyes popping like a pouting baby and mouth formed in a perfect o-shape of self-important righteousness. “Well now we’ve got that out the way,” says Jack firmly.

“In all seriousness, I find his involvement somewhat alarming,” interjects Price. “Ms Purnell must
think we’re completely desperate to even suggest bringing him in.”

Will shifts irritably in his chair and adds “Right,” even though as far as he’s concerned the gesture represents something far more punitive than concern for their lack of progress: functioning less as a form of assistance than it does a display of punishment and humiliation.

“Completely desperate,” repeats Price.

“Well aren’t we?” snaps Jack with clear frustration. “No suspects, no new leads, no witnesses.” He pauses and darts a loaded glance at Will. “No profile.”

Everyone now obligingly rotates their heads to gape at Will, who suspects he should probably be feeling guilty or self-conscious about it but refuses to do either and instead leans back in his chair and folds his arms decisively. “I can’t give you a profile I don’t stand behind to appease Kade Purnell or anyone else,” he adds in a tone which is just as sharp as Jack’s. “There’s still too much that’s inconclusive.”

“Like what? Specifically?”

“Specifically, like the way he stages the bodies. I’ve said it before Jack. There’s a deliberation in it that’s unusual – suspicious, almost. It complicates the motive and it’s too high risk to release speculative information before we’re ready. At this stage we just need to stick to the facts.”

“We hardly have any facts.”

“Which is even more reason not to obscure them with theories that could turn out to be misleading or flat out wrong. There isn’t even any consistency in the victim profile at this stage.”

“They’re all omegas,” replies Jack mulishly.

“So that’s the information we release. But when people ask us why and how, we say we’re not prepared to comment at this stage.”

“What are you talking about?” interrupts Skinner. “Of course we know how.”

“We know he stabs them and mutilates the bodies. Big deal – that much is already common knowledge. But we don’t know exactly what type of weapon he’s using, we don’t know how he’s choosing them, we don’t know how he abducts them, or how long he keeps them alive before killing them, or how he gets them to the dump site afterwards. Those scenes are some of the cleanest I’ve ever seen; he leaves nothing behind him. So no, Agent Skinner. I’d say we don’t know how.”

Jack, who’s aware that Will’s right but is feeling too impatient to admit it, drums his fingers irritably on the table instead. “That’s as may be, but we have got to get more proactive. The attempts to control the media exposure are already poised to blow sky high. The TattleCrime’s just run another article, which means the nationals will soon follow. It’ll happen any day now. By the end of the week every breakfast table in the country is going to be talking about it.”

A soft murmur of dismay runs round the room in response to this and Jack straightens up then crosses his arms and stares accusingly at each person after another. “As of today all leave is cancelled,” he says grimly. “We’ve had four victims now which means this is officially a state of emergency and I want every single one of you eating, sleeping and breathing this case for as long as is necessary. And yes, I know that doesn’t sound especially appealing but remember that the reason you’re here is because you’re the best. And the best is what’s needed if we’re going to have a hope in hell of catching this guy.”
“Or girl,” adds Skinner to no one in particular.

“The best,” repeats Jack, ignoring Skinner. He stares intensely at the assembled faces in ominous silence, seemingly inviting them to meditate in private contemplation from the force of his words; and Will, who finds this type of hyperbole both annoying and pointless, stifles the sigh of impatience he wants to make and stares down mutinously at the desk top instead. Nevertheless – and despite attempting not to – it’s impossible to stop himself wondering how Hannibal feels about being described as the best in this context. The best what, after all? The best babysitter? Next to him on the desktop Hannibal has rolled back his sleeves and Will can’t help stealing a covert glance at his wrists, which are very long and fine-boned and a warm honey brown shade that’s no doubt a leftover from some expensive holiday or other. Unless his skin is just like that anyway, which with the dark eyes and hair is actually entirely possible. Does he have manicures? It’s hard to imagine a man having nails that smooth and well-shaped without any help although if any man were capable then surely it would be Hannibal, so perhaps it’s natural after all. There’s a slim white line along the edge of the ulna bone – an elderly scar – and Will stares at it and imagines what it would be like to touch it. Taken together the contrast makes him feel unhappily self-conscious about the state of his own hands, which are scuffed and chafed with the nails bitten down to the quick; although the awareness of noticing or caring about such a trivial thing likewise strikes him as ridiculous and he defiantly moves them from their hiding place on his knee and places them on the table in full view as a silent demonstration that he doesn’t care if Hannibal or anyone else sees how awful they are.

At the front of the room Jack has now resumed lecturing again so Will stifles a second, louder sigh and begins to stare out the window instead. It’s started to rain and the droplets streak down the glass like a giant’s tears in a monotonous thrumming noise that resembles the resonant rhythm of far-off drums. It’s a rather eerie noise if you think about it too much. In fact it reminds him of a documentary, watched years ago and long since forgotten, of the legendary Zulu warriors and the way they beat drums to disorientate and intimidate the enemy. The drums were made of animal hides stretched over bones and the Zulus struck them mercilessly. The British colonists were terrified of it: the way it pounded and pulsed – the type of noise that gets in your head and lingers there. Why has no one else in the room seemed to notice it? The war cry of the rain against the window…why does no one else seem to care? His head’s really hurting now, indistinguishable from the sharply shrieking ache in his abdomen, and he silently removes one hand from the desktop so he can grip onto the side of his chair to try and ride it out, clinging on until his knuckles turn white.

“We may be trying to play it down in the press,” Jack is now saying as he gestures contemptuously at the still-frozen figure of Professor Barnes, “but don’t for one second let that blind you to the gravity of the situation. There’s no disputing it anymore, so understand this: we have a new serial killer on our hands and he is absolutely not going to stop until we catch him.”

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At some point Will begins to despair that the meeting will ever be over and that they’re going to be forced to sit there reviewing the same grim conclusions for all eternity like the characters in Greek mythology made to push boulders up never-ending hills. Jack seems pent-up and irritable, veering from encouragement to annoyance to overly morbid sermonising in the manner of the more berserk TV evangelists, and it’s increasingly obvious that he must be coming under some serious pressure from his superiors to turn in some results. Rather as if, thinks Will contemptuously, serial killers are just another capitalist commodity and can be expected to conform to the same laws of supply and demand as any other business enterprise to ensure the spreadsheets all balance up with manpower in directly proportionate to results out. It’s easy enough for all them, sat behind their desks with their gourmet coffee and designer shoes…he bets Kade Purnell has never cleaned up after a murder scene in her entire life. Then another wave of pain makes him grit his teeth and when the meeting eventually draws to a close (fucking finally) Will gathers up his coat and scarf then practically runs to
the car park before anyone can notice how pale and perspiring he’s become and start asking
awkward questions about what exactly it is that’s wrong with him. The heat suppressants feel like
they’re virtually burning a hole in his pocket and at several points the rattling sound they make as
they roll around in their little plastic bottle seems as loud and ominous as the rain pounding against
the window. In fact no meth head or heroin addict could possibly be as guilty and self-conscious
about having their stash exposed despite the fact the tablets are entirely legal. Even so, he still doesn’t
know what he’s going to do when they run out. No doctor would risk their license by prescribing
him more – and no sane, sensible person would risk their health by wanting to be prescribed more –
but Will feels his circumstances don’t favour the sane and sensible as opposed to the devious and
desperate. You’ll think of something, he mutters to himself, even though he’s said it so often the
words have become fairly meaningless. You always do. You’ll think of something.

It’s only six o’clock but it’s already dim and dusky and Will can see the flicker of bats as they swoop
down from the eaves of the building and begin to dart around in the thin cold air like tiny kamikaze
pilots. His hands have started to shake slightly and his coordination is so poor that it takes him a few
extra minutes of increasingly desperate rummaging in his briefcase and every pocket he possesses to
realise that no amount of searching can change the fact that his car keys are definitely not in any of
these places and must therefore be lying useless on the desk in his office. The inconvenience of this
when he’s so desperate to leave now strikes him as almost cosmically unfair and for a few seconds
he can’t decide whether he most wants to cry, or kick the car, or possibly an elaborate combination
of the two, because – why the hell not?

“Oh shit,” says Will out loud as a compromise. And then, for good measure: “Fuck. Balls.”

“Problem?” asks a familiar voice.

Will spins round sharply, unpleasantly aware of how his face has started to burn with embarrassment
while trying to take consolation in the fact that at least it’s too dark for Hannibal to be able to see.
“No,” he manages to reply. “No, I’ve just mislaid my keys. It’s fine. They’ll be...” he gestures a bit
aimlessly in the direction of the building. “I’ll just go and pick them up.” Hannibal makes a regretful
noise but doesn’t actually say anything, and Will immediately feels self-conscious again and
consumed with a need to save face by justifying what was so clearly a drastic overreaction by
adding: “It’s just really inconvenient, you know?” Hannibal nods obligingly, although Will can’t
help feeling that he clearly doesn’t know. Impossible, after all, to imagine Hannibal ever doing
something so mundanely absent-minded as leaving his car keys in his office. Probably Hannibal’s car
keys have been trained to return to him on command (possibly by whistling for them like a dog). “I
don’t feel too great,” Will adds, rather defiantly. “I would’ve liked to have headed straight off.”

Hannibal takes a step closer at this, then flicks his gaze over Will’s face and frowns slightly before
saying “Excuse me,” and reaching out to place a cool palm on his forehead beneath his hair.

“Please don’t,” says Will irritably, automatically twisting out the way of someone trying to touch
him.

“You’re extremely feverish,” replies Hannibal in a brisk doctorly tone. Will nods in unhappy
agreement and Hannibal nods back then takes yet another step closer. “Are you sure you’re able to
drive?”

“Yes,” says Will, hoping he sounds convincing. “Yes, I think so.”

“You could always get a cab,” replies Hannibal, who’s now watching Will very intently. “I think
that would be more advisable.”

“No – no, I can’t do that. I can’t leave my car here.”
“I can drive you if you like?”

“You would do that?” says Will in a doubtful voice.

“Of course.” Hannibal’s face arranges itself into a very faint smile and Will has a sudden mad impulse that if he walked away now the smile would remain after he’d gone, hovering in the air like the Cheshire Cat’s. “At least I can once we have located your keys.”

“But what will you do?” says Will rather stupidly. “You’ll be stranded at my place.”

“A cab, naturally. I can collect my own car tomorrow.”

Will goes quiet for a few seconds, mindlessly tracing one foot against a ridge in the asphalt and torn between wanting to agree while battling against an ingrained reluctance to be beholden to anyone. “It’s really no trouble Will,” adds Hannibal in the same calm tone. “In fact I’d prefer it; I’m not convinced it’s safe for you to drive.”

“Well…yeah. Okay then,” says Will. Hannibal’s smile briefly reappears and Will bites his bottom lip before frantically trying to inventory all the rooms in the house Hannibal might realistically see while waiting for the cab and trying to remember if there’s anything embarrassing in any of them. “Thanks. Thank you. It’s kind of you to offer.”

“No,” says Will hurriedly, “it’s fine, I’ll get them myself.” Then he attempts a smile of his own (managing, through sheer force of effort, to make it appear as casual and un concerned as possible) before retreating into the building with a surreal combination of enthusiasm at the idea of having Hannibal in his personal space and agonised anxiety for the same reason. He finds the keys lying in a smug little heap next to his computer – “You complete bastards,” says Will – then gathers them up and runs back down the corridor and into the elevator, irritably smashing down the buttons from concern at keeping Hannibal waiting any longer than necessary. Oh God, it’s no use now: the anxiety is undeniably winning out over the enthusiasm, because as appealing as having Hannibal in his house might be in theory, the reality of it is starting to feel unsettling and unpredictable. Not least because Will’s mental version of him is vaguely controllable – or at least, when uncontrollable, is easily dismissible – whereas there’s no doubt that the living breathing version is not going to remotely behave according to any pre-set script that Will’s written in his head beforehand. That’s the safety of fantasies after all. The chances of fulfilment might remain impossible as long as it’s all in your imagination, but the level of risk likewise remains at zero and nothing can happen of which you’re not in ultimate control. After all, what if such close confinement makes Hannibal decide that he doesn’t like him?

Turning round, Will critically inspects his reflection in the shiny panel of the elevator. His face is extremely pale and his eyes are glittering in an odd unhealthy way, but somehow it’s more than just that. And then: What if he can tell? whispers a furtive, guilty part of Will’s brain. What if he can tell you want to kill someone? What if he can see it in you? The reflection stares back with its haunted face and gleaming eyes and Will blinks a few times then resolutely turns away from it and takes a few deep breaths and runs his hands through his hair. Then for a few panicked seconds he thinks he can actually hear the words being spoken aloud and has a surreal urge to scream before realising it’s just the grinding of the brakes as the elevator draws to a halt. Stepping out he presses the button again to send it away to the top floor, fantasising that the eerily staring reflection is trapped inside and is therefore being carried away too, then leans against the wall and draws another soothing lungful of air.
“It’s fine,” mutters Will under his breath. “Everything’s fine. You’re fine.” So he forces himself to straighten up and stroll across the foyer with his hands in his pockets: deliberately calm and casual as he says goodnight to the janitor before pushing open the door and heading towards the parking lot. The wind feels refreshingly cool against his flushed skin and he’s just contemplating calming down again when he spots Hannibal, who’s still keeping patient vigil next to Will’s car only now with company in the form of Siemens and Skinner. Both of them are propped against the trunk while holding forth about the Sculptor case in obnoxiously loud voices and Will curses internally at the inevitable delay this is going to cause. Then he briefly considers a strategic retreat into the building until he hears Siemens calling his name and is reluctantly forced to walk over.

“Hey Will, are you okay?” asks Siemens as an opening greeting. “You’ve gone very pale.” Will, who’s trying to work out at what point they moved onto first name terms, says he’s fine; it’s just a slight headache.

“Yeah?” says Siemens, who doesn’t sound particularly convinced.

“Yeah,” replies Will firmly. He gives a chipper little nod to prove it – how eminently fine he is – then makes an abrupt executive decision that Siemens and Skinner can both respectively fuck themselves so passes the keys to Hannibal and says “Shall we get going?” Skinner raises both eyebrows then adds, in a voice virtually dripping with contempt, “Are you taking him home?”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal calmly. Skinner’s eyebrows elevate even further and Will, waiting for Hannibal’s inevitable excuses and justification that he’s only doing so on medical grounds, can’t help feeling pathetically grateful when they don’t happen: that even if Hannibal is embarrassed to be linked with him in such a public way (and surely he must be?) then at least he’s not going to show it. Skinner revolves his eyes from one of them to the other but doesn’t say anything else, leaving it to Siemens to muster one of his limp smiles and say: “It’s very kind of you to drive that far Dr Lecter.” Not surprisingly, thinks Will, there’s no indication of using his Christian name.

“Yeah,” adds Skinner slightly accusingly. “You’re going quite out of your way.”

“Thank you for the praise,” replies Hannibal, slowly flicking his eyes from one to the other, “although it’s not particularly deserved – it’s nothing more than a favour between friends.” Siemens smiles again in perfect coordination with Skinner’s frown and Hannibal nods in response before turning his back on the pair of them in what’s clearly a polite yet firm dismissal. And Will, not for the first time, can’t help being struck by the incongruity of it: how in anyone else that kind of aloof authoritativeness would be repellent, and yet in Hannibal manages to be decisive yet undeniably charismatic.

“After you, Will,” says Hannibal after a slight pause.

Will mutters an affirmative noise then darts round to the passenger side and virtually dives into the car. Hannibal glides in himself at a far more leisurely rate and Will fastens his seatbelt then stares fixedly in front of him; so consumed with the pain, as well as relief at the prospect of getting away – and anxious anticipation of what’s going to happen next – that it never occurs to him to notice how Siemens’ and Skinner’s remarks both implied an unaccountable familiarity between the two of them with exactly where Will lives.
This is the fourth time in my fic writing life that I’ve had a chapter beta read and omg it was amazing! In fact I intend to get off my lazy arse and arrange it far more often :-D Huge thanks to Prosey for not only culling my many typos and British-isms but suggesting the scene with the crime statistics board, helping me develop the meeting scene and generally being a total Hannigram goddess. Any remaining mistakes are definitely mine.

The other half of my thanks, hugs and sques wholeheartedly go to the very talented jgrante who’s made a stunningly atmospheric image to go with Chapter 2 and completely made my weekend as a result :-D
Chapter 4

It doesn’t take Will long to decide that Hannibal drives in the same way as he does so much else: coolly controlled, smoothly efficient, and with a certain dash of fearlessness that in anyone else might come across as reckless but in his case seems more like confidence owing to the imperishable sense of control. As a result the journey passes quickly (which Will partly expected) but also in a companionable silence (which he didn’t) and as the minutes stretch past in a peaceful undemanding haze there’s ultimately nothing to stop him resting his forehead against the window and watching as the city slowly dissolves away to be replaced by barren stretches of field and rows of trees whose naked limbs straggle upwards like they’re trying to claw the sky. So much desolation often feels oppressive when he makes the journey alone but there’s undoubtedly a soothing aspect to having company that’s enough to lay a more benign filter over the landscape and recast what’s normally sinister and menacing into a scene that merely appears shadowy and mysterious, rather like the illustrations of enchanted forests in some of the more old-fashioned children’s books. Orion and his dogs are just about visible through a veil of ragged grey clouds and Will stares up at them in silent solidarity before Hannibal finally asks him for directions and he’s forced to straighten up and focus on the road again.

“Were you asleep?” says Hannibal. “If so, I’m sorry I disturbed you.”

“No, it’s fine. Anyway I’m the one who should be apologising; I didn’t give you very clear instructions. In fact I hardly gave you any instructions at all.”

“If you want to rest,” adds Hannibal tactfully, “then feel free to give them to me now. I won’t have any trouble remembering them. My memory is…rather good.”

“It’s fine,” repeats Will, gloomily considering that he’s starting to say this so often he should just save time and have a recording made. Possibly he could print it on a shirt…possibly have an entire uniform made, including buttons and a baseball cap, just to emphasise how extremely fucking fine everything is. “Anyway it’s not all that far now,” he adds, trying to sound a bit more upbeat. “Just take the next left, then the second right, and after that it’s pretty much straight on.”

“Rather a substantial commute for you – doing this every day.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I should have warned you.”

“It’s not a problem Will,” says Hannibal with the typical serene sincerity that Will can never quite convince himself is entirely sincere. “I’m happy to do it.”

“I’ll reimburse you for the cab.”

“That really isn’t necessary.”

“I’m paying you back,” says Will mutinously, preparing to rev up for a fight; although in the end Hannibal just gives one of his more benign smiles – radiating sincerity the entire time – then thanks him for the consideration and politely lets the subject drop. So that’s that. “I appreciate you taking the trouble,” Will finally adds in a friendlier voice. “You were right, I was probably better off not driving.”

“Do you think some time off work might be advisable?”

“No,” says Will firmly. “Definitely not. I prefer to be in work.” Then he feels like kicking himself for giving a reply that’s so enigmatic and loaded it’s virtually an open invitation for Hannibal to begin
asking exactly why that would be the case. Although as it turns out Will’s destined to have his expectations subverted for a second time, because rather than interrogating him Hannibal merely nods in acknowledgement then renew his concentration on the stretching black road in front of them and the rest of the journey passes in the same comfortable silence as before. In fact the silence is so comfortable that Will, a veteran of taciturnity and countless speechlessly strained encounters, feels like he could bask in the ease and contentment of it as if it were a feather quilt. Possibly he’s overreacting – but really, it’s hard not to be won over by such a pleasantly novel sensation of simply sharing a space and breathing one another’s air without being compelled to cram and shovel endless forkfuls of sentences into the other person’s mouth. There’s just the quiet lull of the engine and the occasional rustle of fabric as someone moves their arm, punctuated by the sound of them breathing in tandem within their mutual metal cocoon as it slices through the darkness under the watchful eye of the trees. *A liminal space between words*, thinks Will hazily. He’s never felt there’s anything particularly intimate about sharing a car with someone, and yet there’s undeniably a sense of quiet intimacy in this. It’s…nice. Then he realises that Hannibal has found the house and is pulling into the driveway; and it’s therefore not only time to exit the car and go inside like a normal person without performing any of his usual anxious rituals but also somehow find a way to maintain the fiction that everything is ‘fine’ and there’s nothing for Hannibal to be alert or concerned over. *Yeah right*, thinks Will gloomily. Nevertheless he manages to stroll up to the porch and unlock the door in a suitably unhurried and casual way then politely stands aside to allow Hannibal to walk in first before following behind, flicking on the lights and calling the dogs to heel before Hannibal gets smothered by them. Then he just hovers for a few seconds in the hallway and fights a growing temptation to simply shut down and stare aimlessly into space – because having finally achieved his ambition of getting Hannibal in the house, he’s realised that he has absolutely no idea what to do with him. *What the hell am I supposed to do with you now?* he imagines saying. *Help me out here. Do you come with instructions or what?*

“Will?”

“Yeah?”

“I said can I get you anything?”

It’s at this point that Will decides Hannibal must really enjoy hosting things seeing as he’s just effectively relegated Will to the role of visitor in his own house. “No, thanks, I’m good,” he says firmly. “Can I get you anything? A drink? Or – or would you rather I just got you a cab? Do you want to leave straight away; I can get you a cab if you like?”


“Oh okay,” says Will cautiously, trying to mine his last reserves of social ability and perform a rapid stocktake of every liquid substance in the house that might just about pass as fit for consumption. Then he makes a mental note to congratulate himself for generally avoiding socialising at all costs because it’s actually really fucking exhausting. What would Martha Stewart do? Oh Christ no, not Martha Stewart. *You are not to model your social intercourse on Martha Stewart*, thinks Will sternly to himself. *I fucking forbid you.* “Coffee?” he says now in a deliberately brighter tone. “Or there’s beer. Or whiskey…or I think I’ve got some wine somewhere.”

Hannibal, as expected, opts for the wine so Will vanishes into the kitchen to retrieve it and to take an opportunity to feed the dogs. The bottle is slightly dusty from having lain fallow for so long although he feels reasonably confident in offering it – the sole bottle in his possession – because it was a gift from a local attorney in return for Will’s help in making sense of a particularly complex set of autopsy results and therefore, while almost certainly not up to Hannibal’s usual standards, is unlikely to be completely contemptible either. Then he has to go back again to get a corkscrew (which is
embarrassingly not a proper one as opposed to part of a pen knife), then leaves the glasses on the counter so has to return a second time to fetch them (although no doubt Hannibal thinks he spends all evening downing wine straight from the bottle so wouldn’t be all that surprised anyway) before finally heading back into the living room clutching the entire lot to his chest like a new born baby and feeling absurdly self-conscious the whole time.

Hannibal is still stood where Will left him by the window and doesn’t turn round when he comes in. While he’s removed his coat he’s made no attempt to sit down and the awareness of this immediately makes Will berate himself all over again, because isn’t that what you’re supposed to say to guests? Please take a seat, that’s what you’re supposed to say. Make yourself at home won’t you. Although surely it’s not too much to ask to expect guests to show a bit of goddamn initiative and work such things out for themselves? Where are you supposed to draw the line anyway: please do continue to respire won’t you. Do feel free to maintain your vital bodily functions as long as you’re under my roof. Then he realises that Hannibal isn’t merely standing there aimlessly but is calmly inspecting the photo on the desktop, head slightly on one side to avoid the obscuring bunch of flowers that Will has finally remembered to buy.

“Is this your mother?” he says now.

“It is, yes.”

“I can see the resemblance.” Hannibal picks up the frame and examines the picture rather thoughtfully before placing it down again in the exact same position as before. “She’s a very beautiful woman.”

“Yes she was, wasn’t she?” replies Will, happy to have had this acknowledged despite completely missing the implied compliment. “I’ve got the wine here by the way; do you want to open it? I always break the corks.”

Hannibal holds out a hand and Will wordlessly passes over the bottle just as the pack of dogs, frustrated at being denied entry for so long, finally succeed in nosing open the door and tumbling into the room in a joyful flurry of fur and pink lolling tongues. “Sorry,” says Will. “They like to…” he’s about to add ‘hang out with me’ but decides not to at the last minute in case it sounds like it’s his custom to spend all evening socialising with a hoard of dogs (which it actually is, although there’s no need to advertise the fact). ‘Hanging out,’ though…it sounds like they all sit down and smoke pot together before sticking on Grand Theft Auto. “They like being in here,” he says instead. ”You don’t mind do you?”

“Not at all.”

Will smiles appreciatively in response then gently shoos the dogs away from the sofa so they can both sit down. Oh God…Hannibal’s expensive suit is going to be covered in dog hairs. Will barely even notices it anymore himself but right now it’s hard not to view the ancient upholstery and liberal coating of fur through a stranger’s eyes and give a small wince of distaste. “It’s a very nice house,” adds Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts. “I imagine the solitude suits you?”

Will makes a vague noise of agreement which he has to change into “Thanks” halfway through when Hannibal passes him one of the glasses. “I hope this is okay,” he adds, gesturing towards the bottle. “To be honest I never really drink wine.”

“No? Do feel free to get something else if you prefer.”

Will is about to say that it’s fine but can’t quite bring himself to utter that fucking word one more time today so just demonstrates it instead by taking a cavalier swig that manages to empty half the
glass in one go. “It’s very good,” adds Hannibal, as if in solidarity.

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t go in for all that stuff.”

“What stuff? Wine appreciation?”

_Wine bores_, thinks Will rather contemptuously. Of course it’s far too rude to say such a thing out loud but it’s true nonetheless: the whole pretension of it is completely ludicrous as far as he’s concerned. Jack’s been known to veer perilously close to it on occasion and even someone like Price doesn’t appear completely immune – although neither of them are ever completely successful owing to their preference for white wine: and while amateurs might attempt it with white, red wine is where the professional grape geeks truly excel. Not that any of this is remotely worth expressing so in the end he just nods instead and takes a second, more retrained sip.

“While I don’t entirely agree I can certainly sympathise,” says Hannibal. He briefly holds the glass up to the light, appearing to admire the deep hues of purple-tinged vermillion that glisten with the same richness as blood. “Wine enthusiasts can be uniquely tedious. As with any fanatic they become preoccupied with trivia of no possible interest to anyone beyond themselves.”

“You mean like the decline of the Malbecs?” says Will mischievously.

Hannibal catches his eye and begins to smile. “Yes,” he replies after a pause. “Exactly like that.”

“Well here’s to them,” adds Will, inclining his glass. “To the last.”

“To the very last,” says Hannibal with another rather feline smile. “Their decline and fall.” He tips his own glass enough to make the wine ripple against the side then leans back against the sofa and regards Will meditatively. “Although I can hardly pretend it’s the most optimistic choice of toast. What else should we drink to, do you think?”

“Honestly?” says Will. “I have no idea.”

“No latent cause for celebration?”

“None at all.”

“You have the look of someone who wants to add a disclaimer to that sentence. Something to the contrary.” Will raises an eyebrow. “I believe you’re thinking: ‘quite the opposite.’”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe not. Feel free to ignore all this probing – you’re not under any obligation to tell me anything.” Hannibal pauses delicately and beams a pointed look at Will from over the top of his wine glass. “But if there is something troubling you…you know I’m happy to listen.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” says Hannibal, then deliberately falls quiet in favour of subtly running his eyes over Will’s face: partly because strained silences don’t bother him but mostly because he finds Will’s obvious distress somewhat addictive.

“I just…I just haven’t been feeling too great recently,” Will finally replies. Hannibal leans forward and he hurriedly adds: “physically, that is.”

“Anything in particular?”
“Not really. Just, y’know…run down. Under the weather. That kind of thing.” Hannibal hums in sympathy and Will glances up sharply. “What do you mean? Why are you making that noise?”

“What noise?”

“That mmm-ing noise.”

“Why would you think it means anything?”

“Because I know you,” says Will before he can stop himself. Then he clears his throat awkwardly, embarrassed by the presumptions of intimacy that the statement implies – although it’s obviously too late now and he can hardly take it back. “You think you’ve already worked it out,” he eventually adds. “Don’t you? You’re waiting for me to confirm what you think you already know.”

Despite having carefully engineered the entire conversation to this particular purpose, Hannibal convincingly feigns remorse and gives a small, regretful sigh. “I’m being rather transparent aren’t I? Very well then. Forgive me, but I think you’re currently having an adverse reaction to heat suppressants.” Will’s mouth drops open in dismay and Hannibal holds up a hand. “Please don’t look so concerned. It might be obvious to me – medically speaking – but it’s highly unlikely anyone else would have noticed. In fact I’m certain most of your colleagues don’t even know you’re an omega.”

Will bites his lip and stares at the floor and Hannibal adds in a gentler voice. “Why do you go to such trouble to hide it?

“Why do you think?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. You’re the one who’s relevant.”

Will goes silent for a few seconds, suddenly overcome with a longing to unburden what’s troubling him. But it’s not as if Hannibal could offer any practical input – as a non-specialist he wouldn’t even be able to prescribe more tablets – and in this respect the same reluctance that led him to avoid confiding in Jack now settles onto the previous layer of evasion and seals the problem up even more. Because Will hates the idea of being pitied: and given that there’s nothing anyone can do to help beyond changing the law or fixing his fucked-up biology, then he’d rather suffer in self-respect and stoicism than wilt into a defeated heap while everyone stands round and feels sorry for him. Then he sighs fretfully and, as anticipated, neatly deflects the question and snaps: “Anyway, it’s not even true. What you said before: people do know. That Skinner guy – he said as much this morning.” Not that this is exactly what happened, but he resents Hannibal uncovering his secret so casually and it’s making him feel deliberately stubborn and contradictory.

“Did he?” says Hannibal lightly.

“Yeah. Yeah, he did.”

“Then someone must have told him. With all that pheromone spray you smother yourself with you could easily pass for a beta.”

“I don’t smother myself with it,” retorts Will with dignity before he catches Hannibal’s eye again and can’t help starting to smile. “More like ‘lightly smear’.”

“Oh yes,” replies Hannibal, completely deadpan. “A small sprinkling only.”

“A trickle.”

“It could be worse I suppose. At least it drowns out that abysmal aftershave.”
“Oh shut up,” says Will, who’s still trying not to laugh. “Anyway, you can hardly blame me.”

“Of course I don’t blame you. You see it as protecting yourself; I’ve no doubt you have good reasons for doing so.”

“Show me an omega that doesn’t have good reasons,” says Will abruptly. “Considering what alphas are like.” He clears his throat again then glances surreptitiously at Hannibal. “No offence.”

“None taken.”

Will runs his hand absent-mindedly through his hair then seems glad of the distraction when one of the youngest dogs, barely more than a puppy and far less disciplined than the rest, struggles free from the slumbering pile of furry bodies by the fireside and takes a running leap for his knee. “Hey,” says Will softly, reaching down to help it clamber the rest of the way. “Come on then.”

“True companions aren’t they?” observes Hannibal, looking at it with barely-concealed dislike.

“Yeah they are,” says Will with obvious fondness. He begins to stroke the fur on the dog’s tiny stomach – right now comically rounded from its recent meal – then starts to smile as it whimpers with pleasure while wriggling further into the touch. “They’re good to have around. No stress.”

“It’s easy to see why,” says Hannibal, idly wondering if Will would react quite so ecstatically to being caressed in the same way. Probably not; at least not at first. “Affectionate, exuberant, unquestionably loyal: unconditional love. Certainly less trouble than humans, although perhaps less rewarding on occasion.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you owned one,” replies Will stubbornly.

“Perhaps.”

“Not that most alphas own dogs,” adds Will, who’s finding that pain and tiredness are making him increasingly unguarded. “They own omegas instead.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer immediately and Will has a sudden sinking feeling that – as usual – he’s gone too far in the service of protecting himself and has caused genuine offence. Then he glances up and is relieved to realise that rather than displaying the expected resentment or indignation, Hannibal is merely gazing straight at him with the familiar Sphinx-like smile. On meeting Will’s eye the smile, once again, grows fractionally wider. “Undoubtedly there are some alphas who feel that way,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “But the ideal should not be to try and objectify or subjugate one’s mate but to cherish them. Revere them, even.”

“Well what if they don’t want to be revered?” snaps back Will. “What if they just want to be treated as equals?”

“Why does one preclude the other?”

“You’re talking in theory. I’m talking in practice.”

“Your own?”

“No,” says Will after hesitating a fraction too long. “Just generally.” During the conversation he’s gone completely motionless and the dog, still resting on his knee and wanting further attention, begins to nudge Will’s hand to encourage him to resume stroking it again. Hannibal, on noticing this and realising that he’s just been forced into the position of empathising with a dog, sighs irritably to himself and pours out some more wine. “Maybe I’ve just been unlucky in the type of alphas I’ve
met,” Will adds, obviously trying to be charitable.

“And what type was that?”

“Oh I don’t know,” says Will, suddenly tiring of the whole subject. “Just the general stereotype I suppose. Controlling. Authoritative. Domineering.” Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Will opens his mouth to say ‘pissing on fences and all that bullshit’ but falters at the last moment, not least because he doesn’t think he can bear to have it repeated back to him in polite incomprehension (‘I beg your pardon Will? Pissing on fences?’) so lamely substitutes it for “Marking their territory” instead. Hannibal inclines his head in silent acquiescence and Will adds, rather defensively: “I suppose you’re going to say ‘not all alphas.’”

“I suppose I could, but I don’t intend to. It would be deflecting your criticisms rather than engaging with them. Besides, alphas are more than adequately represented and advocated; they hardly require additional defence from me. I’m more interested in your perspective.” Hannibal pauses slightly. “As an omega.”

Will is starting to shrug so hard he’s wondering if he might dislocate his shoulder. “I’ve told you what my perspective is.”

“You have, but very concisely. Why don’t you elaborate?”

Why don’t you go and piss on a fence? Will wants to reply (and of course doesn’t). Honestly though, why would he even want to elaborate? Regardless of what they might think to the contrary, it’s not like alphas are particularly interesting when all’s said and done. All that strutting and posturing (and pissing on fences) not to mention the endless bragging about potency and knotting. Bulbus glandis… it's actually pretty revolting if you think about it. In fact the only mammals that do it at all beside human alphas are dogs and wolves, but from the way they carry on you'd think it was some sort of immensely special borderline-magical trait shared solely with elves and unicorns and brought to life through pixie dust. As if their ludicrously inflated genitalia can heal the sick and raise the dead, and no doubt assemble flat-pack furniture and negotiate world peace before changing a spare tyre. As if every omega in a ten mile radius is supposed to expire with longing at the very thought of it. Andrew had alluded to as much on their first unchaperoned meeting: the language might have been a bit more restrained and metaphorical, but the clear meaning had basically been along the lines of ‘Well then, you unbelievably lucky bastard, it looks like you’re destined for the good fortune of having the living daylights fucked out of you then being left skewered on my cock for a n-i-c-e long time afterwards.’ No thanks, Will had replied; and unsurprisingly it had all gone downhill from there.

“Will?” says Hannibal.

“Yeah? Sorry, I was miles away.”

“I asked you how you’d been finding the teaching this semester.”

“Right. Yeah,” says Will, who despite the awkwardness of being caught out in such embarrassingly blatant daydreaming is still feeling grateful for the tactful change of subject. “Teaching. Yep. Sure.”

“Going well?”

“Pretty well,” says Will cautiously. A fear of being boring about it initially makes him uncommunicative, but when Hannibal listens attentively and with obvious interest he gradually feels encouraged and proceeds to describe his ambitions for the new psychocriminology modules with an unusual level of enthusiasm and animation – alternately quick and precise interspersed with dreamy
and thoughtful, and completely oblivious to how charming either combination makes him appear –
before a blend of tiredness, alcohol and industrial doses of painkillers finally get the better of him and
during a comfortable lull in the conversation he ends up falling asleep with both feet planted on the
floor and his head tipped back against the sofa. Hannibal makes no attempt to wake him but just
continues to watch with a sense of fascination – not least at his own reaction, because he would
generally find it distasteful to see someone slack and insensate with sleep and therefore isn’t entirely
prepared for the jolt of tenderness Will manages to arouse in him when in the same state.

Hannibal frowns to himself, trying to work it out, and ultimately decides that it comes from a display
of vulnerability that should rightfully be tedious and begging to be crushed and yet in Will’s case
succeeds in being poignant and yearning and therefore worthy of scrutiny. Not that the view is as
good as it could be, given that half of Will’s face is obscured by shadows. Hannibal watches a while
longer, eyes slightly narrowed as he calculates the precise angle and level of force required, then
leans forward and gives Will a neat little push that sends him slumping to the side until his head is
barely an inch from Hannibal’s knee.

One of the dogs, resentful of Will being touched in this way, emits an ominous growl and Hannibal
calmly swivels round and stares it into submission until the dog begins to cower and duck its head.
“Never show your fear,” Hannibal tells it in a low voice that’s tinged with just enough foreboding to
keep the dog wary and subdued. “Ever. You will always find someone prepared to exploit it to their
advantage.”

Over on the sofa Will is now moaning quietly from the depths of sleep, his expression creased with
distress like someone battling unseen demons. Hannibal gives the dog a final glare then quickly turns
back again to look at him, his expression promptly softening as he has to resist the temptation to
touch Will’s face for fear of waking him up. A loose curl of hair has fallen over his eyebrow and it’s
that combined with the pale skin and lingering air of sadness that sparks a recollection in Hannibal of
someone else – someone many years ago – who likewise looked so susceptible and sorrowful and
had lain there calling out for him until he finally found her and she could reach up to twine her small
arms around her older brother’s neck. The setting is long since gone and crumbled away and the
person is long since dead, yet somehow the scene now seems as fresh and vivid as an image from
only yesterday; all breathed back to life from nothing more substantial than the angle of Will’s
eyebrow and the way his skin looks flushed and glowing when it’s painted in the soft light of the
lamp.

“So vulnerable,” says Hannibal quietly. “And yet…so much violence in you. You try so hard to hide
it yet you wear it like a brand. And you wear it well.” He pauses and runs his eyes over Will’s face
once again, admiring the determined set of the mouth that’s visible even in sleep. Such dark vitality:
someone who not only refuses to shy away from the deliverers of horror and violence but actively
identifies with them. Will looks upon violence as a sculptor looks upon slabs of marble or piles of
clay; and yet an artist whose specialism is not creation, but rather desecration and destruction. In this
respect the new killer’s nom-de-plume seems curiously apt. A sculptor. Only Will is not suited to be
shaped as marble is – meticulously and forensically with hammer and chisel – but rather moulded in
the same way as clay: slowly and sensuously with one’s hands. Hannibal frowns again, remembering
the famous words of Michelangelo whilst crafting his David: I saw the angel in the marble and I
carved until I set him free.

What would it take to set you free? muses Hannibal, resuming his close inspection of Will’s face.
And then if you had your freedom, what would you do with it? Would you use it wisely? Will stirs
once more, his fingers beginning to twitch as if he’s limbering up for a fight, and Hannibal looks at
him and tries to imagine what Will is like when he’s angry. Frustration and irritation he’s already
observed and savoured, but not actual rage…something white hot and ruthless. Or would Will veer
more toward anger that’s icily restrained and lethal, rather like Hannibal does himself? In this respect
Will’s emotions are such engaging things: compelling in their chaos and beautiful in their volatility — shards of glass, chips of bone, clicking together like pearls — and all the more so from how tirelessly Will tries to keep them concealed. It not only makes the occasional stolen glimpses of them infinitely more gratifying, but stokes Hannibal’s desire to take every possible opportunity to trick them into emerging from their dark hiding places and revealing themselves.

Nevertheless Hannibal not only believes in the value of the long game but has turned delayed gratification — at least in the service of self-interest — into a positive art form. He’s therefore content to bide his time and makes no further attempts to touch Will beyond extending a fingertip to brush against a strand of hair from where it’s spilling across the cushion. It’s impossible that Will could have felt it but he flinches restlessly nonetheless; and Hannibal makes a soothing noise before his mouth quirks into a very faint smile as he gently stokes the edge of one single curl. It’s easy to see why hair has acquired the significance it has: lovers putting strands in lockets, snippets used for spells in voodoo, or even sheared off entirely and coiled into braids that are stashed around the wrist or neck. Will’s hair makes him look younger and softens the angles of his face; no doubt the feel of it would be equally soft, although of course such an experiment is currently impossible. To look, however, is considerable consolation for being unable to touch; and Hannibal therefore sees no good reason to resist the temptation of moving leisurely forward in order to achieve an even better vantage point. It means his shadow gets cast across Will’s face as he leans over it — at which point the dog, no longer able to contain itself, begins to growl again sufficiently loudly to disturb Will before Hannibal has a chance to quell it into submission. Hannibal sighs with irritation then swiftly resumes his previous position on the sofa just as Will jolts awake with a speed that’s almost violent: eyes flying open with something like panic before springing upright and gazing at Hannibal with a look of epic discomfort and a face that’s extremely pale beyond a high dot of colour across both cheekbones.

“Oh God,” says Will. “I’m really sorry.”

“Why? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Will sighs in response and Hannibal decides in that moment that he’s never fully acknowledged to himself just how much he likes Will’s voice. While admittedly far softer than his own it’s still unusually deep for an omega with a pleasingly dry edge that dilutes its gentler aspects and prevents it becoming too sweet in the same way good wine balances bitterness with piquancy. He especially enjoys the little raspy edge to some of the vowel sounds when Will becomes animated – rather like he’s catching his breath – as well as the abrasiveness that pummels round a word like sandpaper as if Will’s scouring his opinions prior to sharing them. Will, in turn, now seems determined to withhold the gift of his voice and merely blinks a few times in favour of saying anything else, briefly appearing as strained and haunted-looking as an El Greco saint. Really, such aesthetic misery is addictive: Hannibal wishes there was a way to bottle it up and breathe it in. It would be something to savour, doled out in small exquisite sips until the time comes when Will is so thoroughly under Hannibal’s care and influence that he’ll never have cause to be melancholy again and the bottle’s content will be the only lingering memory of it.

“Look, let me get you a cab,” says Will abruptly, scrubbing a hand over his face as if trying to chase the sadness away. “You must be desperate to get home.”

Hannibal waits a few seconds, calculating assorted probabilities with lightning speed in the manner of a chess master. To stay a little longer is extremely tempting, although he’s reluctantly forced to concede that leaving Will alone whilst so unhappy and discomforted is likely to serve his own long-term interests much better than remaining and run the risk of upsetting the delicate balance that’s begun to be established between them. “Thank you,” he says now as he gets to his feet and begins to gather up his coat. “Although please consider calling in sick tomorrow. You need some proper rest. And take some aspirin for the fever.”
“Mmmm,” says Will vaguely.

“Doctor’s orders,” adds Hannibal in a sardonic voice. Then he briefly pauses in fastening his coat and runs his eyes over Will’s face. “Would you like me to stop by after work and see how you’re doing?”

Will opens his mouth to agree then quickly closes it again, because although he would like it – a lot – it’s not the same as a social call and the idea of becoming an object of pity and inconvenience is actually pretty unbearable. “Thanks,” he says firmly, “but I’ll be fine.” Hannibal nods serenely and for want of anything better to do Will gestures towards the dogs. “They didn’t give you any hassle did they?”

“Not at all.”

“Oh okay. That’s good.”

“Why should they have done?”

“No reason really. It’s just that they can be a bit protective of me if there’re people they don’t know.”

“They were fine,” replies Hannibal smoothly. “I suppose they could sense that I’m not a threat.”

“Okay – great,” says Will while secretly wondering if he’s just made himself sound like the equivalent of a crazy cat lady or socially awkward Dog Overlord who relies on a group of furry enforcers to safeguard his interests in preference to any kind of human interaction. Oh well, it’s too late to change it now (and it’s partly true anyway). “I’ve just texted in for a cab,” he adds. “It should be here pretty soon. Let me get you some cash.”

Hannibal smiles appreciatively then spends a few more luxurious seconds admiring Will from a distance before prowling up behind him as he’s rooting round in his coat pocket to locate his wallet. “What you said this afternoon,” says Hannibal abruptly. “In the meeting. What did you mean?”

Will, who’s been startled by the unexpected noise, flinches slightly before clearing his throat and slowly turning round with an expression that’s somewhat wary and defensive. “Which bit?”

“When you told Jack that the Sculptor shows an unusual degree of deliberation.”

“What it sounded like. The scenes are too staged.”

“Performative?”

“Yes. Exactly. I wouldn’t go so far as to say theatrical, but…”

“But he’s working too hard to achieve a particular effect.”

Will frowns to himself then briefly closes his eyes before snapping them sharply back open again. “Yes. It’s like he doesn’t have his own voice. A style that’s not his own.”

“A copycat?”

“I’m not sure. Possibly.”

“He derives satisfaction in imitating the crimes of other people?”

“But that’s just it; I don’t know where the satisfaction comes from. I don’t have the ‘why’. And that’s what’s making him hard to pin down.”
Hannibal nods again then lets his gaze slide suggestively across Will’s face; in the half-light his eyes are gleaming like a cat’s. “That lecture you gave the other week: the one about organized and disorganized offenders.”

“Hmm.”

“When that student questioned you, you said it wasn’t a presentation concerning an individual case study. But I don’t believe that was entirely true. I think you were using it to work the case out to yourself as you went along – you were profiling him the entire time.”

Will just shrugs, typically modest, and Hannibal takes a small step closer. “It was there in the subject matter wasn’t it Will? The paradox of the Sculptor. Organised yet…”

“…disorganised.”

“Both things…”

“…yet neither.”

“Precisely,” replies Hannibal. At the exact same time Will says “Yeah,” then gives a small smile at their synchronised responses; completely unaware of how intensely Hannibal has begun to stare at him again. “There’s something rather irresistible about a paradox,” adds Hannibal after a short pause. “No wonder people grow so preoccupied with them: how can one thing comprise such opposition in its component parts? Chaotic yet methodical, as in the case of this unknown killer of ours. Or else something different entirely: light yet dark, moral yet corrupted…vulnerable while still immensely powerful.”

“I guess,” says Will, who feels like he’s starting to lose control of this conversation.

“So,” adds Hannibal, abruptly reverting to his previous, more pragmatic mood. “If the Sculptor is a copycat – then who is the inspiration?”

“It’s just an idea,” says Will. “I don’t know for certain that he is.” Remembering the earlier Taskforce meeting he can’t stop himself beginning to frown before adding, rather bitterly: “No doubt if Skinner were here he’d insist on adding ‘or she’.”

“That is highly unlikely in this case. There are no known incidents of this type of killer being female.”

“Agreed. God knows why he even bothered mentioning it.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “He mentioned it because he likes to disagree with you.”

“Mmm. Yeah, I know.”

“And do you know why?”

“Because he dislikes me,” replies Will rather aimlessly. He closes his eyes again then stretches his arms behind his head. “It sounds like your cab’s arrived, you better get going.”

Hannibal nods and moves towards the door before turning round again with his fingers still curled round the handle. “Are you aware of a reason for it?”

“What, the reason he dislikes me? Not especially. Not beyond general terms.”

“Which are…?”
Will gives a rather crooked smile then bends down to stroke one of the dogs who’s winding round his legs while alternately lifting its head to glare at Hannibal. “Because doesn’t everyone?”

Hannibal waits until Will has straightened up again then looks him directly in the eye. “No,” he says softly. “Not everyone.” Will darts his tongue over his lips and doesn’t reply and Hannibal stares at him for a few more seconds before wordlessly pushing open the door and vanishing into the night. It closes behind him with a restrained little click and Will leans against the wall and takes a deep, slightly shaky breath before running back into the living room to try and catch a last glimpse of him through the window before the cab takes him away. The delay is less than a minute but he’s already too late and by the time he gets there there’s nothing to see except a gleam of headlights that flicker faintly in the distance like will-o-the-wisps until even they’ve disappeared and there’s nothing at all but streaks of shadow bleached cold and pale by the moon. Suddenly bereft, Will presses his palm against the glass then rests his forehead against it: fleetingly aware of being more alone and wretched than he has in recent memory and consumed with a hopeless, helpless force of feeling that’s all the more painful because he’s knows it’s never going to be possible to say it aloud. In fact it’s barely even possible to say it to himself although he still attempts it anyway: reciting the words internally in a weary hymn of longing and resignation that’s almost unfeasibly hard to admit to and call by its name. But it’s there regardless; it’s there all the same. It’s there, and it’s real, and its inherent impossibility does nothing to diminish it. Come back, it says. Come back. Please. Don’t leave me here alone. Come back, come back; come back to me. I need you now, I need you so badly…I need you more than I have words to say.
Dear You,

I don’t really have anything new to tell you since my last letter. Only that I think about you often (as usual) and that things continue to feel difficult (also as usual) and that since you were here these two things have become unexpectedly combined. ‘You’ on one hand and ‘difficult’ on the other…I guess that probably sounds rude? I promise it’s not meant to. It’s only that while I liked having you here – and I really did – I still half wish you hadn’t come because of how it highlighted the gap between the way I want things to be and the way they actually are. Do you understand what I mean when I say that? Can you see how the fact you only came because I was ill and you felt sorry for me could be worse than not having you here at all? It’s not that I don’t appreciate your sympathy, because I do; I just don’t particularly want it. Or at least I don’t only want that. I don’t just want compassion and charity and small acts of kindness and your therapist’s smile. I want you to see me as an equal.

Not that it really matters that much – all these things that I want – because it’s never enough to stop me trying to believe that you and I aren’t impossible, even though I know that we are. I know this: I know all of it. All these things. So why do I sometimes still feel like my need to be close to you has no limits? It doesn’t even make any sense.

I’m not angry with you by the way. It’s not your fault. I suppose it’s not really mine either. It just is; it’s how things are supposed to be. You’re designed for elegance and privilege and classical music in the background with a group of admirers in evening dress to hang onto your every word. Not desperation and dog fur and a lonely house in the middle of nowhere. Not like me. I’m designed for these things, and you’re not, and it’s as simple as that. We’re like polar opposites really, aren’t we? Like two elements that can’t properly mix together. Like oil and water…that sort of thing. It’s why I was so surprised you were able to make a pretence of fitting in as well as you did. Did you notice that by the way; how surprised I was? I’ll admit I wasn’t totally expecting it. It was as if you were genuinely…what’s the right word? Comfortable, I guess. Yeah, you seemed to be comfortable being here – emphasis on the ‘seemed’ because I can’t believe you actually were. In fact why on earth am I still talking to you about this? I don’t even know, it’s not like it really matters. I’m making out like I want it to mean something when all it shows is that you’ve mastered that chameleon-like ability to blend into your surroundings, the same way a lot of charming people are able to do.

Now that we’re talking about it, did you know that I can blend as well? You must have picked up on it by now. In fact I think I can blend almost as well as you can when I have to, although in my case the motivation is different because I do it so survive and minimise harm the same way a real chameleon does. It’s not about being charming it’s about trying to stay safe. I’m still not entirely sure why you do it. Obviously it’s not for survival – I don’t think you know what real desperation feels like. Although maybe the reason isn’t all that important? Maybe you do it just because you can.

All these complaints…am I starting to bore you now? Are you rolling your eyes with irritation and drumming your fingers on your desk? I wonder if you do that when you’re alone. I’ve never seen you express boredom or annoyance in the same way that other people do, although I can’t believe you don’t feel it. Anyway, I promise I’ll stop soon – it’s not as if it’s making me feel any better. I suppose I just want you to know that I’d like us to be proper friends and to be real with one another. And that while I enjoyed having you here I’d have enjoyed it even more if you’d come willingly, not because I needed help and you felt it was the ‘right thing to do.’
Would you like to know the reason for that? Well I hope you’re listening, because I’m only going to say it once and then I don’t think I’ll ever find the courage to tell you again. You see, the thing is that I feel like I’ve spent my entire life playing chess on my own – playing chess against myself – and growing increasingly lonely and maddened the entire time until one day you walked in and took a place on the other side of the board. And I want you to stay there and renew the game and review the strategy over and over again: and I’d like you to do it because you want to, not because you feel you should. I sound like a child now don’t I: ‘I want someone to play with me.’ But it’s true, because I do. And I want that person to be you.

Okay, I said I’d stop now and I will. See? I’ve stopped. What else should I say to you? The usual stuff I suppose. Like that I hope you’re having a good day and aren’t being surrounded by people who bore you, and that you find some time later to do whatever it is that makes you happy. Music, dining – that kind of thing. I don’t even know, although I think I’d like to: what it is that makes you happy.

Ah, I can see you rolling your eyes at me again. I’m not telling you what you want to hear about am I? You were hinting about it enough the other night so I know that you’re interested. And now I’m avoiding it just like I did then – just like I always do. You want me to tell you why I insist on taking the heat suppressants even though they’re half-killing me and why it matters so much to me that people don’t know I’m an omega. You want to know about that don’t you? You want to know why I can’t bear the idea of bonding with anyone. And one day I’ll tell you – I promise I will. But in the meantime I’d rather tell you something else, which is that I’m in trouble. Real trouble. Because no matter how hard I try, I can’t get hold of any more pills.

I’ve seen about eight different doctors now and it’s always the same. The appointments start off with the routine Q&A, just going through the motions, and I tell the same lies I’ve told on each previous appointment and that I get better and better at each time. How my alpha is going away on a long business trip, or is sick, or is on military service (the details vary a bit – I’d get bored otherwise) and that’s why I need the pills; and then I tell a lot of new lies about my physical health and previous use of suppressants (blah, blah blah) and it always goes so well right up until the physical exam and then – not so much. That’s been eight doctors now, practically ripping up their prescription pads in front of me. Eight doctors looking horrified and telling me that my alpha must be out of their mind (it’s always the alpha that’s out of their mind, as if I don’t have enough of a mind to be held accountable for it) and what were they even thinking to put their poor omega at a risk of damaging their body in such a way? Alphas are supposed to be able to sense these types of things apparently; in fact I’m almost starting to feel bad for this alpha of mine, even though they don’t exist. Eight doctors lecturing and preaching and trying to refer me for hormone therapy. Eight doctors telling me no.

I haven’t really got enough energy left to make it a ninth.

So the conclusion to all this is that medical science has effectively told me I’m a hopeless case: and in purely pragmatic terms I wouldn’t necessarily disagree with them. ‘But there’s an easy answer to this Mr Graham,’ they always say. ‘Just stop taking the tablets – problem solved.’ Only it wouldn’t be problem solved, it would be game over. It would be giving up. And right now giving up doesn’t feel like a viable option; I don’t have the luxury to just give up. To be honest I haven’t even considered what it might mean to stay on the tablets against so much medical advice. I suppose if I thought about it at all it’s to tell myself that the doctors could have got it wrong (because doctors do get it wrong sometimes; I bet even you’ve got it wrong once or twice). Or I tell myself that if they’re right and staying on the pills will completely wreck my health, then at least no alpha would ever want me at the end of it and how that in itself is a version of a happy ending. Because it actually would be; it’d mean no one can ever try and take me over. It would mean complete freedom.
I suspect I’m probably boring you again with all these details, so suffice to say that this is a convoluted way of telling you that if I can’t get the tablets legally then I need to find an illegal way of getting them instead. And no, I’m not particularly proud of that: but the simple fact is that I’m too frightened not to. Because I’m frightened of what it would mean to be in heat and how it would feel, and I’m frightened of the idea of Andrew forcing me to go back because of it; but most of all I’m frightened of the ultimate solution to all these things and the way I’m irresistibly drawn to it. I’m frightened of that little voice that says ‘you could kill him, you could kill him’ and how it knows full well that I could. And not just because I feel like I’d have to…but because I know that I want to.

That little voice – it’s the most frightening thing of all. I don’t want to listen to it, I don’t even want to acknowledge it exists, but what can I do? Because it’s still there; it hasn’t gone away. And it’s getting louder all the time.

*****

The body has been lying there for several days. It was a hiker who found him: happily roaming across the countryside with a backpack and a little hand-knitted cap and completely unaware that in a few seconds time she was about to stumble across something tattered and torn amongst the withered stalks of pampas grass that once was alive but now is dead – and the mere glimpse of which is destined to haunt her for the rest of her life. Will can see her now in the corner of his eye: slumped on the ground with her head drooping forward and the bobble on the hat swaying crazily in the wind like a pendulum. A paramedic is bending over her with a hand on her shoulder as his mouth opens and closes like a goldfish while he murmurs soothing words of sympathy; even though no right words exist, because what on earth can you possibly say? Will supposes she’s in shock and not for the first time can’t help mourning for the part of himself that would once have likewise been shocked by such things rather than coolly acquiescing and hardened to horror. He misses that innocence: the part of himself that still had the power to care.

“What do you think,” Jack is now saying. “Is it him?”

Will forces himself to stop staring at the hiker and her sad little knitted hat and turns round to face Jack instead. Does Jack care? Probably; at least more than Will does. “Yeah,” he says heavily. “Yeah it’s definitely him.”

“You sure? Don’t tell me you’re sure if you’re not.”

“Pretty much. I guess the autopsy will officially confirm it, but as far as I’m concerned this is the Sculptor.” Then he frowns slightly at the sound of the words because it always bothers him that the victims are immediately identified only as they relate to their killer. After all, this isn’t the Sculptor – of course it isn’t. This is John, or Joe, or James, or whatever the poor bastard’s name is (or was) and he’s probably someone’s husband or brother, and is definitely someone’s son. At any rate far more than The Sculptor’s Fifth, even though that’s how he’s fated to be known to posterity from this moment on. Christ, it’s so unfair: the way that victims are condemned to be linked to their killers for all time in which even death offers no genuine means of escape. From now on every book and article and internet blog that discusses the Sculptor case is going to be mentioning John or Joe or James, probably accompanied with a photo of him from some happier time when he was just a regular person and not a criminology statistic or a footnote in the annals of Serial and Violent Crime. “Do we know who he was?” Will abruptly asks Jack. “Any ID?”

“The CSI team is looking into it,” replies Jack, waving a hand towards the small troupe of field agents who are creeping around the frozen ground like spectres in their white overalls. “No wallet on the body though, so it may take some time. Either he didn’t have one with him when he was killed or the Sculptor took it.”
“It might have fallen from his pocket while his body was being moved? Get them to check the field.”

“They’ve already done that Will.”

“Well get them to do it again. It’s highly unlikely the murderer kept it. Let’s face it Jack, it’s not like he goes in for those kinds of souvenirs.”

“Yeah,” replies Jack grimly. “I know he doesn’t.”

“So…” says Will. Then he takes a deep breath, struggling against a renewed surge of pain. It’s even worse today if possible: like being scraped from the inside with a rusty, blunt scalpel. “What’s been taken?”

“Price says the left cavity is missing a kidney. Portions of the left lung also removed.”

Will nods wordlessly then turns back again to glance at where the hiker is swaddled in a shock blanket while taking tiny sips from a white Styrofoam cup. She’s clearly devastated yet he still envies her for a distress that’s so pure and uncomplicated – so completely unblemished by the same pitch black degeneracies of his own reaction. It is, after all, the sort of distress that can be talked about without any kind of shame or reservation; a response you can describe without people drawing back in revulsion and saying “What? You thought what when you saw it? You felt like what?” before turning their backs to get away from you. But I don’t know what, thinks Will bleakly. I only know why. I only know the designation and the purpose; this is my design.

“Are we expecting Hannibal?” he says suddenly. He’s still finding it hard to overcome the urge to use more formal terms when discussing Hannibal with other people and the Christian name generally comes far less naturally than it should. In contrast ‘Is Dr Lecter joining us?’ virtually trips off the tongue…it's actually rather weird. Although he knows exactly why he does it – an attempt to distance himself and appear more emotionally detached than he really is – so maybe it’s not that weird after all.

“The office called him but he didn’t pick up,” replies Jack, who’s clearly dissatisfied about this. “They left a message; maybe he’ll join us later.”

“Right,” says Will tersely, aware of a sad refrain that’s now started up almost on instinct: Join us now. Please, I need you. Then he frowns again – deeply irritated with a weakness that has neither place nor purpose when there’s a job to be done – and gestures towards the spectral outlines of the CSI team instead. “What’s taking them so long? We need to get it…him…back to the mortuary as soon as possible. We’re losing evidence. He’s already been outside for days.”

“I know Will, they’re going as fast as they can.”

“And I want to know as soon as they find out who he is. It doesn’t make sense that he was dumped all the way out here – the others were all found within a few hours.”

Jack nods in response then tips his hat a little further over his forehead as protection against the increasingly vicious gusts of wind. “You think there’s something special about this one?”

“There’s something different. He’s changed his pattern – why not just leave the body close to the abduction site like he’s always done before?”

“Maybe this one was killed close by?”

“Then why was he hunting for victims in the middle of the countryside?”
“He might have been passing through?”

“On his way to where? There’s nothing here.”

Jack nods again then pulls the hat a little further down until his eyes have disappeared in the shadow of the brim. “Well you’d know I suppose. Isn’t this your neck of the woods?”

“Yeah,” says Will reluctantly. “It’s a few miles out, but kind of.” Then another spasm of pain hits and he takes a deep breath and bites his lip, struggling against a need to scream at the wretched intensity of it. In an attempt to ride it out he gazes determinedly into the horizon: tracking his eyes over the vista of straggled trees and the ragged little outline of the crows as they dip and weave between the branches. The sight of them creates an unpleasantly visceral twinge in his mind and it takes a few seconds of confusion to realise that it’s because they remind him of the morning he first made his long-postponed call to the doctor.

“Will? You okay?”

“Did you know that a group of crows is called a murder?” replies Will, half to himself.

Jack gives him a look. “What’s going on Will? You’re as white as a sheet.”

“Headache,” replies Will tersely. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look it,” says Jack, whose voice has started to acquire its familiar tone of concern spiced by impatience. “In fact I’d say you look ready to pass out.”

“I’m fine.” Will clears his throat then turns his head in the opposite direction, stiffening slightly as he spots a lone and unexpected figure that’s loitering behind the police cordons. “And who the hell is that?”

“Who?” says Jack, squinting in the same direction as Will. “Oh yeah, that kid. He’s another hiker. We spoke to him before you got here: told us he spotted ‘the fed cars’ and headed over to see what was going down. Morbid curiosity apparently; at least he’s honest.” Jack glances at the grim expression on Will’s face and sighs in solidarity. “I know it’s a bit disrespectful but he’s behind the barrier – there’s nothing we can do.”

Will nods in wordless agreement then discreetly turns his head to get a better look at the figure: a young man in his mid-twenties with a thin slightly feral-looking face and what Will imagines would be pale hawkish eyes, even though he’s too far away to properly see them. “Someone should speak to him again,” he says after a short pause. “I’m not happy with his story.”

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“Oh?” says Jack with interest. “Why not?”

“He’s wearing sneakers. What kind of hiker comes all the way out here in this weather without boots? No backpack either.” He jerks his head in the direction of the ambulance. “That’s a hiker. This guy came here by car.”

“Could’ve got out and then walked,” says Jack reasonably. “I know what you’re thinking Will, but they don’t advertise themselves at their crime scenes that obviously. The level of risk is insane – there’s no way he wouldn’t be spotted immediately.”

“I know. And maybe he is just a morbid onlooker – or maybe he isn’t. Either way we should get some proof of ID and a follow-up address. Tell him it’s because he’ll need to give a witness statement.”
“Consider it done,” says Jack before turning round to face one of the CSI officers who’s been hovering by his elbow for the past few minutes and discreetly clearing his throat in an attempt to get their attention. The officer clears his throat for a final time and Will can’t help noting that now his objective is achieved he’s beginning to visibly wilt, rather like he’s quailing inwardly at the thought of addressing the mighty Jack Crawford. “Yes?” says Jack in a kindly voice. “It’s Johnson isn’t it? No – Johns. Agent Johns. What have you got for me?”

“Mr Crawford. Mr Graham.” He turns to Will and dips his head in a nervous little bob that makes Will muster the first genuine smile of the day at the artless sincerity of it. “There’s something we thought you should see.” His voice is soft and feathery with the faintest trace of a Southern accent that’s obviously managed to survive years of living and working in DC; and Will looks at his shiny young face and can’t help finding something rather touching about its earnestness. Oh Christ, this is ridiculous: why is everything making him so mawkish at the moment? It must be another effect of the pills…

“Yes,” says Jack in a tone that’s marginally less kind than before. “We don’t have all day.”

“No sir. Well, you know the body had nothing on it beyond the usual stuff? Keys and loose change and whatnot: nothing of actual relevance and nothing to tell us who he was. But we did find this.” He holds up a zip-locked evidence bag, waving it slowly back and forward for maximum effect, and Jack leans in to inspect it then sucks in his breath through his teeth. “Possibly a coincidence,” adds the agent with a nervous glance at Will. “But, you know…” He trails off awkwardly then falls completely silent as Will also moves forward to examine the bag’s contents: a single square of white cardboard that’s blood-smeared and crumpled yet initially seems innocuous and pointless until he sees what’s written in the centre. Because there it is and there’s no mistaking it, painstakingly etched as it is in careful black letters: WG.

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An hour later everyone has assembled back at the lab, where the energy of devising some kind of strategy plan is only slightly subdued by the increasingly urgent howls from the pack of journalists that are gathering in front of the building. They seem to have more than doubled in the past half hour, spawning and multiplying the way bacteria does, and at one point there’s even the sound of a news helicopter industriously chopping away for an aerial view of the scene. Will fantasises about leaning out the window and yelling at them all to fuck off.

“A calling card,” Skinner is now saying ominously. “A calling card: with Graham’s initials.”

“I think that’s a rather inflammatory way of putting it,” snaps Jack. “We have a piece of card with two letters that just happen to be Will’s initials. They could also, and almost certainly do, refer to a wide variety of other things.”

“Like what Mr Crawford?”

“WG is a logging abbreviation for ‘wrong,’” offers Price. “Or there’s a local attorney’s office called Wardle and Green Associates. They do those terrible advertisements, you must have seen them – the ones with the singing judges. Or there’s that place on the high street, White and Garett. It sells organic produce and hand-knitted lentils and that sort of thing. Or maybe it’s Waite and Garett? But they definitely peddle over-bred vegetables.”

“WG could stand for weapons grade?” adds Zeller. “Or wage grade? Watergate?

“Working girl?” suggests Skinner with a spiteful look at Will.
Will returns the look very calmly from over the top of his glasses then resumes leafing through a stack of autopsy reports without saying a word.

“Aw, it was just a joke man,” says Skinner. “Don’t get your panties in a twist.”

“Seriously though,” chips in Siemens, “WG is a common police abbreviation. Do you think he really might be trying to send a message about prostitutes?”

“No,” says Will.

“And what makes you so sure?” snaps Skinner, despite having clearly only suggested it in the first place out of malice. “How do you know he doesn’t have a hatred of prostitutes? Loads of these guys do.”

“Because the guys that do have a tendency to – y’know – actually kill prostitutes,” says Will serenely. “As opposed to middle-aged men in fields.”

“It might be worth checking though,” persists Siemens, who’s actually bouncing up and down on his heels with eagerness. “Just in case. You never know Mr Crawford: perhaps the dead guy was a john?”

Will stares back in disbelief and is struggling to think of a nice way of telling him to stop being so fucking stupid when Siemens directs one of his patented watery smiles in his direction and it suddenly occurs to him that Siemens is attempting to find an alternative explanation for the letters in order to deflect attention away from Will. Then Siemens smiles again, rather more boldly than before, and Will can’t help feeling slightly touched by the show of solidarity, despite the fact it’s badly misguided. “We’ll certainly be checking the victim’s background,” he says now, trying to be charitable. “Better to be safe than sorry, Mr…” then he hesitates because it suddenly occurs to him that saying ‘Mr Siemens’ out loud without laughing requires a degree of stamina he isn’t entirely sure he possesses.

“Oh call me Adam,” says Siemens, unintentionally coming to the rescue.

“Yes, Adam,” replies Will carefully. “It’s definitely worth pursuing every possible lead.” Even though it clearly isn’t; yet Adam-formerly-known-as-Siemens still begins to beam as if he’s just won the lottery and Will gives a small awkward smile of his own then hurriedly turns his back on him. “Hey. You okay?” murmurs Jack in an undertone.

“I guess. It seems unlikely it’s a reference to me, but…”

“But you’re not entirely happy about it. I don’t blame you – I wouldn’t be either.”

“Well, my involvement in the case has been publicised,” says Will vaguely. In fact he’s secretly struggling with his reaction because while he didn’t seriously think Jack would adopt the same hectoring, accusatory tone as Skinner he can’t help feeling relieved to have it confirmed that, as far as Jack’s concerned, any allusion to Will is more likely as a potential victim than a perpetrator. Although of course that shouldn’t be a surprise, Will firmly amends to himself: there’s no reason anyone should assume he’d be capable of something like this. Even Skinner almost certainly doesn’t think that. Then he realises he’s grown so preoccupied with people accusing him of being the Sculptor that he seems to have forgotten that being flagged as a potential target of the latter is hardly reassuring either…talk about being caught between shit and shite. Although why was his initial concern the idea of being seen as a killer rather than the fact some epic maniac might be sending him coded messages? What the hell is wrong with me, thinks Will miserably. Then he glances back at Jack and from the grim set of his mouth and eyebrows it’s almost as if he’s thinking the same thing as
“Will is himself: this guy likes to target omegas.”

Jack meets Will’s eye and emits a small sigh. “I honestly don’t think it’s likely; just a weird coincidence. If he wanted to contact you directly there’re so many other ways he could have done it. Ways that are far more effective than scribbling your initials on a bit of cardboard.”

“Where exactly did they find it? In the victim’s pocket or…”

“It was underneath the body.”

“So it could have been there already?” says Will hopefully. “It could have been there for days beforehand.”

“It could have been, yeah. It probably was. Chances are it’s nothing more than a red herring.”

At the sound of this Will’s mouth can’t help quirking into a faint, mournful smile. Red herring. It’s such a quaint expression: the sort of term beloved by old-fashioned detective novels where an elegant lady of a certain age discovers who murdered the butler and stole the church roof restoration fund before pootling off again in an elegant Edwardian motor car just as the local constable arrives to haul the miscreant off to the magistrates. Staring round at the scenes of carnage and chaos in the lab he sighs audibly. How can there be room for the romance and intrigue of red herrings in a setting like this? Because there isn’t, is there – no room at all. They don’t have red herrings in Behavioral Sciences they have misleading facts and SUs, and where detective novels have inklings and suspicions they have swabs and evidence bags and bits of human bodies on slabs. This isn’t Clue; it’s never going to be Colonel Mustard in the library with a candlestick as opposed to the Sculptor in a filthy back alley with a meat cleaver.

“Even so,” Jack is now saying, “even though it’s most likely nothing…”

“You don’t want to take any chances? It’s okay Jack, neither do I.”

“We’ll monitor it,” says Jack firmly. “I can’t make a case for a formal security detail without a more obvious threat, but I can…” He hesitates for a few seconds, seemingly rummaging round his mental stash of solutions like a conjurer trying to tug a reluctant rabbit from a hat. “I could have someone escort you to your car after hours?” Jack finally says, clearly apologetic at having nothing better to offer. “You know – if you’re leaving when it’s dark.”

“Thanks,” says Will, “but that won’t be necessary. I always park close to the building.” Jack nods approvingly, obviously liking the way Will’s remaining so stoical (when he doesn’t like it then it stops being ‘stoical’ and morphs, less charitably, into ‘stubbornness’; or, if Will’s particularly annoyed him: “Will, you reckless asshole, sort yourself out”). And Will, in turn, thrusts his hands into his pockets while neglecting to add that he’s actually spent the better part of a year developing measures to minimise the chance of being followed so it doesn’t matter all that much anyway.

Jack gives Will a look of guarded sympathy then falls quiet again for a few moments, obviously trying to think of something else to suggest as a form of comfort now the idea of being nannied in and out of the parking lot has been politely refused. “Hannibal should be here soon,” he says eventually. “We got through to his secretary. He’s been in with patients all morning but she said he’ll be free very soon and she’ll pass the message on.”

“Oh, okay, says Will. This is done in a deliberately casual, offhanded tone as if he couldn’t really care less either way; although it still doesn’t stop him waiting until Jack has moved off to speak with Price before whipping his phone out his pocket and firing off a text: Can you talk? He doesn’t particularly want to get his hopes up only to be disappointed – and knowing Hannibal’s schedule
‘calling when free’ might mean anything from several hours to several days – so when his phone begins to buzz a few minutes later he’s so relieved to have made contact that it never occurs to him to ask whether there might be something significant in Hannibal ignoring Jack all morning and then responding almost immediately as soon as Will is the one to get in touch with him. Even so, he can’t stop himself from smiling very slightly before pressing the button to accept the call then moving away towards the window where he won’t be overheard. “Hi,” he says now. “Your secretary told us you were busy, so…yeah. Thanks for calling me back.”

“You’re welcome.”

Hannibal’s voice always sounds lower over the phone with a slightly smouldering edge to the vowels, rather like someone switching up the bass dial on a stereo. There’s no obvious background noise so he’s most likely still in his office and Will briefly tries to imagine it: how he’ll be leaning across the desk or possibly propped by the window, endlessly poised and watchful as the dark eyes skim round the room in that slightly hypnotic way.

“Is that Dr Lecter you’re talking to?” pipes up Siemens, who’s managed to materialise directly behind Will without warning. “Tell him I said hi!”

“Adam Siemens says hi,” says Will through gritted teeth. There’s no response. “He says hello,” he adds to Siemens after a few seconds pause.

“Tell him Mr Crawford’s been trying to contact him all morning.”

“He knows,” snaps Will. “He’s coming when he’s free.”

“But he is not free,” adds Hannibal, who’s starting to sound amused.

“Tell him Mr Crawford wants his opinion.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Consider him told,” says Hannibal serenely. “Although it doesn’t change the fact that Jack Crawford shall have to wait.”

“What’s he saying?” persists Siemens.

“He’s saying he knows,” snaps Will, who’s starting to fantasize about clouting the phone straight into his stupid face.

“Ask him…”

“Look,” says Will firmly, “can you just….” He hesitates very briefly, struggling against the urge to add can you just kindly fuck off. “Can you just give me a minute please? You’re making it a little hard to concentrate.”

Siemens promptly looks so mortified that Will feels vaguely guilty despite not having done anything wrong. Honestly though; there’s just something about the extreme pitifulness of his mortification, not unlike a puppy that’s left a puddle on the floor. “I’ll catch up with you later,” adds Will in a kinder voice in what feels like a human equivalent of administering a reassuring pat on the head.

“Sure Will,” says Siemens, obediently cheering up again. “Sure: anytime you’re free.”

“That was very charitable of you,” adds Hannibal from the depths of the phone. “Although be prepared for him to make you honour the promise.”
“What do you mean?”

“You appear to have an admirer there. Or at least someone very eager for your attention.”

“What, him?” exclaims Will, checking over his shoulder to ensure Siemens has moved out of earshot. “No, no way. At least not like that – not how you mean. He just looks up to me professionally.” Hannibal makes a non-committal noise and Will can’t resist adding: “If anything you’re the one he admires. I can’t imagine him so desperate to have a three-way conversation with me.”

“Oh indeed? Are we rivals then?”

“Looks that way: I’ll suppose I’ll have to fight you for him.”

“In that case I concede,” says Hannibal. “You can have him all to yourself. Although rest assured I shall be secretly resenting you the entire time.” Will huffs out a laugh then turns further away from the others towards the window, absent-mindedly tracking a streak of rain with his fingertip. “Well now you’ve successfully placed me in a state of pining for Agent Siemens,” adds Hannibal. Unlike Will, who always want to cackle when saying the name, Hannibal seems to be made of sterner stuff and pronounces it in the usual deadpan tone. “Although I don’t imagine it was the only reason you got in touch.”

“I suppose you’ve heard by now?” says Will, dropping his voice even further. “There’s been another one.”

“You’ve visited the scene?”

“I did, yeah.”

“And?” Will doesn’t reply immediately and Hannibal adds in a slightly softer tone, “What did you see that’s troubling you?”

Will’s small smile grows a fraction wider at this: partly because he appreciates Hannibal’s ability to slice through useless preamble and get straight to the point, but also because the way he always seems to know what Will needs without being told is rather reassuring. At first Will had resented it – had hated it, in fact – as if Hannibal was casually rifling through his emotions without permission before holding out whatever he found at arm’s length to inspect it. It used to drive him wild with irritation; but not anymore.

Why are you asking? Will had once said after Hannibal, apropos of nothing, had enquired what was wrong. How do you know anything’s the matter?

How do I know? Because you’ve told me of course.

No I haven’t. I haven’t told you anything.

Hannibal’s mouth had flickered then: that eternal way he can communicate amusement without taking the trouble to smile. No, and you never tell me if you’ve cut your hair, or acquired a new shirt; but I observe it nonetheless. And in the end Will had just smiled on behalf of the both of them: because it’s true, he can just see it can’t he? He can see Will. And Will, in turn, had never really understood how badly he needed that until it was on offer. To be really seen, despite there being so much he can never possibly show. In some of his bleakest loneliest moments, Will can even believe that there’s no greater way to demonstrate regard than those three small words, surpassing even love itself. I see you. As if love is just a pale and unconvincing counterfeit of perception: of the acceptance and awareness that comes from being seen.
“Will?” Hannibal is now saying. “Are you still there?”

“I’m still here,” replies Will cautiously. Then he promptly goes quiet again, because now it’s come down to it the thought of just blurting out his sense of unease is making him feel self-conscious. In fact if he’s totally honest he’s starting to regret that whole knee-jerk impetuous text. Obviously it would be good to talk about it, but not necessarily to do so now…far better to come across as stoic and reflective by waiting out a bit longer rather than wailing over the phone to Hannibal straight away and risk appearing hysterical and undignified. “There were a few things that were different about this one,” he finally says. “I’d like your opinion. Do you have time to talk later?”

“I could talk now, though for a few minutes only. Or for longer this evening.” Hannibal pauses very briefly and there’s a soft rustle of breath as he inhales. “I could call by your house on my way home?”

“Oh great, could you?” says Will before he can stop himself. Then he winces with frustration at what seems like a foolishly masochistic impulse to have Hannibal in the house when he knows how unhappy it’ll leave him feeling afterwards. Nevertheless it’s too late now and he can hardly take it back. “Um, okay then, yeah,” he adds, rather awkwardly. “Thanks. That would be helpful – I mean, if it’s no trouble?”

“It’s no trouble. Is seven o’clock convenient?”

Will pauses now himself as he calculates how much time is realistically required to accomplish the Task Of The Day; which just so happens to be (illegally) obtaining more heat suppressants. It’ll be a rush but manageable; it’ll have to be manageable. “Yeah,” he says at last. “That should be fine.”

“Then I shall see you at seven,” replies Hannibal. He doesn’t add anything else and after a few seconds silence Will presses the button to terminate the call before carefully replacing the phone in his pocket. He then takes a deep breath and forces himself to turn round to face the others, who he’s relieved to see are still mercifully deep in conversation and evidently unaware of him. The sole exception to this is Siemens who catches his eye and begins to smile; and Will makes an effort to smile back before starting to surreptitiously edge towards the door and desperately hoping that Jack won’t see him and start asking awkward questions.

In this respect, and despite his best efforts, Will is now aware of feeling deeply guilty and nervous. Admittedly it’s hardly in the same league as trying to score some meth or heroin, but he’s still uncomfortable with what he’s about to do and can’t help being briefly overcome by yet another wave of bitterness at how unfair it is to be driven to such desperate measures in the first place. The trade of heat suppressants is strictly regulated – by alphas, naturally – although in this instance Will suspects it isn’t solely driven by a desire to oppress omegas as opposed to raking in massive profits for the pharmaceutical industry. Not that this motivation makes it any better – except for the alphas, obviously, because if they can rake in massive profits while subduing omegas at the same time then the happier they’ll no doubt be. In fact it’s like a big alpha bonanza for them when you think about it…the stupid bastards.

“Will!” says Jack. His voice comes booming across the lab like the proverbial foghorn and Will curses internally and elaborately before reluctantly turning round again with one hand still on the door handle. “Leaving already?” asks Jack in a rather accusing way.

Will gestures aimlessly at the half-open door, which is as about close as he dares get in non-verbal terms to announcing well obviously I am, you massive dumbass. Jack’s forehead begins to crease with annoyance and Will gives a small shrug in response. “Sorry,” he replies, calm but firm. “I’ve got a doctor’s appointment. I’ll be in as usual tomorrow.”
“Can’t you reschedule? We need you here.”

Jack, reflects Will with irritation, seems to have a positive genius for dispensing high-handed lectures on wellbeing until the exact moment that Will’s wellbeing becomes personally inconvenient: at which point it can pretty much go and fuck itself. Although admittedly if was a regular medical appointment then he would offer to rearrange it…only that drug dealers aren’t generally known for their scheduling flexibility and secretarial support. Examining the row of disapproving faces, he idly imagines turning round while loudly and sarcastically announcing the real reason he has to leave: Hey there, you uptight law-abiding bastards! Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to stay but I’m just off to an alleyway to score some illicit shit, yo. Laters.

“Will?” repeats Jack in what’s obviously supposed to be a commanding tone (rather as if, thinks Will with annoyance, he’s calling a dog). “You sure you can’t stay?”

“No,” says Will, a bit firmer than before. “I’m sorry Jack, but I’ve been trying to get them to fit me in for ages now. Anyway, I’ve told you what I think.” Yeah…for all that anyone’s listened to it. “It’s not like I’ll even have anything new to add until the lab results come back.”

“Something might come up before then,” persists Jack, whose eyebrows are starting to furrow.

“To be honest I don’t think that’s very likely.”

“Yes, but if it does…”

“Then you can call me on my cell,” replies Will, surreptitiously reaching into his pocket to turn it off.

Jack’s eyebrows slowly arrange and re-arrange themselves into increasingly acrobatic displays of disapproval and Will watches their progress with something like fascination before deciding that while Jack’s clearly not happy he’s going to surrender with good grace rather than risk making a scene. “I’ll see you tomorrow then,” says Will brightly, determined to seal the deal before Jack can change his mind. Then he spins round and practically dives through the door in his eagerness to escape, glancing at his watch and grimacing before picking up his pace to get to the car a little faster. Nearly 20 minutes have already been wasted although if he drives quickly and is lucky with the traffic…anyway, surely the guy will wait? There’s no doubt he wants the money and – thanks to Will’s skilful pretence at nonchalance when arranging the sale – has no idea how completely desperate the situation really is. In fact as far as the dealer is concerned, he’s the one at the disadvantage: competing to gain the business of a customer who could just as easily find a competitor to buy the tablets from. He’ll wait. Won’t he? Yeah, he definitely will – he’ll wait. He has to.

Overhead it’s beginning to rain and Will fumbles to switch on the windscreen wipers with one hand while rummaging in his pockets for some painkillers with the other. Across the street a pack of alphas are sheltering beneath the shop hoardings, hands thrust in their pockets and typically loose-limbed and aloof as they arrogantly survey their surroundings: and there’s something about the sight of so many of them together that causes a new source of anxiety to abruptly veer into his mind and makes him go slightly pale before renewing the rummaging with a fresh sense of urgency. But what he’s searching for is definitely not in his coat or jacket and he knows it’s not in his briefcase: which means he’s forced to acknowledge, with a powerfully plummeting sense of unease, that in his haste to leave the office he’s forgotten to bring his gun. In fact he’s constantly forgetting things at the moment, just as Dr Reynolds predicted, and for a few fraught seconds he wrestles with the idea of turning the car round to retrieve it. Only if he does that he won’t need it anyway because then he’d definitely be too late.

A flurry of bad-tempered horns behind him makes him realise that the lights are already on green again so he forces himself to pull off while biting unhappily on his thumbnail and attempting to
review his options with a level of calmness and logic. Not that there are any real options to speak of beyond ‘go’ or ‘not go’, so he reappraises his response to both of them and convinces himself that he’s almost certainly overreacting: needlessly projecting his paranoid, distrustful view of the world into an interaction where it’s not really needed. After all it’s the dealers who carry the weapons, not their customers. What about all the suburban omegas, sneaking out from behind their rose bushes and white picket fences to source themselves some desperately-needed heat suppressants? What about those palely insipid omegas in Dr Reynolds office or the ones he sees pushing prams in the park, or what about the ones who go on TV and do those insufferable ‘lifestyle shows’ about fashion and diet and the best way of making alphas notice you? Omegas like that will sometimes be driven to go outside the law to get the tablets – just as much as omegas like him – and while it’s hardly plausible that they all go to do it packing firearms nothing ever happens to them. Does it? No – no, it can’t do; he’d have heard about it if it did. He’d have read about it in the papers. The alphas would have used it as an excuse to put some increasingly stifling legislation in place…

“It’s fine,” says Will out loud. And this time the often-repeated much-loathed phrase fails to ignite its usual level of irritation, simply because right now he has to believe that it’s true. Because he understands that this is what happens when you’re desperate and your options are limited and all you have to choose from is an increasingly wretched range of diminishing returns. You have to tell yourself that it’s fine. And you have to force yourself to believe it because it’s the only thing you have left. You can’t let them take it away from you – your faith in yourself to save the situation and force it to be fine. Because if you allow that to happen then all that’s left is the knowledge that there’s absolutely nothing you can do to make the misery stop; and that in itself is a level of hopelessness Will genuinely doesn’t think he can bear.

Chapter End Notes

The analogy of the chessboard isn’t my original idea – I read a S2 era interview with Hugh Dancy where he talked about it and I stole borrowed it from him. Although in the same interview he also said that Will and Hanners have a platonic relationship (yeah RIGHT *guffaw*) so I don’t know why I’m paying any attention to him anyway ;-D

In other news, huge thanks and hugs once again to everyone who’s been supporting the fic in the comments. It’s incredibly motivating and really does mean a lot to me.
Chapter 6

The site of the urgent and much longed-for transaction – Will is now to refusing to call it ‘a drug deal’ on the basis of sounding needlessly melodramatic as opposed to what it actually is: an exchange of goods between seller and customer – is a narrow alleyway that cuts between two decomposing archways like a slash in the bricks with a sordid-looking massage parlour on one side and a derelict pawn shop on the other. In other words it’s a thoroughly squalid, depressing spot and he doesn’t even need to get out the car to know that everything inside it is going to be wrecked and reeking, coated in the type of straggling vegetation that spontaneously appears on debris and damp, and drenched with the same eerily decayed abandonment that could double for a churchyard or crypt. It’s not like he was expecting shiny table tops and a buyer’s lounge with all the mod-cons...but even so there’s no denying that the site for the transaction is not particularly promising. Nevertheless it’s far too late to back out now, even if he wanted to (which he doesn’t) so he parks his car as close as possible then gets out and takes a rather forlorn look at the hubcaps, unable to shake the suspicion that this may well be the last time he ever sees them again.

Across the street a lone alpha is staring at him from the murky depths of a shop doorway and Will accidentally catches his eye then is briefly unable to look away again, simply because it’s so incredibly unusual to see one that’s quite that wretched-looking. It goes without saying that the city is teeming with the deprived and the destitute, but they’re almost always betas; that, or the occasional omega who’s angered the system in some way and been cast out to fend for themselves as a result (and in this respect is a fate that, in his gloomier moments, Will is fairly inclined to imagine for himself). Alphas, on the other hand, are so inherently privileged and high-status that it’s actively difficult for them to end up in anything like the condition of this man. Not all that long ago – not within Will’s memory admittedly, but certainly with his father’s – alphas like this would have been put in institutions and most likely forcibly sterilized for tainting the purity of the alpha gene line. In fact this is one of the few real disadvantages that alphas are forced to contend with, in that any difficulty or distress is automatically attributed to personal weakness as opposed to society letting them down – and it means that when they fall, they fall hard. Whereas betas or omegas in the same circumstances might be ignored or sneered at, the fate of an alpha is to be actively punished.

Up until now the alpha has been leaning against the doorframe but now he abruptly straightens up, spindly and skittering as an insect in his long black coat, and begins loping across the street in Will’s direction. Will glares at him in return then strides off at a slightly faster pace than normal, unpleasantly aware of the alpha’s voice as he trails behind after him: “Hey. Hey! Where you going little omega? Where you going?” It doesn’t vary much in either pitch or register, just drones on and on in an unsettling sort of crooning noise – Where you going? Where you going? – and Will wonders whether he’s on drugs of some kind. Nevertheless this is an extremely bad start so he reaches into his coat pocket for a woollen hat, tugging it down over his forehead to cover his hair before removing his glasses and stowing them in the other pocket and finally flicking up his collar to hide his throat. Then he ducks his head slightly and quickens his step, even though the chant is still there – Where you going? Where you going? – winding through the air and trailing after him the entire time like a living thing before it reaches a pitch of mournfulness and abruptly cuts off halfway through like someone flicking a switch. Somehow this sudden silence manages to be even more unsettling than the chanting and in spite of himself Will can’t resist glancing over his shoulder to see what’s happened: and where he’s genuinely disturbed to see the way the alpha has just ground to a halt in the middle of the road, his tattered coat streaming out behind him like the wings on the murder of crows. He sways slightly then seems to finally register Will looking at him and immediately cranks back to life and raises an arm straight in his direction. His fingers are long and almost unnaturally elongated in the manner of claws, and he brandishes them in agonised silence as his mouth works helplessly up and down before the silence is suddenly shattered and he screams out: “You shouldn’t
Oh fuck off, thinks Will with genuine anger. Although there’s something so eerie and unsettling about the spectacle of the swaying, screaming alpha – so terrible yet somehow so tragic – that he can’t quite bring himself to yell it aloud as intended and in the end just turns round again and speeds up even more until he’s turned the corner and the site for the rendezvous is straight ahead. It looks even less inviting close up than it did through the car window, but he doesn’t slow down – doesn’t pause or waver – because the fact an alpha can now identify him as an omega merely by smelling him reiterates the urgency for a fresh supply of tablets and has raised the pressure to acquire them to a pitch that’s vaguely feverish in its intensity. In this respect he can still hear the alpha screaming, although by this time it’s no longer words anymore as opposed to just a wailing stream of incoherent syllables that seem to be gushing from his mouth like vomit. The sound is both unnerving and distressing by turns, yet despite the volume and incessant desperation of it no one else looks round or even seems to care. And notwithstanding the importance of the errand and the frantic need for the tablets, it’s then that it really begins to dawn on Will that he might well just have made a terrible mistake in coming here. But it’s too late to back out now – everything’s always been too late; most of his life has been too late – and so he carries on down the street with a kind of helpless, mechanical resolution until a voice hisses out: “Hey pal. You got the time?”

Seeing as this is the pre-agreed code there’s no doubt that this is the dealer appeared in person; and which means Will has to give the pre-agreed countersign about a broken watch, despite feeling like a colossal idiot the entire time for engaging in something so embarrassingly melodramatic. Seriously though, surely such subterfuge isn’t really necessary…no doubt the dealer has watched a few too many spy movies and got carried away. In fact his appearance certainly indicates that he might have done: a paunchy middle-aged man in a tracksuit that the designer clearly intended for someone several decades younger (and several pounds lighter) with the kind of damp-looking parchment pale skin that rarely sees the sun. Easy to imagine him in a basement somewhere with a plate of day-old pizza and the James Bond marathon on TMC, his pale face illuminated by the glow of the screen as his mouth opens and closes reciting the dialogue he’s already heard a dozen times before…

“Nice,” says the man, abruptly cutting into this rather pointless train of thought: although whether he’s referring to Will’s acquiesce to the spy-script, or the fact he turned up at all, or even Will himself (oh God, though…surely not?) is impossible to say. “You got the cash?”

Will averts his eyes from where he’s trying not to stare too obviously at the assorted crusty stains on the dealer’s tracksuit (and trying even harder not to speculate about their possible provenance) and raises his head. “Of course,” he says irritably, struggling to stop his impatience showing. “You got the…” Then he falters slightly, because while it seems like it might be a bit risky to blurt out ‘tablets’ in the middle of the street he’s struggling to find a satisfactory alternative (‘merchandise’ being straight out of a bad gangster film and ‘stuff’ sounding impossibly juvenile).

“Oh course I got them,” snaps the dealer before Will can get any further; and that on the face of it seems rather rude, but which Wil’s actually pretty grateful for in this case because it saves him the trouble of having to come up with the right euphemism (pills…goods…gear?). Oh Christ, this is tedious – why do people even bother doing illegal drugs if you have to go to this sort of trouble to get them? Not least hanging out with grunting assholes who look like they live under a rock and expect you to talk to them in code like they’re cosplaying GI Joe. “Not here,” adds the man as Will reaches into his coat pocket. “Jeez pal, are you crazy? You want to get us both arrested?”

Seeing as Will is in no real risk of getting arrested he doesn’t actually bother to reply to this. It’s virtually unheard of for omegas to be charged for these sorts of misdemeanours after all – in fact he’d just have to start bleating about not knowing any better (possibly pretend to cry) and then they’d definitely let him off. Worse-case scenario is that they’d send for the Named Alpha, which in this
case would be Jack…although admittedly that would still be pretty bad, not least because the level of effort involved in getting Jack to fall for the fake wailing and bleating might well prove fatal. Nevertheless possession is one thing and intent to supply is quite another; and for a beta like the dealer clearly is, a prison sentence would be almost inevitable (alphas, after all, not tending to look kindly on anyone helping omegas to suppress their heats). He therefore follows into the alleyway without complaint, despite the fact that every nerve has begun twitching and straining with reluctance and he’s briefly overcome with an urge to call the whole thing off and say he’s changed his mind.

“What are you waiting for kid?” barks the dealer from over his shoulder. “Move it why don’t you?” The words make Will realise how far he’s inadvertently lagged behind, so forces himself to speed up while trying to ignore the way the walls of the alleyway seem to soar up skyward all around him, lurching in crazy disarray from where subsidence and general neglect has made them swell and sag. In turn they’re so blackened – so sullied and corroded from years of factory fumes and diesel – that they give the illusion of blending into the darkening sky and no matter where he looks all he can see are curdling shadows with the occasional misty sliver of streetlamp. There’s a fierce smell of despair and decay: relics of other people’s wretched lives and deaths and overhead the sky groans and whimpers with the threat of thunder. Will glances up at it, hoping to catch a glimpse of Orion and his dogs, then squares his shoulders and forces himself to strengthen his resolve. You can’t go home empty-handed, he thinks desperately. You need them, you NEED them.

Contrary to both hope and expectation the alleyway isn’t empty but is instead littered with a motley collection of betas, most of whom are in their late forties and all of which appear to be in the same advanced state of desiccation as the dealer. The way they veer through the shadows and swarm around makes there seem to be more than there actually are – one moment five betas, the next moment ten – and when they’re not doing that then they’re propped up against the wall with packets of cigarettes and cans of beer where their eyes catch the streetlamps and look as if they’re glinting.

“What’s the problem honey?” shouts one of them as Will walks past. “Your alpha won’t leave you alone?” Will grits his teeth and fights against the urge to snap something aggressive in response before reluctantly admitting that any kind of argument will achieve nothing beyond prolonging the ordeal even more than necessary. “Can’t say I blame ‘em,” adds the beta, who’s mistaken Will’s angry silence for embarrassment. “If you belonged to me I wouldn’t keep my hands off you either.”

The surrounding betas collapse with laughter at this remark as if it’s some kind of cosmic witticism, and Will ignores them with the same blank indifference as before and gestures at the dealer instead. “Come on then,” he says sharply. “Where are they?”

“Aww, look at him,” observes one of the betas. “Ain’t he cute? I don’t normally get to see one so close up. It’s not fair, is it darling? The alphas keep you all for themselves.” Will takes a deep breath in an effort not to lose his temper then deliberately turns his back on them and raises his voice. “I asked you a question. Where. Are. They?”

“Chill out kid,” replies the dealer insolently. “I told you I got ‘em. You show me the cash.” “You show him yours and he’ll show you his,” shriek the betas before dissolving into laughter again. “S’only fair.” Will grits his teeth even harder then wordlessly retrieves the wad of bills from his pocket and waves it rather scornfully in front of the dealer’s face without actually handing it over. “Eighty, like you said,” he adds. “Now stop wasting my time.” “One fifty,” replies the dealer without missing a beat. “Price has just gone up.”
“Ain’t you never heard of inflation?” yells one of the betas.

“Course he hasn’t,” chimes in another. “They can’t read.”

In the resultant shrieks of laughter Will can feel his stomach turn over with a lunge of unhappiness but with an enormous force of effort refuses to let it show and tips his head back instead in order to regard the dealer with barely-concealed contempt. “We agreed 80,” he says, calm but firm. “That’s all I’ve got.”

The dealer begins to smile: a slow sickly contortion of the mouth that spreads across his face like grease across a skillet. “No baby,” he replies after a pause. “No, that ain’t all. You got more than that.”

Will’s breath catches and in spite of himself he automatically takes a step backwards as the dealer’s oily smile spreads even further. “Now don’t be that way,” he says coaxingly. “No reason we can’t work something out. How about you come a bit closer and be nice to me, and in return I let you have it at a discount?”

Once again Will fails to reply: merely stands there in the silence as the seconds stretch out and the betas jeer and laugh while the dealer leers, and all the time consumed by an awareness of how the reason for his muteness has altered so dramatically from before. Because this time it’s not from fear, or even revulsion, but more from a sense of shock as within himself he can feel something rupture and shift. It happens so easily too. In fact that’s the shocking part: how smooth and effortless it is, like the turning of well-oiled gears. Something ineffable that’s icy cold and flinty sharp, comprised of bone and blood and writhing with the same pitch-black grace as the crows. Something that murmurs, almost tenderly, in a voice that doesn’t sound like his and in words that shouldn’t belong to him: How about you give me what we agreed and in return I let you live?

“See it as a form of social work,” the dealer’s now saying in a mocking voice. “You go back afterwards to your nice big house and your nice rich alpha and you get the satisfaction of knowing you did something charitable for the less fortunate. I mean how else is someone like me ever gonna get within spitting distance of an omega? Besides,” he adds, abruptly becoming more serious at the thought of the money. “It’s not like you’re gonna get them anywhere else. Why’d you come to me in the first place? You know as well as I do there’s been a big lock-down on these things.”

Will frowns slightly but once again refuses to answer. In fact he doesn’t entirely believe the last part – there’s always a way if you’re desperate enough – but what he does know is that there’s no realistic prospect of finding an alternative supply within the next 48 hours; and by then it’ll almost certainly be too late. He can hear his heart beginning to pound in his ears in a weird, unnerving way and as he stares at the dealer’s snering face it takes him only seconds to decide what he’s going to do. Then he flicks his eyes around the scene, calculating the various requirements with rapid speed before leaning back on his heels and dipping his head again in a convincing performance of defeat. “All right,” he says, and his voice in his own ears sounds very far away. “What do you want me to do?”

The dealer, sensing victory, takes a step forward in a gesture of casual possessiveness that makes Will want to scream. “It’s not complicated baby,” he says earnestly, rather as if he thinks they’re sitting down at a board table to thrash out business terms as opposed to negotiating sex-for-drugs in a godforsaken back alley. “Just simple math really: either you buy them for 150, or you get down on your knees for me – and you make it good – and I give you them for 80 like we agreed.” He takes another step closer and this time actually darts his tongue over his lips. “And if you let me fuck you then I give you them for 80 and throw in an extra packet for free.”

“What a bargain!” chorus the betas. “What a deal!”
“You should go for that honey,” adds a second one. “Have a drink to celebrate.” She mockingly tosses her bottle at Will (who neatly catches it and slings it back again) then waves her hands flamboyantly in the dealer’s direction like someone announcing royalty. “Ain’t no one else gonna risk pissing off the alphas by selling you those things. Not in this shitty town.”

“And not at that price,” adds another. “Anyway you lot like nothing better than having something to bend over for. You should be paying him.”

Will darts them a look of loathing from beneath his eyelashes, but as tempting as it might be to try and take them out, six against one are not good odds by anyone’s standards and without a weapon his chances of success are extremely limited. “Fine,” he says instead, then dips his head down even further and allows his shoulders to sag – not too much, not enough to be obvious – but enough to make his frame shrink down slightly, as if he’s beginning to wilt, before adding: “But not while they’re here.” The betas start to clamour with noisy disappointment and Will growls internally before working a slight tremor into his voice, coughing as if he’s embarrassed and wants to hide it, then makes himself droop a bit more and follows it all up with a mournful sighing noise for good measure.

The dealer, as predicted, falls for it immediately. “Fuck off you guys,” he says, rounding on the betas. “It ain’t no peep-show.” Their protests grow even louder in response and the dealer holds up a hand to indicate they be quiet while running his eyes leisurely over Will’s face – obviously noting how pale he’s gone while completely mistaking the reason for it. “I’m serious,” he adds sharply. “Beat it.” Then he reaches out even further, his features arranging themselves into a repulsive leering expression as he begins to stroke his palm across Will’s shoulders. “This one’s shy.”

“Shy!” shriek the betas. “Are you crazy? None of them are shy. They all drop on the floor and spread their legs for the first alpha that looks at them.”

“No,” replies Will in the same flat, mechanical voice.

“You heard him,” adds the dealer fondly, beginning to massage the side of Will’s wrist with his thumb. The betas renew their complaints even louder than before and Will, in turn, goes completely rigid with the effort of not seizing hold of the man’s arm in order to wrench it down and to the side, rupturing the annular ligament in the process as the ulna bone snaps in half. It’s so easy to imagine it too: the sound it would make as it splintered apart…

“Relax baby,” says the dealer, seeing Will’s set, frozen expression and once again drastically mistaking the cause. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“No,” says Will quietly. “I know you’re not.”

Something about the ominous tone of voice makes the dealer glance warily at him, and Will bites his lip at being stupid enough to let his true feelings show before ducking his head even further until the tip of his chin is touching his chest. At the sight of what appears to be submission the dealer makes a satisfied noise then reaches up and casually tugs off the hat, completely oblivious to Will’s hiss of anger as he feels grubby fingers beginning to tangle against his scalp. “Nice,” says the dealer approvingly. “They always say omegas have pretty hair. It’s your genes or something isn’t it? It’s ‘cos the alphas like it.” Without waiting for a reply he spins round and jerks his thumb in the direction of the street. “You guys. Fuck. Off. I’m not gonna ask you so politely the next time.”

Grumbling mutinously the betas begin to assemble their assorted belongings of bags and beer cans.
then take their time in ambling towards the top of the alleyway, yelling the occasional mocking comment to Will as they go. “I guess I should be apologising for them,” says the dealer, renewing his stroking motion on Will’s wrist. “No manners at all. So we’re on our own now sweet thing and you’re gonna have to help me out here. You have to tell me how omegas work.” Will stares back silently and the dealer takes another step closer. “What, ain’t you got nothing to say? Jesus you really are shy aren’t you. Okay, for starters: is it only the alphas that get you excited or can anyone do it? Yeah, you with me now? You like the sound of that, huh baby? You don’t need to do that bashful thing with me.”

Will bites down so hard on his lip he can taste blood then forces himself to wait a few more seconds until the betas’ voices have faded away before violently jerking his arm free and spinning round. “All right,” he says sharply. “First off – the pills. I want you to prove you’ve got them.”

Possibly the dealer’s surprised by Will’s abrupt change in manner now the others have left, although if it’s the case he gives no indication. “I’ve got ‘em,” he says soothingly, attempting to tug Will backwards by the hand. “I told you I did. Now come here...come here baby, nice and close. I want you up against the wall.”

“No,” snaps Will. “I want to see them.” No point, after all, in wasting time rifling through the man’s pockets – or, even worse, potentially making off with the wrong package.

“Suspicious aren’t you?” says the dealer irritably. “I thought you lot were supposed to be better at doing what you’re told?” Will just raises an eyebrow in lieu of a response, and the dealer sighs in annoyance but nevertheless leans down to root around in a mildewed-looking leather satchel that Will hadn’t even noticed was there to retrieve a pill bottle that’s chipped and smeared and somewhat scuffed round the edges and yet – Will breathes a sigh of relief – still has the familiar pharmacy stamp across the front.

“And the second one,” he adds firmly; and when he speaks again it’s impossible to keep the contempt out of his voice. “You told me I could earn two.”

“I did, yeah,” replies the dealer with obvious satisfaction. “There you go: two bottles as promised. Now that’s it, baby. Done. Time to get yourself ready.” He sets them down on the lid of a nearby dumpster where the yellow glass glints in the soft glow of the streetlamps and Will can’t help staring at them with longing before flinching as he feels thick fingers clamping round his wrist again.

“You’ve got little bones,” adds the dealer thoughtfully. “Delicate. Omegas are meant to be delicate. Are you delicate everywhere else?”

“No,” snaps Will, unable to contain himself any more. “Although you wouldn’t be the first to make that mistake.”

“Oh yeah? Like it rough do you? Is that why you want those pills – your alpha not giving you what you need?” And then, when Will doesn’t reply. “You’re seriously uptight baby. You know you’re not as pretty when you’re frowning; you know that right? Why don’t you relax? Just smile and make yourself look nice for me and I’ll make sure you enjoy it.”

“I somehow doubt,” says Will coldly, “that you’re going to be able to do anything for me that I’ll enjoy.”

“Oh fuck you,” snaps the dealer, his previous good mood abruptly dissolving. “You spoilt little bitch, don’t you dare give me any of your stuck-up omega crap. Jesus. You think you’re all so goddamn special just because the alphas lose their shit over you. Well I don’t see any alphas here now.” Reaching out he seizes a fistful of Will’s hair, twisting his head back so he can press his face against the base of his throat before giving a deep sigh of satisfaction. “You smell so good baby. Too bad for
you that I’ve got you trapped in here after you pissed me off; I don’t feel so inclined to be sweet to you now. You’re gonna have to work real hard to make it up to me.”

Will takes a deep breath and for a moment it’s as if the world goes still as he stares up at the sky: stares up at the faint trace of Orion and his dogs, at the ragged streaks of cloud and the way the sky is dappled with streaks of purple and grey as the sun sets and everything goes dark. Then he lets out the breath and snaps back to life: startlingly aware, just in those few seconds, of how his usual sense of himself has faded away as someone else arrives instead.

“Hey, hold still!” snarls the dealer. “Hold still. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Jerking fully upright Will knocks the man’s hand away then grabs hold of his collar and tugs him roughly forward until their faces are only inches apart: breathing one another’s air and eyes locked together in a danse macabre of mutual mistrust. Caught badly by surprise, the dealer doesn’t react immediately and Will makes the most of the brief disorientation to lean even closer in. “You got it wrong,” he says, his voice frighteningly low and intense. “I’m not trapped in here with you. You’re trapped in here with me.”

The dealer makes a strangled yelling noise that’s meant to sound intimidating but which Will can easily tell is layered with an undertone of fear. Then some primitive, primeval siren seems to sound inside the dealer’s mind and he begins to struggle in earnest: flailing and thrashing in an increasingly desperate attempt to pull away as Will neatly rears his head back then brings it smashing forward into his face. It connects to his nose with a sickening crack as the fragile bone shatters and collapses in on itself, and the dealer howls with genuine pain and terror as Will pivots round again – supple and fearless with the lean, leonine grace of a panther or leopard – and delivers a vicious kick to the kneecap to make him lose his balance before punching him square in the jaw and sending him plummeting down to the ground. The dealer screams again, a hideous clotted-sounding noise from his damaged nose, and Will draws back his foot to deliver a series of brutal kicks to the ribs as the dealer begs for mercy before abandoning words entirely and simply howling in fear instead. Then for a few seconds Will just stands there, motionless and victorious and consumed with something like awe over the savage grace of it. Because there is: he’s always thought so. How swiftly, simply and beautifully a human body can be breached and broken apart. The sense of life and soul even in the midst of dying. Here the exhilaration; there the sense of reckoning. The knowledge that justice can be meted out anywhere – in books or plays, the hallowed lofty spires of the Supreme Court, or the filth and abandonment of a back alley. And the rush and the righteousness, and the power and purpose…and the way that the blood looks black in the moonlight.

A few more beats of silence follow in which there’s nothing to hear except the subdued whimpering of the dealer and the softer sound of Will’s breathing. Then he abruptly snaps back to life for a second time and pockets the tablets before stooping down and twisting the dealer’s face round by the chin so they’re staring at one another. “Listen,” says Will softly. “And understand this. If you ever try to do that to someone else, then I will come back for you. And I will kill you.”

The man begins to nod in something like a frenzy before quivering and cowering as he tries to pull away. “Say it,” snaps Will in the same low voice.

“Sir, I understand. I won’t sir…I won’t ever…”

It’s beginning to rain now. Endless droplets as if the heavens themselves are crying…streams of tears dyed silver by the moonlight and which set up a relentless pounding rhythm that ricochet off the crumbling bricks and course against Will’s face in rivulets. Not that the analogy is any use though – not really. Because of course the sky isn’t mourning. Nature doesn’t care: it lacks either pity or mercy, just like so much else. Just like God, to whom elegance is more important than suffering
because that is his design. Straightening up Will contemptuously drops the wad of dollar bills onto the ground in front of the dealer’s huddled body then steps over him and walks out the alleyway without looking back.

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It’s not until Will’s cleared the city and is over halfway home that the reality of what he’s done fully hits him. In fact it’s less like being hit as opposed to being sucker punched and the intensity of it is such that he needs to swerve over to the side of the road in order to take some deep steadying breaths before reassuring himself that, yes, of course he was in control the entire time; and of course he could have stopped – and did stop – before things got out of hand; and that everything, in conclusion, is absolutely fine.

“He deserved it,” says Will out loud; and this much at least seems undeniably true so he says it again, then adds “Thanks to you he’s less likely to do that to anyone else” for good measure, followed by a determined little nod. Only it seems a stretch too far to actively give himself credit for what he’s done – considering the way he felt while he was doing it – so in the end he just falls silent again and closes his eyes, tipping his head back against the seat as fractured images from the last hour veer through his head in crazily kaleidoscopic array. Behind his eyelids is the face of the dealer, blood-stained and tear-streaked (or was it only the rain?) as he lay groaning and grovelling on the paving stones. But then that’s not right either because the groans weren’t really groans at all but actual words: clotted and indistinct but speech nonetheless. Please. Please…Don’t kill me…I don’t want to die like this.

Will’s eyes abruptly snap open and he takes another, deeper breath. No – he never actually said that; he knew Will wasn’t going to kill him. He never said that.

As he stares ahead Will catches sight of his reflection in the rear view mirror and for a few seconds finds it impossible to look away because there’s something deeply unsettling about it that reminds him of that night in the elevator when he was sick and Hannibal had to drive him home: how he’d glanced into the door panel and been so unnerved by the haunted face and gleaming eyes that stared back at him as a furtive, guilty part of his brain whispered What if he can tell you want to kill someone? What if he can see it in you? And now…here it is again. As if it never went away at all in fact, but has been there the whole time: baited-breathed and hollow-eyed, watchful and wary and patiently lying in wait.

A sudden scream of tyres from beyond the window makes Will jump violently, and it’s at that point he can feel himself starting to panic as he desperately tries to tell himself that the reflection is just an illusion – a trick of the light caused by the shadows and the ghostly glow of the headlamps. Only when he glances back it’s still there, and for a few feverish seconds it feels as if the mirror isn’t a mirror at all but rather a window with a stranger peering through from the other side: a stranger that looks a bit like him, yet is nothing like him at all, and which gazes back with a sense of quiet exhalation that could easily beat a man to death in an alleyway with the same casual thoughtlessness as someone snuffing out a candle. Then he blinks a few times and the image is gone and it’s just him again, sad and strained and pale with a rapidly blooming bruise on his forehead that’s trickling blood from the force of the earlier impact. It’s fine, thinks Will firmly. That’s not me. It’s NOT. Then he realises he’s saying it out loud and that the thing in the mirror – whatever it is – doesn’t even believe him anyway and has reappeared to gaze at him defiantly with its weirdly glittering eyes and gore-streaked face. Notice me, it says, this stranger in the mirror. Know me and notice me and accept that I’m there. There’s an eerie duality to it: these twin versions of himself that shouldn’t feasibly be able to coexist and share the same body and yet in that single moment appear to not only be achieving it, but excelling at doing so and even deriving a level of satisfaction in the opposition. So eloquent and plausible in their competing principles to the extent there’s almost a kind of artistry in it: laureates of a double life.
And suddenly…it’s all too much. The ache in his head feels like it’s screaming now, blending and merging with the near-constant abdominal pain to create a symphony of suffering which howls and pulses in a discordant crash of desperation that’s almost unbearable. Staggering out the car, he collapses onto his hands and knees at the side of the road and throws up.

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It takes Will a long, long time to pull himself together. Far longer than would normally be the case, even though ‘pulling yourself together’ hardly seems the right term for it when it’s more like being pulled apart at the joints and the task is how to wash the component pieces clean and reassemble them into soothingly sterile normalcy. *Carving nature at the joints*; isn’t that an expression? He’s sure he’s read it somewhere. Carving, sculpting, a Sculptor…oh Christ.

“I’m dying,” says Will out loud. “These tablets are *killing* me.” Fortunately the extreme melodrama of the statement is enough to finally make him get a grip on himself – the verbal equivalent of a slap to the face – and he calms down sufficiently to restart the car and drive the rest of the way home in careful silence and without any of the previous messy hysteria. After all, nothing’s *really* happened. The guy wasn’t even badly injured enough to lose consciousness and it’s not as if a drug dealer being foiled in sexually coercing vulnerable customers is a bad thing. Even his reflection has returned to normal now, although somehow the memory of it still lingers and he finds himself darting the occasional anxious glance in the rear view mirror as if he’s afraid of catching another glimpse of it. So pale and watchful as it was, and so incredibly knowing. *My dark mirror image*, thinks Will vaguely; then frowns at himself for being so far-fetched and imaginative. All that’s needed is to adjust the dosage on the tablets and possibly look into getting some sedatives prescribed. Stronger painkillers too. More sleep, better diet: it’ll be *fine*.

As he pulls up into the yard Will spots a sleek dark car parked close by and is immediately aware of a subliminal sense of comfort that’s confusing for being so dramatically at odds with his initial alarm at who the hell it might be. *Andrew*, he thinks with horror. Oh God, how is it even possible? Then it’s not until he sees the license plate and logic and emotion catch up with one another – because he’s realised that, of course, it’s Hannibal’s car – that he remembers the earlier appointment and feels a further surge of relief flow through him like blood after a transfusion. Because surely, somehow, Hannibal will make it okay? Without being fully aware he’s doing it he twists the rear view mirror until it’s facing completely away from him, then gets out the car and runs off towards the house.
Chapter 7

Despite the sleekly looming presence of the Bentley there’s no immediate sign of Hannibal himself, and Will has a few moments of confusion trying to work out where he could possibly have gone—which involves a lot of frowning and sighing while swivelling his head from side to side in an unintentionally exaggerated way like a meerkat—before realising that he’s actually been sat on the porch bench the entire time: so finely blended into the shadows in his dark coat that all Will’s initially aware of is the faint gleam of his eyes as they shimmer in the darkness like a cat’s. In fact the impression they make is somewhat striking, and serves to remind Will that while he’d rather be flogged half to death before admitting it he actually quite admires Hannibal’s eyes. If he’s honest he pretty much always has, although perhaps this is hardly surprising considering how much time he’s been forced to spend staring into them. Hours and hours in fact, whether in the office or from across a room or raising up from the gruesome remains of some crime scene or other: Hannibal’s eyes as a constant presence the entire time with their fathomless stare and vivid intensity, rather as if there’s flecks of fire distilled behind the lens, all framed by enviably thick lashes, and which are not only capable of seeing flawlessly without a need for glasses but, also unlike Will’s, are of an exotic shade that’s not at all easy to describe. A prosaic term for them might be ‘chestnut,’ although they’re actually a very rich deep brown with a faint flush of crimson when the light catches them a certain way. In this respect it’s not uncommon for alphas to develop a maroon tint to the irises when in rut but Hannibal seems to have it all the time.

“I’m sorry I’m a bit late,” Will finally announces into the darkness. “I, um, got held up.”

Hannibal’s eyes remain gleaming from their position on the bench for a few more seconds before abruptly elevating as he draws himself up to his full height then slides out of the shadows and into the light of the doorway. The movement is extremely rapid and causes Will to inadvertently take a step back before reproaching himself for being so stupid and returning to his previous position; and then moving even closer than he was before, just for good measure. Then he frowns slightly, unsure why he felt compelled to pull away. Why did he do it? It’s hard to say for certain. Perhaps it’s just that there’s occasionally something intimidating about the way Hannibal moves: silently graceful yet eerily fast and shot through with a carefully controlled hint of menace, rather like something dark and unknown that darts around beneath the surface of water which otherwise remains smooth. Will blinks a few times, somewhat taken aback at this sudden realisation—although in that moment, it doesn’t occur to him to ask why the instinct to move closer again was even stronger than the one to retreat. From far beyond the fields is the sound of screaming: possibly foxes engaged in battle, or even some fearsome nocturnal bird spearing its prey. But whatever it is the rawness of the noise is horrible and gnaws at his frayed nerves on-and-on-and-on in a way that’s almost unbearable as in his mind the culprit slowly morphs into a vicious amalgam of both fox and bird: claws and feathers and bright black eyes, with a dripping mouth and grasping claws—a composite creature of breath and bone and skin and shadows. Oh God, those fucking tablets. He feels like he’s going a bit mad.

Hannibal, on the other hand, seems undisturbed by the screaming and merely moves a little closer himself before smiling slightly as an indication that Will’s lateness is not a problem. Then he slowly regards the blood on his face and for a few seconds his eyes appear to flash with a spark of...what? What would you even call it? Fascination? Possibly that’s too strong...call it curiosity. Then it’s gone so quickly that Will starts to suspect he just imagined it after all and Hannibal has promptly reverted to Doctor Mode instead and is calmly asking Will what’s happened.

“I got into a fight,” replies Will, who’s feeling much too tired and careworn to come up with a less dramatic excuse. Hannibal makes a sympathetic noise before his eyes flick briefly towards the pill bottles and Will flushes and hurriedly stuffs them into his coat pocket. “Someone, um, they tried to
steal my wallet.”

“I’m sorry.” Hannibal’s eyes slowly swivel away from the bottles and back to Will’s face.

“It’s fine,” says Will firmly. Then he adds “No harm done,” in an even firmer voice, because it’s true (of course it is). Nevertheless, and despite the awkwardness of the moment, he can’t help feeling grateful for the calmly pragmatic tone of the question – especially when compared to the lavish hysterics that someone like Jack would almost certainly be having by now. Oh God, it’s so easy to imagine it: Jack’s patented blend of concern that’s invariably well-meant but too easily crosses the line from kindly to condescending and from alarmed into lecturing. ‘You’ve been doing what?’ Jack would be saying now, possibly accessorised with an accusing finger wagging straight in Will’s face as if he’s an errant five year old. ‘You got into a fight with who? Well did you hurt yourself?’ Hannibal, on the other hand, clearly has no interest in either patronising Will or admonishing him for being in a risky situation and his expression of concern is limited to the more practical variety that involves simply gesturing at Will’s forehead and announcing: “It’s still bleeding. Would you like me to take a look?”

“No,” says Will. He’s realised now, far too late, that he’s still wearing that fucking hat and can’t quite decide whether it’s worse to stand there brandishing it in full view or rip it off and stuff it into his pocket (the latter option having the advantage of stopping Hannibal from seeing any more of it, but the disadvantage of suggesting a degree of self-awareness on Will’s part that he shouldn’t have been wearing it in the first place on the grounds that no sensible adult leaves the house in the type of thing a blind grandmother might have knitted for you. Not to mention the numerous sagging folds and the hollow at the very top...Jesus. It looks like a woollen foreskin). Hannibal’s eyes slowly track across Will’s face with a faintly quizzical expression, either at the sight of the cut or possibly the foreskin hat (God knows anymore) and Will defiantly adds: “It’s fine. It’s nothing. Just a scratch.”

“It’s a little more than that,” replies Hannibal in the same leisurely tone. “Although you should let me examine it for my own sake rather than yours, because if you can bear to humour me for a short while then I will be able to pretend that I’m still a proper doctor.”

Will huffs out a laugh then shuffles his feet against the splinterly wood of the porch while trying to avoid catching Hannibal’s eye. In fact he fully intends to refuse again – and he really does intend to – yet somehow still finds himself following Hannibal into the kitchen without further complaint; even perching obediently on one of the chairs so his head can be tipped back while the cut gets inspected from various angles. Hannibal’s hands are surprising gentle – deft and cautious in the manner of an artist or surgeon – and Will stifles the sigh he wants to make without even knowing why he wants to make it until Hannibal finally releases him and announces that the wound doesn’t require stitches.

“I told you so,” says Will, who’s now beyond exhausted and is trying to resist the temptation to sink forward so he can lean against Hannibal’s chest.

“You did, although it’s always better to check. Do you have a first aid kit to hand? It still requires cleaning.”

“Yeah, there’s one somewhere. Try under the sink. And thank you; I appreciate it.”

“It’s really no trouble,” says Hannibal casually. He retrieves the kit from its dark hiding place and brings it back to the table (upon which they discover it’s lain fallow for so long that it requires an extensive combination of coaxing, cunning and outright force to persuade it to open, and which elicits an assortment of irritated snorts from Will accompanied by a series of feline smiles from Hannibal) then carefully dabs some iodine onto the broken skin with one hand while stroking a palm against Will’s shoulder with the other at the resulting hiss of pain.
“Make sure you keep an eye out for any signs of infection,” adds Hannibal, “but otherwise it should heal up fairly quickly.” He pauses for a few seconds and once again Will feels the faintest hint of pressure against his shoulder blade. “I don’t suppose the same can be said for your assailant?”

“Actually he’s fine,” snaps Will. “I hardly hurt him at all.” Hannibal’s Sphinx-like smile briefly reappears and Will promptly realises, far too late, that such defensiveness means he’s just walked straight into the verbal trap set up for him and confirmed Hannibal’s obvious suspicion that the confrontation was far more serious than Will is letting on. But Hannibal, contrary to expectation, makes no attempt to pursue it beyond giving a brisk confirmatory nod (although the faint half-smile takes a little longer to fully disappear) then just finishes cleaning up the cut in calm silence before stepping back and letting Will get out of the chair.

“The dogs,” says Will rather awkwardly. “I should feed them.”

“Of course,” replies Hannibal. “Although at some point you should consider feeding yourself as well.” He leans back against the edge of the table as he’s speaking, all long limbs and casual elegance, and Will can’t help thinking how anyone else would look as slovenly as hell in the same position whereas Hannibal manages to drape himself about like an artist’s model. Then he wonders how consciously done it is; whether Hannibal deliberately arranges himself to look as striking as possible or if it’s just natural grace? Everything he does is so considered that it’s hard to imagine even something as simple as his posture to be entirely accidental; but then it’s likewise difficult to credit him with being genuinely preoccupied with whether people find him attractive or not. Most likely it doesn’t mean anything and Will is just over-thinking things as usual.

“Are you going to get anything to eat?” prompts Hannibal, who has now shifted from Casually Elegant mode to Dashing Glamour mode simply by pressing his palms on the table top and leaning back slightly on his forearms. Honestly; how does he manage it? It’s like…witchcraft. “At the very least you should have some fluids. You’ve lost a quantity of blood after all.”

“Yeah, I guess” says Will vaguely. Lost some blood: it sounds so odd if you think about it too much; as if the blood has slipped away when he wasn’t looking and is now sat somewhere on its own, patiently waiting to be reclaimed. And Hannibal’s really staring at him now, a single eyebrow beginning to slowly elevate…oh God. “I should do, yeah,” adds Will, trying to rally a bit. “What about you. Are you hungry?” Then he mentally inventories the contents of the kitchen and gloomily decides that trying to do anything constructive with them extends the frontier of his culinary capability by several miles. “I could order something in?” he suggests after a pause. “It’ll take a while to arrive, but if you wanted…”

“Order something in?” repeats Hannibal, announced with a look of horror that Will feels would’ve more appropriate for him proposing they go out and forage by the highway together for a bit of roadkill. “You mean a take-out?”

“Well…yeah,” says Will. Hannibal’s other eyebrow begins to ascend to join the first and Will watches its progress while silently trying to work out at what point ordering takeaway meals became a sign of unspeakable depravity.

“Let me arrange something,” adds Hannibal firmly; and which seems like a sensible solution, although Will can’t help feeling he ought to object to it on principle given that Hannibal’s the guest and Will is the one whose responsibility it is to feed him. But then again it’s not like he’s the one expiring with horror at the idea of a perfectly respectable pizza (honestly, you really would have thought he’d suggested harvesting roadkill. Week old roadkill…radioactive zombie roadkill that needed to be taken out with a head shot prior to consumption). So in the end just waves his hands around rather haplessly without saying anything, and which Hannibal naturally takes for agreement.
before proceeding to root around Will’s kitchen with the kind of casual familiarity that Will suspects he ought to find invasive but which actually feels rather comfortable – the sort of thing a friend would do. Hannibal, in turn, politely refuses all offers of help so Will just props himself up by the kitchen table and mentally wishes Hannibal good luck in trying to persuade the assembled items of ancient eggs, a wedge of cheese sweltering sadly in its cling-film wrap, and a wilting bag of shop-bought salad to transform themselves into anything resembling an actual meal.

“Do you want a drink?” he says after a few minutes silence. Because surely a drink is the least of what Hannibal will need if he’s going to take those eggs on; including, but not limited to, wrestling with their uncertain provenance and undeniable antiquity. Will takes a surreptitious glance at them while Hannibal’s searching through the cupboard and promptly feels rather appalled on their behalf. They look like fucking dinosaur eggs.

Having located a grater Hannibal has begun to deftly slice the cheese into a little bowl; and while it really shouldn’t be possible to perform such a mundane task as grating cheese in an elegant way, needless to say he somehow manages it. Rather as if, thinks Will incredulously, grating cheese is an act of the upmost solemnity deserving of hallowed lamplight and a soundtrack of choristers (Exhibit B: witchcraft).

“Are you having one yourself?” asks Hannibal without turning round.

“I was going to get a beer, yeah,” replies Will, although even as he’s saying it he can’t help silently acknowledging that this probably wasn’t what Hannibal had in mind when he suggested fluids. Oh God, does that mean a lecture is in the offing over the incompatibility of alcohol and head injuries? It probably is. In fact it almost certainty is. And it’s exactly the type of thing Jack would say, as if Will is so hapless he can’t be reliably trusted to act in his own interests.

“Then one for me also,” says Hannibal. “Thank you.”

Will blinks a few times, partly because the expected lecture clearly isn’t forthcoming and partly because he can’t really imagine Hannibal knocking back Budweiser and is now half-wishing he hadn’t suggested it. “What, you wouldn’t prefer to have wine?”

“In light of our previous discussion I’ve resolved to stop drinking wine in your presence,” says Hannibal in an exaggeratedly serious tone. “See what lengths I will go to keep you happy?”

Will can’t help laughing at this, then finds himself relaxing slightly and goes to retrieve two bottles from the cupboard before neatly using the side of the counter to knock the caps off. “You’ll thank me in the end,” he adds as he hands one over. “All those boring wine conversations.”

“Y-e-s,” replies Hannibal with a slow smile. “I dare say. By the way, I don’t suppose you have any limes?”

“Limes?” says Will, wondering if close confinement to such plebeian beer has made Hannibal go a bit mad. “What?”

“I want to dress the salad.”

“Oh. Right, yeah.” Seriously though…limes? Hannibal raises his eyebrows expectantly. “Sorry, I don’t. No.”

“Never mind,” says Hannibal, casting his eyes around. “You have some vinegar here, that’ll do instead. So how are you anyway, beyond this evening’s…altercation? I believe you wanted to discuss the case.”
Will makes an affirmative noise, although the reality is that the stress of the past few hours has diluted the impact of that enigmatic scrap of card to such an extent that he can scarcely find the energy to mention it. “Perhaps some food first?” adds Hannibal, noting how pale and tired Will suddenly looks. “If you want to go into the living room I’ll bring it through.”

Will smiles appreciatively at this suggestion and then, as an attempt to contribute something proactive to the evening’s entertainment beyond bottles of cheap beer and an absence of limes, not only goes to the trouble of building up a fire and turning on all the side lamps to give the room a soothing, ambient glow but patiently fiddles with the radio until he’s finally able to locate a classical music channel. The table’s piled too high with stacks of books and papers to do anything useful with, but hopefully Hannibal won’t mind sitting on the sofa and eating off their knees instead like students (although no doubt even when Hannibal was a student it was all five course meals and evening dress). In this respect he appears a few minutes later balancing two trays against his forearm in a waiter-like gesture that Will finds rather endearing in comparison to the usual brand of aloof elegance – and where it becomes apparent that he’s somehow managed to renovate the paltry contents of Will’s fridge into cheese omelettes and a cunningly flavoured salad, as well as resuscitating an ancient loaf by transforming it into garlic bread.

“This is delicious,” says Will, trying not to sound too surprised. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” replies Hannibal, “although it’s nothing especially worth commending.” He pauses, critically examining the plate from several angles. “This is extremely basic.”

“You sound rather distressed about that,” says Will, forking up the omelette.

“Rest assured I am crying inside.”

“Yeah, I thought you might be.”

Hannibal smirks slightly then takes a delicate mouthful himself before leaning back against the sofa so he’s at a better angle to watch Will: currently hunched over his plate and devouring the contents like someone half-starved. The bruising looks more subtle in this light; rather as if an artist has taken a very fine brush and blended shades of amethyst and crimson around all the exquisite bone structure to throw it into sharper relief. Although it would take an artist of considerable gifts to adequately capture the fierce glint of vitality that makes Will so luscious and luminous despite his obvious exhaustion. It energised you didn’t it, thinks Hannibal with interest as he flicks his eyes across the injuries. Kindled an impulse and aroused an instinct, even if you can’t admit it – or even acknowledge that it’s there. Then he carefully files this information away for future use and returns his gaze to Will’s eyes and lips instead, idly trying to imagine how that yearning for destruction might manifest itself in more intimate ways. In this respect he decides that Will is almost certainly one of those rare omegas that become aggressive during their heats and attack the alpha. The phenomenon often appears as a discussion point in medical journals: the extreme viciousness with which such omegas bite and scratch and how difficult it is to settle them down to the extent they’re willing to take a knot. Clinically it’s presented as a pathology for which medication is required, but in this instance Hannibal finds the idea appealing because of how incredibly pleasurable it would feel to be attacked by Will; and, even more so, finally persuading Will to allow himself to be overpowered.

“What?” asks Will abruptly. “You’re staring at me.”

“Yes, I suppose I am,” replies Hannibal in a leisurely voice.

“Well it’s rude,” says Will with a hint of triumph.

“You are quite right; I apologise. You caught me deep in thought.”
“About what?”

“The case,” lies Hannibal with smooth plausibility. “I’m wondering what was different about this one to make Jack Crawford so keen for a consultation.”

“Don’t you mean me as well?”

“Not at all. You sent a single message only.”

“Yeah, well, sorry about it regardless. I shouldn’t have bothered you at work.”

“You didn’t; although my curiosity has been piqued so you might as well tell me now. I suppose the body was discovered in an unusual location? Somewhere far out?”

“How did you know?” says Will before he pauses and smiles. “Oh yes of course: the timing of the calls.”

“Correct,” says Hannibal. “They clustered together and the interval between them implied you were probably all travelling in the interim. So this one was found – where? The countryside?”

“Yep. Not that far from here actually.”

“And was there anything else that was different?”

“Yes, there was…’’ Will pauses again then carefully replaces his fork onto the plate. “There was a piece of card on the body.”

“And?”

“And it had my initials written on it.”

“Did it?” says Hannibal crisply. He leans forward, obviously intrigued. “And you believe it’s a reference to yourself?”

“I don’t know. It could be a coincidence. Jack thinks it is.”

“That is, of course, a possibility.”

“If he wanted to contact me there’s far more effective ways of doing it.”

“Again; that is undeniably true.”

“And yet…”

“And yet you are not entirely satisfied. Which is fine, because neither am I.” Almost imperceptibly, Hannibal moves a fraction closer. “So, if it is a reference…why do you think that might be?”

Another pause. “Why would the Sculptor be drawn to you?”

“I guess because I’ve been publically linked to the case.”

“But then so have many others. Why not JC on the card? Or, for that matter, HL. Why you?”

“I don’t know.” Hannibal waits a few more seconds, eyebrows very slightly raised. “I don’t,” says Will.

“Then perhaps it really is nothing more than a coincidence,” replies Hannibal lightly. “It might be
that we are scrabbling for patterns where none exist.” Will doesn’t reply immediately and instead just runs his hand across his face suddenly looking extremely wan and drawn. “It’s unsettled you hasn’t it?” adds Hannibal in a gentler voice.

“Not just that,” says Will pensively. “To be honest it’s been a weird sort of day.”

“I can tell.”

“Hmm.”

“You look less well than usual,” adds Hannibal with careful tact. “And while I’m aware you won’t want to hear it, you really should consider reducing your use of those suppressants. The side effects are even more pronounced then when I last saw you.”

“You’re right,” snaps Will. “I don’t want to hear it.” Then he hesitates himself and briefly looks uncomfortable. “Sorry. It’s just that I…it’s…” He falters again then sighs and shrugs, abandoning any attempt at explanation. “It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure it is. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No,” says Will, looking even more forlorn as he briefly considers the scale and scope of his various problems. “Not really.”

Hannibal waits a few more seconds, privately rather fascinated at the way his previous sense of protectiveness is becoming blended with a surge of possessiveness at the idea of anyone trying to impose on Will (except for himself, obviously) that’s almost breathtaking in its intensity. “It’s fine,” adds Will in a flat, mechanical voice that doesn’t sound remotely convincing. “I’m fine.”

“I hope you won’t be overly offended by this suggestion,” says Hannibal after another delicate little pause, “but do you require gentling?”

“Why?” snaps Will with a degree of bitterness. “Because I’m an omega?”

“Naturally because you are an omega,” replies Hannibal serenely. “I’m hardly offering because you are A Will.”

Will tries to summon the energy to be affronted by this until he catches Hannibal’s eye and can’t help starting to laugh. “I’ve performed similar services for a number of patients,” adds Hannibal. “It can be rather useful in times of stress.”

“Well…I guess…okay then,” Will hears himself saying; even though this isn’t entirely what he meant to say. He then does nothing to save the situation by following it up with: “Only if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” replies Hannibal, ultra-casual.

“Thank you,” says Will, who now seems faintly bashful and is struggling to hide it. “I guess I’ll probably find it helpful.” Then he smiles a little more and runs his hands absent-mindedly through his hair. “Honestly though. ‘A Will.’ It sounds like some kind of weird rare breed.”

“Indeed. Although I suppose it really ought to be The Will – considering there is only one.”

“I suppose one is more than enough.”

“Undoubtedly,” says Hannibal, who’s beginning to smile as well. “Now: what would you like me to
“I don’t know. Just…whatever. What do you normally do for patients in these situations?”

“In these situations, I am guided by their personal preference.”

“Well just do whatever you usually do.”

“But I want to know what you would like,” replies Hannibal, whose smoky voice is now so low and resonant he virtually sounds like he’s purring. “In fact I can’t help feeling you need a little more practice in learning what it is you enjoy.”

“I enjoy plenty of things,” says Will defensively.

“Yes? Then you should have no trouble identifying this.”

“Touché,” says Will, starting to smile again. “You’re so annoying sometimes. Have I ever told you that?”

“I believe you’ve mentioned it once or twice, yes.”

“Well just so long as you know,” replies Will amiably. “Okay then…let me think.” He goes quiet for a few seconds, obviously mulling the question over, and Hannibal waits in silent, patient anticipation with the same faint smile on his face. “I quite like having my shoulders rubbed,” says Will eventually, while neglecting to add that no one’s ever actually done this for him so it’s only based on guessing what he might like. “And my back as well.”

“What about your scalp?”

“Sometimes,” says Will, pretending to think about it. “But not too hard.”

“That sounds like it should be manageable. How would you prefer to sit?” Will looks bemused and Hannibal’s mouth quirks into another slow smile. “I mean to say – where. Here as you are? Or on the floor?”

“Oh right, yeah. Here is fine.”

“Then turn round a little so you’re facing away from me.” Will falters for a few seconds then obliges before drawing up his legs so he can prop his chin on his knees, appearing to shrink a little in the process. “A bit closer please,” adds Hannibal in an invitingly low-pitched tone. “Closer. There, that’s perfect. How very tense you are Will: why is that? Does this make you feel self-conscious?”

“I suppose so,” says Will vaguely, quivering slightly as he feels two warm, firm hands slide slowly across the thin material of his shirt. “I guess it feels a bit weird.”

“Not especially. Or at least only as much as you wish to make it.”

Will makes a non-committal humming noise then settles his face more comfortably against his knees; completely unaware as he does so that Hannibal is busy inspecting his neck for any bites or scratches that would indicate the attempts of an unknown rival alpha to make a prior claim. As it turns out the skin is pale and unblemished and beautiful, although it’s still not enough to stop Hannibal internally snarling at even the thought of someone else being in touching distance of this most precious of possessions. Reflecting on this, Hannibal decides that when he bites Will himself it’ll be necessary to open and re-open the wound several times to ensure the scar is as deep and vivid as possible. Undoubtedly it will hurt – Hannibal gives a soft caress of apology across Will’s neck in anticipation
of future suffering – but it’s unavoidable nonetheless, because it has to be made as clear as possible that Will belongs entirely to him. At this point Will, possibly unsettled by the associations of an alpha touching his neck, shifts warily and looks as if he might be on the verge of pulling away; so Hannibal gives his neck a final stroke as a farewell gesture then moves upwards to Will’s head instead – and where he briefly closes his eyes with satisfaction at having finally achieved what he’s been anticipating with the greatest amount of pleasure for some time now, which is running his fingers through Will’s hair. Will leans up into the touch and Hannibal carefully suppresses the sigh of admiration he wants to make and concentrates instead on memorising all the different shades concealed within in: rich bands of chestnut, the occasional coppery strand of auburn and even one or two faint traces of blond entwined with the more prominent sable and chocolate tones. There’s so much of it too, and while not quite as soft as anticipated has a very pleasing thickness and lustre that more than makes up for this.

“Mmm. S’nice,” says Will sleepily.

“Ah, The Will approves.”

“Yeah, good work – you’ve pleased The Will.”

“I shall bear that in mind,” says Hannibal. “With considerable satisfaction, I might add, because I believe it’s probably easier to please The Almighty on occasion than it is to please The Will.”

Will makes an amused noise then tips his head back far enough to be able to see Hannibal’s face. “That’s a very defeatist attitude you’ve got there Dr Lecter. They do say ‘where there’s a will there’s a way.’”

“They do say that,” agrees Hannibal, gently smoothing Will’s hair out his eyes. “However, they have also under-estimated that a will is hardly the same as The Will. So for that reason I’m not inclined to take them very seriously.”

“Defeatist,” repeats Will, with a hint of smugness. “You are one of The Defeated.”

“Very true – although at least you must admit that I am gracious in defeat. As it happens Jack Crawford asked if he could come to my office tomorrow. He was attempting to be humorous: ‘I don’t want therapy’ he said, ‘I just want somewhere to sit for an hour with my head in my hands.’ I shall now have to tell him that it won’t be possible on the grounds that I intend to sit there with my head in my own hands as a result of prolonged exposure to The Will.”

Will laughs again then resettles himself so he’s leaning forward once more and Hannibal can run his palms up and down his spine. “I might join you,” he says. “In fact you’ll probably have a queue of taskforce members wanting to do the same.”

“Yes, I suppose this new murder is going to escalate the tension,” replies Hannibal. Slowly he allows his fingers to trail down Will’s ribs – then does it a second time because he like the way it makes him quiver – before returning to his spine again. “And how is the profile progressing?”

“It’s not.”

“No? No further thoughts about your copycat hypothesis?”

“Not really,” says Will fretfully. “To be honest when I saw the card I did wonder whether there might be a link to one of my past cases – the mutilations would be consistent with a couple of them – but it doesn’t make all that much sense. I mean why copycat any of those guys? They were hardly what you’d call renowned. Not like…oh I don’t know.” He falls quiet for a few seconds, clearly
considering the best example. “Do you remember the Chesapeake Ripper case?”

Hannibal pauses almost fractionally before resuming the slow motion of his hands; although not even a flicker in his voice betrays any trace of interest as he replies: “They never caught him did they?”

“They didn’t, no. But someone like him... In his case, I could understand the inspiration of a copycat.”

“Oh?” says Hannibal. Slowly he trails a finger down the side of Will’s throat. “And why is that?”

“Because he was unique,” replies Will without hesitation. “The violence was so extraordinarily controlled. I’ve never seen anything like it; none of us had. I still haven’t seen anything like it.” Briefly he closes his eyes as he attempts to re-envisage the police reports and the crime scene photos, swathed in tattered tape that fluttered in empty air. The initial impressions, the instincts, the narrative that had emerged from each imprinting... so vivid and vital when torn from behind the dry typescript and photocopied pages, like a gothic Grand Guignol tragedy performed just for him – the only one who could see it. Then he makes a subdued groaning sound because the pressure from Hannibal’s hands seems to be all over his skin at intervals, almost – but not quite – painful.

“There was an artistry to what he did,” Will finally adds and his voice sounds faint and faraway; as if he’s reciting something hewn from within himself that’s been endlessly rehearsed internally and is only now being uttered aloud. “An elegance. They were tableaux: the way something was presented mattered as much to him as what it was he displayed.”

Hannibal slides a palm lower down Will’s spine with one hand then takes hold of his shoulder with the other until Will is forced to lean back and allow Hannibal to take most of his weight. The sudden urge to have Will close to him makes him far rougher than intended, although if Will notices this he doesn’t appear to mind. Instead he instinctively shuts his eyes as his head tips backwards, completely unaware of how near he is to Hannibal’s face until he speaks again and Will feels warm breath ghosting against his cheekbone.

“What else?” asks Hannibal softly.

At some vague level it occurs to Will that this sort of earnest rhapsody about such a gruesome subject is bordering on inappropriate, but the words are spilling out now and he can’t seem to stop them. “The Ripper murders configured death as art,” he replies in the same intense voice. “Yet also as arbitrary; they were his grand arrangement and everyone was equally deserving. Sadistic yet virtuosic; theatrical yet meticulous.... it was like he wanted to transmute the vulgar and banal and make it beautiful. Something that warranted exhibition.” Then he finally processes what he’s just said and flushes before abruptly falling silent as Hannibal’s breath, faint as gossamer, continues to brush the side of his face. “Oh God, look, just ignore me,” says Will unhappily. “I’m really sorry. I lose myself in this stuff sometimes. I must sound so morbid.”

“Not especially,” replies Hannibal. Sighing rapturously to himself, he gently skims his palms across Will’s shoulders and down his arms as a reward for being so utterly... perfect. “You speak as you find: the impressions may be disturbing, but then so is the object of scrutiny. Besides, it often happens that true tragedy acquires the artistic elements of beauty. You understand that don’t you? You don’t see the world the same way he does – yet you can assume his point of view.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to my world,” says Will drily. “I’m sorry to drag you into it.”

“Oh the contrary,” replies Hannibal. “I got here on my own; but I appreciate the company.”

Will gives a small nod but otherwise doesn’t respond and Hannibal continues rubbing his shoulders
in comfortable silence in which there’s nothing to hear except the low crackle of the fire before a sudden impulse makes him want to try and touch Will’s neck again. Recalling the assorted lectures on omega biology he’s been obliged to sit through over the years he begins to carefully curl his fingers round the back of it: alternating the pressure at intervals and then smoothing his palm across the small ridge of bone at the top of Will’s spine. And unlike the last time, Will not only allows it but reacts even more beautifully than hoped for by growing completely soft and pliable beneath Hannibal’s hands – even making the tiniest hint of a moaning sound in a way that seriously tests Hannibal’s self-control. Without releasing Will’s neck he lets his other hand slowly stray downwards towards his shoulders; and where he’s rewarded all over again by the way Will trembles slightly then leans trustingly back into the touch.

“That’s it,” says Hannibal softly, almost unbearably charmed. “Good boy. You’re doing so well. Just try and relax.”

“Mmm. I like this,” replies Will, rather unnecessarily.

“I know you do, The Will – I can tell.”

“Don’t call me The Will. It makes me sound like a comic book character. The Flash, The Hulk…The Will.”

“Noted.”

Will smiles again then closes his eyes and settles further backwards until Hannibal’s bearing nearly his entire weight. “I bet you don’t even know what a comic book is.”

“I am aware. Although I suppose it won’t tax your sense of surprise to know that I’ve never actually read one.”

“To be honest I don’t think I have either. Or at least I might have done when I was younger…I don’t really remember.”

This concept in itself is something of a gift and briefly causes Hannibal to close his own eyes in fascinated introspection at the image of a teenaged Will, all long limbs and uncertain passions – the forlorn foal that wistfully grazes away from the rest of the herd – who yearned for connection while fiercely and defiantly eluding it. Not so much different from now in that respect, yet much more unrestrained in it: like a beautiful wild wave dashing itself against a tidal wall.

“I wasn’t much into that stuff,” adds Will vaguely.

“I would be interested in hearing more about your childhood sometime.”

“No you wouldn’t. It’s honestly not that interesting.”

“I find that rather hard to believe.”

“Why should you?”

“Why do you think?”

“No reason at all,” replies Will firmly. “In fact it’s like you said earlier: you’re looking for patterns where none exist.”

Hannibal smiles to himself then moves his hands upwards to gently cradle Will’s head between his palms before deftly trailing his fingers across it like he’s attempting to chart each cleft and ridge of
the skull: occipital bone, parietal bone, up along the jaw then straight across the forehead.

“So you say,” murmurs Hannibal caressingly.

“I do say.”

“And yet this mind of yours didn’t just spring to life in adulthood fully formed. Did it Will?” Will shifts irritably beneath his hands, obviously resenting the contradiction, and Hannibal delicately increases the pressure while resisting a strong temptation to lean down and brush his lips against Will’s forehead just to see how he’d react.

“You referred before to the Chesapeake series,” adds Hannibal softly. “The elements of alchemy in it…purifying and reifying the base elements into the noble ones. You can’t bring yourself to admire an impulse like that; yet see how you do it yourself every day? The way you walk into the shadows. Collude with them. Converse with them. Engage and empathise with them – don’t you Will? Then emerge again with your spirit unbroken and your reason preserved. You have the capacity to wrench ugliness out of the world and leave something beautiful in its place: transforming what is unworthy and useless into something artistic.”

“I guess.”

“You guess, do you?” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to skim his palms along Will’s back and dipping a little further down each time. “What, nothing else to say? Although perhaps you’re right to be so circumspect; perhaps we should end the conversation here and leave the themes to their own devices. Remember, after all, what Nietzsche had cause to observe about it: He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not himself become a monster.” He runs his fingers along Will’s throat again then smiles very faintly. “And when you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you.”

“Not really,” says Will firmly. “No.”

“Naturally no,” replies Hannibal with another smile. “Besides, I suppose the idea of the fallen hero is much too clichéd for your tastes. We can keep you in the role of the warrior seeking justice instead; or would you prefer to be a rebel? It doesn’t really matter, does it Will? You can still keep your perceptions of your monsters to yourself and appreciate their design without becoming them.”

“Of course,” replies Will irritably. “Besides this thought experiment of yours is missing the point, because I don’t meet them on their own terms.”

“Indeed not. You meet them on Jack Crawford’s don’t you?” Hannibal pauses then deliberately lets his thumb brush against the edge of the cut on Will’s forehead. “At least…most of the time.”

“That’s completely different. It’s not the same at all.”

“None of it is really the same,” says Hannibal softly. “After all, the original quote is from a collection entitled Beyond Good and Evil; and they are not independent forces in the way the Jack Crawfords of the world would like to claim. Creating a sense of self, for example; one’s construction of one’s humanity and what it is to be human. That would be seen as an absolute locus of good and evil – as their battleground – yet identity is not merely a process of curating various moralities: it is a representation of art. A monster, therefore, lacks artistry. Just like the Sculptor, in fact: so artless and graceless and pointless. And yet there’s no moral outrage which, in the right hands, can’t acquire the aesthetic properties of beauty.”

“Retain your artistry and resist the abyss,” says Will sardonically.
“Perhaps. After all, you know as well as I do that the particular monsters you pursue always end up destroyed by what they are.”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” replies Will shifting slightly beneath Hannibal’s hands. “It’s why Jack hired you after all.”

“Of course,” says Hannibal in the same low voice. “My intention has always been that you don’t end up destroyed in the same way. Rather I wish to see you…elevated.”

“Yeah,” says Will tonelessly.

“You don’t agree?”

“I’m not overly optimistic, no. Not that it really matters. I can live without elevation after all; in fact I’m pretty happy to just keep rambling along where I am.”

“What very modest ambitions you have Will,” says Hannibal, beginning to gently run his fingers through Will’s hair. “I suspect we can do better than that.”

Will shuffles uneasily and makes a vague noise of dissent, although it’s equally striking that he makes no effort to pull away. In fact if anything he’s doing the opposite – leaning further in until he’s just a hairsbreadth from resting against Hannibal’s chest – and the obvious unconsciousness of it finally distracts Hannibal from his previous train of thought and reminds him instead of the numerous monographs he’s read about the impulse omegas supposedly have for being concealed and sheltered. In fact there’s a whole industry devoted to it: nesting supplies and canopied beds, not to mention the realms of specially-lined curtains and coated bulbs intended to dim the room and keep it snug and secure. Not that Will ever shows much concern about such seclusion – the way he strides through fields and runs through forests or stands alone on podiums in cavernous auditoriums – yet perhaps the instinct for it lingers regardless. You could have all of those things if you needed them, thinks Hannibal with a rare surge of tenderness as he imagines the time that Will is finally removed from here and safely installed in Hannibal’s own house instead. And anything else besides; you only have to ask. I would always give you whatever you wanted.

“I’m sorry,” murmurs Will, drooping further backwards before unknowingly disappointing Hannibal by jerking straight up again. “I’m starting to fall asleep.”

“Indeed you are,” says Hannibal fondly. “Although at least you’re more relaxed now.” Will makes a quiet noise of agreement then disappoints Hannibal even further by pulling away entirely so he can curl himself into a ball at the other end of the sofa. “I should go,” adds Hannibal, taking care not to sound too regretful about it.

“Sorry,” repeats Will, somewhat muffled and indistinct as sleep begins to overtake him. “It’s been a long day.” Although aren’t they always? It’s a stupid expression anyway; even the longest day can’t exceed the same 24 hours of the previous one after all.

“I understand,” says Hannibal. There’s an undertone of gentleness in his voice that’s not usually there, although on this occasion Will’s far too tired and preoccupied to notice it. His head is still almost within touching distance, and Hannibal is surprised – and not entirely pleased – by how tempting it is to try and reach out in order to stroke his face; possibly even begin to twine a strand of hair round his finger. Look what you have done to me Will Graham, he thinks, slightly amused. You have managed to subvert every expectation I have about myself — and yet I can’t bring myself to begrudge you your success. Then he sighs and internally rolls his eyes at himself before gesturing discreetly towards one of the pill bottles which at some point has fallen from Will’s pocket and rolled across the floor. “If you do fall asleep, be sure not to leave those out,” he adds pointedly. “The dogs
might get hold of them otherwise.”

Even by the dim lamplight the resulting flush on Will’s face is clearly apparent: a rather charming tinge of pink on both cheekbones. “Yeah I know,” he says after a pause. “I won’t.”

“And don’t store them in direct sunlight.”

“Oh. That I didn’t know. Thanks.”

“I was about to ask if I could use your bathroom,” says Hannibal airily. “If you like I’ll put them in the cabinet for you; or wherever else you usually keep them.”

Now that he’s more alert again Will can’t help but notice the tone in which this is said – ostensibly tactful with a lingering trace of sympathy – and it leads to the strong conclusion that Hannibal has already intuited the link between the pill bottles and his damaged face. Needless to say he isn’t entirely comfortable about this, although it’s some consolation that Hannibal’s obviously recognised it isn’t any of his business and doesn’t intend to ask about it. Then he’s tempted to tell Hannibal to just leave the bottles where they are, only it seems a bit churlish to refuse the help when it’s been offered. Not to mention the fact he’s so tired and the opportunity to just remain where he is and doze in front of the fire is incredibly tempting. Besides, perhaps allowing Hannibal to take them might be interpreted as a gesture of solidarity – of friendship – and is a simple way for Will to demonstrate trust and familiarity in his presence? So in the end he just gives a small smile and says “Thanks, that would be helpful: the bathroom is up the stairs and the first on the right. If you could just leave them in the cabinet over the sink?”

“Of course,” replies Hannibal. “And stay where you are and get some rest, I’ll show myself out.” Picking up a throw from one of the chairs he hands it to Will so he can wrap himself up in it; a gesture he would rather have liked to perform himself if he wasn’t aware that Will would never allow it. “I shall see you soon, no doubt.”

“Hmm. Soon,” replies Will whose eyes are already closed.

Hannibal lingers on for a few seconds more (supposedly so he can fasten his coat, but really so he can stare at Will) then silently vanishes from the room and prowls up the stairs. It’s extremely tempting to use the opportunity to inspect the content of some of the rooms, only the chance of detection is too high to risk it; and after quick deliberation he decides to limit himself to a glance into what he assumes is Will’s bedroom. One of the dogs, slumbering across the rug, raises its head to growl resentfully at the intrusion and Hannibal narrows his eyes at it with dislike before swivelling his gaze back to the room again. As expected it’s mostly austere and functional with few attempts made by Will to imprint traces of his personality on it – no keepsakes arranged in cheerful disarray across the shelf, no books on the bedside table, and the few pictures on the wall possessing the same attractive yet impersonal aesthetic of those found in hotel rooms. Nevertheless he’s interested to see a large wingback chair by the window; unremarkable in itself except for the positioning of the slats, which curve round to an extent that whoever’s sitting in it would be partially obscured. Given his earlier reflections about omegas’ needs to conceal themselves it’s hard not to interpret this as Will’s means of doing the same and he finds the image of it unexpectedly touching: Will’s slim body curled up in the chair, possibly with his legs pulled up to his chest, attempting to find a sense of shelter in a world that’s confusing and arbitrary with its casual cruelties. To Hannibal’s refined eye the chair is extremely ugly and evokes a fastidious shudder at the idea of having it in his own house – although he knows he would still allow Will to bring it with him if he wanted it. And hopefully such artefacts should become completely unnecessary in the long-term, given that he fully intends Will to be able to get all the sense of security and protection he needs from Hannibal himself. Not that you require all that much, amends Hannibal with interest. In fact considering the obstacles he faces, Will’s self-
sufficiency is rather remarkable.

This reminds him of what he’s actually come upstairs to do, so he regretfully turns round and silently retreats down the hallway where he locates the bathroom without further delay. Once inside he flicks on the light and places the bottles on the window ledge, regarding them meditatively for a few seconds like someone eyeing up an opponent before a fight, then reaches out to deftly twist the safety locks off both lids. It’s unfortunate that Will has obviously gone to such extreme lengths to obtain them, although of course it can’t be helped. *You should have come to me first*, thinks Hannibal as he examines the tiny print on the labels. *I would have taken much better care of you. At least – better than you can provide for yourself.*

Not that this is especially surprising. Will, as is typical with many omegas, has clearly been conditioned to feel tremendous amounts of shame and guilt around his sexuality and encouraged to only view it in terms of the effect it has on alphas rather than something for him to enjoy on his own terms. It will do him good to get reacquainted with the more carnal aspects of himself: everything that’s raw, primitive, instinctual, and – most importantly – uninhibited by society’s pointlessly confining rules about conscience and propriety. At the thought of this Hannibal permits himself a faint smile, because in the long-term sexual desire is only one amongst a number of other far more interesting impulses and having Will in a position to enjoy his own body is going to be nothing compared to watching him enjoy his own mind.

Admittedly though all this is still in the future, and a far a more immediate concern is to avert the inevitable collision course that’s lurking in these toxic tablets. So without wasting any more time Hannibal tips the bottles’ contents onto the ledge and spends a few seconds rapidly calculating the dosage: a task considerably complicated by the fact that – common with illegally traded supplies – they both contain different strengths, with 50mg of synthetic progeratone in one and 40mg in the other. But if things are to proceed as planned it’s vital that no errors are made, so Hannibal vetoes his usual custom of never bothering to double-check his mental computations (because of course they’re invariably flawless) and goes through it twice to ensure that the numbers come out correctly relative to the timespan he has in mind. In this respect such caution is for Will’s sake as much as his own, because it’s imperative that things don’t move so fast that Will is left vulnerable and unprotected and catches the eye of an alpha at the wrong moment. Or, more specifically, any other alphas.

*It’s for your own good my dearest,* thinks Hannibal serenely and without a trace of guilt as he removes a third bottle from his coat pocket and begins to carefully substitute the desired number of tablets from Will’s supply with a quantity of identical-looking ones he’s been carrying around for some time now in anticipation of an opportunity exactly like this one. Will is going to destroy his beautiful body if allowed to carry on in this way and that would be the most appalling waste; even if he had the right to ruin something that’s ultimately destined to belong to Hannibal – which, poor boy, he absolutely doesn’t. Hannibal narrows his eyes into little slits of displeasure at the thought then resumes counting out the pills.

Not that physical wellbeing is the only consideration of course, given that Will’s mind is the most valuable commodity in the equation. And this in itself is extremely interesting, because countless doctors must have warned him about the danger of psychological side effects from abusing the suppressants and it’s done nothing to deter him at all. Why does he care so little? Admittedly this current prescription also risks several side effects, but at least they’d be of a more refined and infinitely more fascinating kind. It’s impossible to say for sure what might happen, but the main thing is that Will is going to be feeling *much* better very soon. And Hannibal, in turn, will have the opportunity to oversee any results in the meantime – what emerges from the chrysalis, as it were – and which is undoubtedly destined to be something impressive. Something that burns brightly with a lethal luminosity all of its own; something fearless, ruthless and fiercely agile…all it needs is the proper encouragement.
With another smile Hannibal neatly replaces the safety catch on both bottles and stows them away in
the cabinet next to the empty ones currently there, then turns off the light and glides silently down the
stairs again to cast a final look at Will and admire the sight of the battle scars from this evening’s
altercation. He’s still curled up on the sofa, now in a deep yet restless sleep, and Hannibal’s
expression softens very slightly at the sight of him. Soon, he thinks; and it’s both a threat and a
promise. Not that the two things are necessarily so very different: both an expression of constancy
and commitment as they are, and both seasoned with devotion to a favoured cause…the murderer
and the martyr of the same dedication. No doubt things are going to be difficult for Will to begin with
– self-discovery, after all, being a painful enterprise for anyone with even a fraction of his
intelligence and sensitivity – and yet there’s really no remaining option. Because to constantly
renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to
inflict; and while it requires a degree of audacity and fortitude to tolerate whatever pain might result
from the knowledge, it’s far more preferable and profitable than the agony of constant, mindless
denial.

Will stirs fretfully as if unsettled by the force of the scrutiny and Hannibal takes a single step closer to
glimpse a clearer view of his face. That striking face curved around the delicate skull which houses
the beautiful mind. And such a beautiful mind; even though Will can only see it as distorted and
dysfunctional – as monstrous – and defensible merely in terms of its effectiveness. He doesn’t yet
understand the possibility of inspiration; how to thrive rather than merely survive. But I can show
you, thinks Hannibal with calm determination. Turning round he casts one final lingering glance then
closes the door behind him to keep Will safely locked inside and silently leaves the house.
Chapter 8

BIZZARE NEW TWIST IN GRISLY OMEGA MURDERS: IS FBI AGENT IN CONTACT WITH THE SCULPTOR?

By Freddie Lounds

In a spectacular new development the TattleCrime can officially confirm that the deranged omega killer known as the Sculptor has raised the stakes by communicating directly with the FBI. Or, more specifically, with one particular agent: TattleCrime favorite and maverick criminal profiler Will Graham, whose initials were written on a business card found on the body of the most recent victim.

An exclusive FBI source has confirmed that the enigmatic message is directed at Graham while also acknowledging that this remains a sensitive topic: “We all know it refers to him, but it’s not being proactively addressed because no one knows what to do about it. You could basically call it an elephant in the room – the fact that this maniac has chosen a colleague as the one he wants to reach out to. It’s not a very comfortable thought.”

While Graham has an impressive track record for his involvement in cracking several high profile cases, it’s long been the TattleCrime’s opinion that his psychological stability is in doubt. The fact that the Sculptor has chosen him as someone he wants to make contact with confirms that this is maybe a question the FBI should be asking itself as well…

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Jack slams his palm down onto the desktop with a dramatic cracking noise that echoes round the silent room with the same resonance of a gunshot. “So what I want to know,” he says quietly, “is how she found out about it?” The tone of his voice has an exaggeratedly soft quality to it that promises a spectacular explosion to come, and as he runs his eyes over the row of assembled faces there’s an uncomfortable shuffling noise as everyone collectively stares at their feet. “I sincerely hope,” adds Jack in the same menacing way, “that whoever leaked this enjoys their payoff from the TattleCrime. I advise them to enjoy it while they can and that they feel it was worth it. Because when I find out who it was – and rest assured I am going to make it my business to find out – I will personally see to it that they never work in law enforcement again.”

“With respect sir,” says Skinner, “it might not necessarily have come from within the taskforce.” His voice is marinated with all of its usual self-righteous smugness and it seems so misplaced in the current context that several people turn and stare at him with vague surprise. “An outsider could have told her and she invented an FBI source to add credibility to the story,” adds Skinner. “Or she might have just found it out on her own?”

“Oh I’m sure you’re right Mr Skinner,” replies Jack with impressive levels of sarcasm. “I’m sure Ms Lounds was able to infiltrate a highly protected and classified federal investigation all by her clever little self with no assistance whatsoever. No doubt she knows who the Sculptor is as well. In fact why isn’t she on the investigation? With those detecting skills she should be heading up the TST.”

“I’m just saying sir,” protests Skinner, abruptly shifting from self-righteous smugness to self-righteous woundedness in a matter of syllables. “Journalists invent things all the time; anything for a clickbait headline.” He waves his hands at the others in an obvious amirite guys? gesture. “They’re always doing it. It’s how they earn their livings.”

“But she didn’t invent it did she?” snaps Jack. “And unless she was able to convincingly imitate one
of you lot and prance round the crime scene without us noticing, then the only way she could have found out about it is because someone in this room told her.”

“I agree,” says Price. “We have a leak from inside the FBI.” Jack nods at him approvingly and Price drums his fingers on the table as his face begins to crease into a frown. “And it’s come from someone who not only has zero judgement about compromising a major investigation, but zero respect and loyalty towards a colleague as well.”

“It’s fine,” says Will. It’s the first time he’s spoken since the meeting started and everyone now stops staring at Skinner and turns round and stares at him instead. “I don’t care. Or at least – not for myself. But Price is right about the impact on the investigation.”

“The Price is always right,” says Price and Will’s face briefly arranges itself into a mournful smile.

“The whole thing is an outrage,” adds Jack with considerable venom. “And whoever you are…” He pauses and trawls his eyes across the room, inviting them to absorb the implications of his words. “Whoever you are, you are going to be exposed and forced to answer for what you’ve done.”

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“Gee Will,” says Siemens afterwards as everyone is gathering up their belongings and preparing to return to their own offices. “This sucks. I’m really sorry.”

“Thanks,” replies Will, trying not to catch his eye.

“If you ever want to talk about it? Y’know? They always say a problem shared is a problem halved. Or I guess that’s maybe not the best expression in this case, because even if was halved it would still be pretty big. Not that…well. Y’know. But if you ever did want to talk…?”

“Thanks,” repeats Will, struggling to sound a bit more sincere than before. “I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Okay then great,” says Siemens happily, who’s clearly taken this rather grudging acknowledgement as complete carte blanche. “You want to go get a coffee? We could go get a coffee?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have time at the moment,” replies Will, beginning to shuffle papers in a kind of frenzy.

“No?”

“No.”

“There’s always time to take care of yourself,” replies Siemens in an earnest voice and sounding so much like an infomercial that it’s almost comical. “There’s always time for that.”

“Yes…I know,” says Will. It would be an infomercial for something faintly pitiful that has to work far too hard to convince the viewer that they want to buy it. Toenail clippers or anti-dandruff shampoo: because there’s always time to take care of yourself. “But you see it isn’t the first time this sort of thing has happened,” he adds, trying to sound appreciative. “So I’m pretty good by now at not letting it get to me.”

“You’re a real hero Will,” replies Siemens in the same earnest voice and completely unaware that only the first half of Will’s statement is actually true. “I do admire you.”

Will gives an awkward smile then picks up his briefcase and waves his hand towards the door in a pantomime of someone in a hurry. “Another lecture this afternoon is it?” asks Siemens coyly.
“They’re always so informative.”

“You…watch them?” asks Will in barely-concealed horror.

“Oh yes,” replies Siemens with simple pride. “I always watch everything you do.”

“Right,” says Will, while praying that this doesn’t literally mean everything (…especially if it’s via binoculars and/or night-vision goggles). “Right. Okay then.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” adds Siemens hurriedly. “I mean, of course I won’t go if you’d prefer I didn’t? I’d never want to make you uncomfortable Will. It’s just that your work is so impressive, and while I’ve got a lot of expertise on the legal side I’d be keen to improve my awareness of the forensic stuff. I know I don’t have to; like, it’s not in my job description or anything, but…” He pauses hopefully, perhaps anticipating an offer for a private meeting which Will narrows his eyes and resolutely refuses to offer. “I figure if you have the chance to learn from the best,” adds Siemens sincerely.

“I’m sorry,” replies Will, trying to sound as if he actually is. “But I only have time for that kind of thing with the actual trainees.”

“Oh well, never mind,” says Siemens. He emits a little regretful sigh: a soft and airy thing that flutters from his lips like air seeping from a withered balloon. “Never mind Will. But if you ever do have a bit of time…”

“Sure.”

“And if you ever want to talk about the TattleCrime article, you give me a call.”

“I’ll do that,” says Will, edging up towards the door.

“Good,” says Price. “I’m glad you don’t care. I’m still sorry you’re having to deal with it though. It’s the last thing you need.”

“It’s not so bad,” replies Will vaguely. “I’ve had worse.” Although the implications of this are so gloomy that he starts to wish he’d never mentioned it, despite the fact it’s undeniably true. In fact he should probably just standardise it as a form of introduction when meeting people for the first time: ‘Hi! My name is Will Graham and you ought to know that I am constantly dealing with something
“Jack’ll find out who leaked it,” adds Zeller comfortably. “Then he’ll slice them into little pieces and feed them to Kade Purnell.”

“He will,” agrees Price. “And you know it wasn’t true, right – that bit about the ‘elephant in the room’? Most people just thought the initials were a coincidence, and I’ve certainly never heard anyone suggest the killer had some sort of sinister personal motive for wanting to contact you.”

“Sure,” says Will. Once again he’s impressed by how convincing he manages to sound, even though every internal impulse is insisting that Price is wrong and that’s exactly what people did think; not least Will himself.

“Whoever leaked it was talking out of their rectum,” adds Price firmly. “They were speaking directly from the sphincter. In fact such is their fluency I suspect they possess more than one; enough to supply an entire anatomical museum. Or a showroom, even, if there was a demand for such things.”

He pauses, realising that Will and Zeller are now staring at him with their mouths slightly open. “An emporium of sphincters,” says Price triumphantly.


“Quite,” says Price. “And seeing as Nature has been kind enough to supply Will with more than his average share of brain cells, I’m sure he’s not going to pay too much attention to the ramblings of anyone with more than his average share of sphincters.”

“Him,” adds Will. “Not ‘her’? You’re narrowing down your suspect list then.”

“I am. As, I suppose, are you.”

“You might say that.”

“Professional envy is a terrible thing,” muses Price pointedly as Skinner’s distinctive bony shadow goes loping past the door. “Although as we said – Jack will get to the bottom of it.”

“Yeah, forget about it Will,” advises Zeller. “No one takes the TattleCrime seriously.” Outside in the corridor the outline of Skinner can be seen beginning to retreat backwards towards the lab and Zeller abruptly cuts off as it grows larger and clearer until it eventually pushes open the door and turns into Skinner himself.

“Pass me that set of callipers would you Will,” says Price airily. “The hinges have gone on these ones.”

“Gentlemen,” announces Skinner, who always seems incapable of greeting any of them in a more casual way. “I hope I’m not interrupting?” Given that the tone of his voice makes it clear he wouldn’t be concerned if he was interrupting no one actually bothers to respond to this, and Skinner smooths down the lapels of his jacket in a pointlessly self-important way before waving a gaunt finger in Price’s direction and proceeding to deliver a pompous speech about the necessity of obtaining new copies of the toxicology reports by the following morning. “The paper trail has already gone completely off the rails,” adds Skinner accusingly. “You know as well as I do how complex this case is going to be when it gets to court.”

“The operative word in that sentence is when,” replies Price in a waspish voice. “Let’s concentrate on catching him first, shall we?” Skinner’s complexion, always slightly mottled, begin to swell and engorge in a way that bears an unpleasant resemblance to corned beef and Price smiles benignly and resumes doing mysterious things involving the new callipers and a stainless steel tray before adding:
“We should worry about the court case when we actually have an occasion for one.”

“I think you’re being rather ingenuous Dr Price.”

“Agreed,” replies Price politely. “I probably am.”

Skinner flounders for a few seconds and glares accusingly at Zeller and Will in their capacity as bystanders before beginning to repeat his request for the reports – seemingly for no better reason than not knowing what else to say. “You can have them when they’re finished,” replies Price. “For heaven’s sake hold your horses. Or calm your farm. Or whatever other agricultural metaphor you might prefer. But these reports are highly complex and Mr Zeller and I can’t simply magic them into existence to suit your schedule; which, I might add, is needlessly over-zealous.”

“I’m not disputing that it’s complex,” snaps Skinner. “But that shouldn’t be a barrier to efficiency. You’re forgetting yourself Dr Price; I’m not asking for your permission as opposed to your cooperation.” Price delivers a look that clearly translates as and you may have my cooperation – in my own sweet, sweet time. “Remember who first said ‘I’m less concerned with who’s going to permit me as who’d dare to try and prevent me’,” ploughs on Skinner.

This is so needlessly bombastic and over the top that Price’s lips begin to visibly twitch. “Dr Doom?” suggests Will politely.

“Ming the Merciless?” adds Zeller.

“J Edgar Hoover,” announces Skinner. “I suppose I don’t need to remind you that he founded the FBI.”

A long pause follows this statement. “Well carry on,” says Price. “Are you waiting for us to curtsey or something?”

“I want those reports,” snaps Skinner curtly. “Don’t force me to take the matter to Agent Crawford.”

“And you may have them when I’ve finished them,” replies Price, equally curtly. “It would appear this conversation has gone full circle.”

Skinner purses his lips then swivels round to stare at Will with a look of contempt that Will, in spite of his best efforts, can’t help but find vaguely unsettling. “And I hope you’re going to try and keep a lower profile after this morning,” snaps Skinner, who clearly feels undermined by Price’s insubordination and is looking for someone to take it out on. “The TattleCrime’s breed of publicity could be absolutely catastrophic for the investigation.”

Considering that he seems the most likely source of the leak the sincerity with which he says this feels even more unsettling: implying, as it does, that he’s either a disturbingly fluent liar or so unbalanced that he’d purposely allow his dislike of Will to demolish his professional judgement.

“Actually, Will’s whole job is doing profiles,” says Price sharply.

“And you can’t really blame me for it,” adds Will, refusing to drop eye contact despite an instinctive sense of aversion that’s urging him to pull away. “I’d suggest you save your outrage for whoever leaked it in the first place.”

“Your odd little reputation hardly helped though,” replies Skinner venomously. “Did it Will? Talk about fuel to the fire.” Will, to his infinite irritation, finds that he doesn’t have a ready answer to this and Skinner clears his throat and resumes smoothing his lapels in the resulting silence, seemingly oblivious to the looks of dislike currently beaming at him from three separate directions. “Those
reports, Dr Price,” he adds in a parting shot as he’s turning to leave. “On my desk as quick as you can; I don’t expect to have to ask you a second time.”

“Well honestly,” hisses Price once Skinner has finally slunk out the lab again. “I’d like to punch that man right in his face.”

“Why the face,” asks Will, attempting for levity to disguise how uneasy he feels. “What’s wrong with in the balls?”

“A good point,” says Price, nodding furiously. “A very good point and well made. And while I’d normally be advocating for the pen as mightier than the sword, that display in his jacket pocket suggests Mr Skinner is rather partial to pens so the sword it’ll have to be.”

“Unless it was to shove the pen in his cranium,” suggests Zeller helpfully. “Hey, you okay Will?”

“Fine,” replies Will in the usual automatic way.

“Don’t let him get to you.”

“I won’t.”

“He’s a loser. He’s just jealous.”

“Yeah.”

“Well no more toxicology screens in this lab today,” adds Price, dropping the papers Skinner is after into the filing cabinet and defiantly slamming it closed. Will gives a small smile then resumes aimlessly leafing through his own stack of reports until he hears Zeller repeating his name and glances up again.

“I meant to tell you earlier,” Zeller is saying, “but there was a guy here yesterday asking about you.”

Will goes completely still for a few seconds before starting to turn the pages over slightly faster than before. “Oh yeah?” he asks casually. “Who was it?”

“He didn’t give his name. Just said he was an old friend of yours.”

To his disgust Will realises that his hands have started to shake so puts them flat on the table to try and hide it. “What did he look like?”

“I don’t know really. Just…a guy.”

“Well was he tall? Short?”

“Pretty tall I guess. Taller than you.”

Will swallows audibly then nervously darts his tongue over his lower lip. “Did he have an Australian accent?”

“No, he was American.”

“Oh okay,” says Will, visibly relaxing. “So what did he want?”

“Like I told you; he just said he was an old friend trying to look you up. I wondered if he might be a journalist to be honest, so I told him we couldn’t give out any information about Behavioral Science staff. What, not even whether they work here? he said, the sarcastic shit. Don’t get me wrong,” adds
“Sure,” says Will. “Thanks. And you’re right – it definitely sounds like a journalist. They’ve tried the ‘I’m an old friend’ routine on me before.”

“At your last place?”

“Yeah.”

“Did it work?”

As it happens these former colleagues had likewise seen through the ploy, but Will detects the faintly hopeful expression on Zeller’s face so opts for kindness over honesty and instead replies: “Yeah they did actually, so I’m really grateful you had more sense.”

Zeller immediately looks pleased – which in turn makes Will pleased that at least he’s capable of keeping someone happy – while Price practically skips around the lab the entire time, gathering up every available toxicology report in a sort of frenzy so they can join their relatives in mutual banishment at the back of the filing cabinet. “You know, I think I’ll head off,” says Will, who suddenly feels exhausted. “If that guy comes back…tell him I don’t want to speak with him.”

“You got it,” replies Zeller. He scoops up the final report and dangles it wordlessly in front of Price.

“There you are, you little minx,” shrieks Price, descending on it gleefully. “Away to the drawer with you.”

Will smiles at them both then slowly knots his scarf round his neck and prepares to leave, unpleasantly aware as he does so of a new sense of prickling dread at the back of his mind that’s abruptly arrived to join the existing ones. Then he reproaches himself for being overly paranoid and fatalistic in conjuring up problems for himself before there’s any clear reason to do so. Because there isn’t any need, not really; that man almost certainly was just a journalist. And the main thing is – it definitely wasn’t Andrew.

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Although it’s still afternoon it’s already nearly dark and the air is cold and raw with a faint metallic tang that catches at the back of the throat. Across the road Will can see a few streetlights beginning to flicker to life accompanied by what he initially thinks are an unusually large number of car headlamps; and it’s only when he opens the door and hears the swell of voices that he realises, with a stab of horror, that it’s in fact the equipment of several news crews. The second he sets foot out of the building they descend on him, baying and howling like a pack of jackals and brandishing their cameras and microphones in the manner of medieval knights parading their weaponry before the joust begins. There he is! someone shrieks. There he is! There he is! There he is! And with those three simple words: it starts.

“Hey Will! Will! Is it true you have a direct line to the Sculptor?”

“Why do you think he sent a message for you Will?”

“Can you comment on reports that he’s been sending you letters for the past few months?”

“He seems to think you might have something in common,” says a voice that’s a little more insistent than the rest; and Will sees the flash of bright red hair and knows that – of course – it would naturally
be Freddie who suggested something like this. “Why else do you think he singled you out?”

“Yeah, why is he contacting you Will?” yells someone else. “Why you rather than someone more senior?”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” snaps Will, “except that he isn’t writing me letters and there’s no evidence it was him who left the card behind.”

“That’s not what your buddies in the FBI are saying. They’re all freaked out by it, aren’t they Will?”

“On the contrary,” says Will, heroically struggling not to lose his temper. “It’s not at all uncommon for these individuals to contact investigators or the media — only there’s no clear indication that’s what’s happening here.” Then he realises this mini-lecture is hardly consistent with his stated policy of not saying anything, so in the end just renews his efforts to fight his way through the throng and dive into his car in order to make as quick an escape as possible. As he’s driving away he can still hear them clamouring after him – Will, Will, Will – so flicks on the stereo in an attempt to drown out the sound of his name in their mouths. Not that it makes that much difference, because ten minutes later it still feels as if he can hear it echoing in his head despite having left them miles behind him. Then the news station begins to discuss the recent Sculptor murder so he tunes it to a different channel only to find it’s doing the same, and in the end just turns the radio off entirely and drives the remaining way in silence. WillWillWill…when it runs together like that it sounds like an eerie murmur, the same way as holding a shell to your ear means you’re supposed to hear the sea. Then it occurs to him how he’s avoiding looking in the rear view mirror, rather as if he’s expecting to find the Dark Reflection staring back at him, and immediately wants to scream at himself for being so hysterical and stupid.

Once back at the house Will performs the usual rituals of triple-locking the doors and feeding the dogs before slumping onto the sofa in the living room feeling almost unbearably restless and lonely. His phone is pressing into his hip from where he’s sitting on it so he takes it out his pocket and places it on the table — only to find that the sight of it as an emblem for sociability is a painful reminder of how the absence of any companionship is actually making things worse. In fact he’s finding it impossible not to torment himself with the idea of how most people would be confiding in a loved one right now. Honey, they’d be saying, you won’t believe the day I’ve had…although it’s admittedly hard to think of many alphas who’d take an omega’s problems particularly seriously, even problems like Will’s. Andrew, for example, while never going as far as advising ‘not to worry your pretty little head about it’ had never been particularly inclined towards supportiveness either, the extent of his input being generally limited to: “But why bother about it sweetheart? You’ll be living with me soon and then you won’t even have to work anymore.” Later on, when it became apparent that Will had no intention of stopping work (and even less intention of living together), then the tone had shifted from patronising to outright hostile because omegas, in Andrew’s view, should have no more pressing concerns than looking nice for their alphas, behaving submissively, and lying around in an expensive house all day with their legs permanently open on demand.

Will makes a small growling noise at the memory of it then realises he’s chewed the thumbnail on his right hand all the way down so switches over to make a start on the left one before tipping his head back against the sofa. One of the cushions is still at an angle from where Hannibal moved it out the way and he’s overcome by a sudden urge to pick it up and cling onto it that’s rather humiliating in its intensity. Oh God, this fucking day. It’s still limping on and on: barely evening yet, let alone night, and he still has absolutely no idea how to fill out the remaining hours before finally escaping into the oblivion of sleep. Then he looks at his phone, feeling almost like a bystander as he watches his hand begin to slowly reach out for it before putting it straight down – then picking it up again – then spending a few seconds twirling it aimlessly between his fingers like a baton until he finally takes a deep breath and hits the call button before he can change his mind.
Hannibal answers on the second ring. “Hey, it’s me,” says Will rather unnecessarily. “Sorry to bother you at home.” Not that he probably is at home – in fact knowing Hannibal he could be anywhere.

“You’re not bothering me. What is the matter?”

“Why do you think anything’s the matter?”

“Because you only make contact when you need something,” replies Hannibal calmly. “Which is not a reproach, by the way – I’m always pleased to hear from you. In fact see it as more of a prompt to remind you that you’re welcome to get in touch for less earnest reasons than work.”

“Less earnest?” repeats Will, aware that he’s starting to smile and not entirely sure why.

“Yes indeed. Less earnest and more – whimsical.”

“You want me to be whimsical?”

“Ah, that displeases you doesn’t it?” says Hannibal, who sounds as if he might be smiling as well. “You don’t want to be whimsical. All right then, give it a more vigorous name. Call it impulsive.”

“How about impulsively whimsical. You can have both.”

“That’s very generous of you; in that case how about whimsically impulsive.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yes. Tell me something you’ve done today that I wouldn’t expect to hear.”

Will’s smile broadens fractionally and he leans further back against the sofa and stretches his legs out in front of him. “That’s actually rather difficult.”

“Why so?”

“Because I get the feeling nothing ever really surprises you.”

“Then invent something and see if I can tell the difference.”

Will laughs outright at this then stretches his legs out even further and flexes his toes as he feels himself starting to relax. “Okay then. I nearly punched a journalist this afternoon.”

“Did you?”

“I did.”

“And I suppose you’re expecting me to be surprised by the context?”

Will shifts the phone to the other ear. “Yes – or at least partly. I’m not sure. Perhaps what really surprises you…”

“…is the fact you did not punch them. Yes indeed; if you had told me you had spent all afternoon thrashing journalist I should not have been surprised at all.”

Will can’t help laughing at this. “No, actually.”

“No?” repeats Hannibal serenely.

“No. I wasn’t going to say that.”
What does that matter? It’s my surprise, after all – I can use it however I like.”

“Oh, well, in that case,” says Will. “If you’re going to use it however you like…Anyway, this is probably going to sound weird, but I appreciate it.”

“I expected as much.”

“You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“I do; you are going to say that you appreciate me not perceiving you as vulnerable and fragile in the same manner as your Uncle Jack.”

“I was, yeah.”

“But why should I? You’re clearly not after all.” There’s a leisurely little pause and Will has a sudden vivid image of the way Hannibal would be gazing intently into his face if he were here. “Although that’s not to say that you don’t benefit from companionship and protection at times,” adds Hannibal after a few more seconds have passed. “Just the same as anyone else.”

“Hmm.”

“So – what is the matter?”

Will sighs several times, but with a little more persuasion finally relents and tells Hannibal about the TattleCrime article and the lingering air of suspicion from Skinner – although neglects to mention the mysterious visitor at the lab on the grounds that it would mean telling him about Andrew as well, which as confessing goes is far too much to cope with in a single sitting. “Jack thinks I shouldn’t take it too personally,” he adds when he’s finished.

“Then Jack is wrong. I think you should take it extremely personally.”

“Why?” asks Will, despite already knowing the answer.

“Because neglecting to take it personally implies a level of passivity and acceptance which I believe is inadvisable.”

“Hmm.”

“Of course I’m not suggesting you become fearful over it either. On the contrary; you should try and cultivate a state of…anticipation. To learn to tolerate uncertainty and cultivate an open state of mind that can allow for enigmas and inconsistencies.”

“That actually sounds pretty appealing,” says Will, even though such a state of mind – while no doubt easy for Hannibal – feels rather unobtainable when applied to himself.

“It has its uses,” replies Hannibal with a little modest flourish that confirms Will’s suspicions that he is, indeed, drawing from his own experience. “The opposite of certainty isn’t doubt, after all, but imagination; a blend of curiosity, enquiry and mental tractability.”

“You’re not just talking about the news coverage any more, are you?” says Will after a short pause.

“I am not.”

“You’re referring to whether the Sculptor really is trying to contact me.”

“Naturally,” replies Hannibal without a flicker of hesitation. “You should use it as the opportunity it
Even though it’s scarcely feasible that Hannibal is referring to using it as anything other than a chance to identify and apprehend the perpetrator, there’s still something softly insinuating about the tone of the statement which makes Will feel as if there just might be more to it than that. ‘Communicating with the Sculptor could be an opportunity for all kinds of interesting things,’ the tone seems to imply, although Will can’t quite bring himself to pursue it – despite being equally aware of a part of himself that wants to. Perhaps the part that lives in the mirror, pale and patient and watchful...Then he blinks a few times and forces himself to refocus on the conversation while silently reproaching himself for being so stupid.

“For all your regular insistence that you’re fine,” Hannibal is now saying, “you still don’t entirely sound as if you are.”

“I am. I’m fine. In fact I’m feeling a bit better,” says Will, perking up slightly at the realisation that this is actually true. “The pain’s been a bit less today.”

“That’s good. You’re satisfied with your new – how shall we put it? Your new supply of tablets?”

“Yes,” says Will, deciding that he can’t be bothered to keep denying it anymore.

“It’s very enterprising of you. High risk of course, considering the illegality; but enterprising nonetheless.”

“It’s not like I had much choice.”

“Yes, you’re so forthright aren’t you Will?” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “And you’re very good at seeking practical assistance. Meeting your more emotional needs, on the other hand...” There’s another suggestive pause. “Not quite so much.”

“That’s not true.”

“Of course it is. Take now for example; you think you’re being very open with me and yet it’s clear you’re concealing far more than you’re willing to confide.” At the undeniable truth of this Will bites his lip then falls silent, listening instead to the soft sound of breathing at the other end of the line. “I suppose it might be different if I were there with you in person,” adds Hannibal in the same considering tone as before. “I might have persuaded you to entrust yourself a little more than you are doing now.” Another pause. “Would you have let me touch you again? You liked it so much before. You’re very responsive Will. It’s the tactile instinct in you, I suppose. That, and the fact you’re more primed for the type of touch that’s intending to harm and don’t quite know how to process anything else. Or perhaps I’m wrong. Perhaps people often touch you in kindness?”

Once again Will doesn’t answer immediately because kindness seems like an entirely inadequate description of that evening on the sofa. Then he realises that at some point he’s closed his eyes and let his head tip so far back that his throat’s completely exposed, and the awareness of it makes him sufficiently embarrassed and self-conscious to force himself to struggle upright again.

“Are you still there?” says Hannibal.

“Yeah. I’m right here.”

“Would you like to meet?” adds Hannibal in a gentler voice. “I was planning to attend a concert this evening and you’d be very welcome to join me. We don’t have to discuss anything if you don’t want to; in fact you can take full advantage of the setting as an opportunity to say as little as possible to one another.”
Will huffs out a laugh and then forces himself to sit even further upright until he more resembles someone waiting for a job interview as opposed to some swooning character in a sentimental novel (for God’s sake). In fact his initial instinct is actually to refuse, but it seems a bit ungracious to reject an invitation that’s obviously so kindly meant; and besides, surely anything is better than waiting here for the next few hours feeling increasingly fraught and anxious until it’s time to go to bed and be wracked by nightmares…assuming he can even sleep at all.

“Okay then, thank you,” he eventually replies. “That would be great.”

“Can you be at the Festival Hall by seven?”

“I can make that,” says Will slowly. “No problem.”

“Then I shall see you then,” replies Hannibal. He doesn’t add anything else and after a slight pause Will hangs up then runs his hands through his hair while berating himself for feeling so needlessly and neurotically edgy about…nothing. Then he also realises it never occurred to him to ask what the concert was – let alone what sort of dress code is required – and mentally yells at himself all over again for being so unbelievably inept and gauche. Catching sight of his reflection in the screen of his phone, it’s actually hard not to feel rather depressed at how pale and half-witted he’s convinced he looks.

“You’re an asshole,” Will informs his reflection firmly, which merely continues to gaze back at him with a bleakly wan defiance as if telling him to fuck off. Will stares critically at the reflection for a few more seconds and the reflection stares critically back – at which point Will decides that there has to be more to life than gazing at yourself in a cell phone screen while telling yourself to fuck off, so drops it on the sofa and dashes upstairs to get changed instead, trying not to laugh when all the dogs get the wrong idea and come charging up after him. A normal suit will have to do; besides, it’s not as if omegas are even really expected to be sophisticated so with any luck even if he does turn out to be drastically underdressed then he’ll just look endearingly naïve as opposed to oafish. Not that this is particularly comforting in itself, especially considering that Hannibal possesses the type of patrician good looks that go extremely well with evening dress whereas Will, in comparison, suspects he’s going to look like some form of advanced primate that’s been coaxed into a formal jacket before being systematically and selectively shaved. But there’s not much he can do about it, so just flings on the same black suit he always uses for vaguely formal occasions (and which has now sat through so many graduations, presentations and assorted ceremonies that given a pair of glasses and a briefcase it could probably just turn up on its own and do the job without him) then drags a comb through his hair and tells himself that it’ll have to do. Which of course it will, because it’s not as if this is a date.

It’s just an evening with a friend, the majority of which will be spent in a dark auditorium where no one will be able to see him anyway. And it’s not as if Hannibal is really going to care about things like that; for all his personal fastidiousness he’s never give the impression of being a snob in that particular way.

The dogs leap up and joyfully pursue Will when he goes downstairs again, so he says goodbye to them all before giving them assorted instructions for behaving themselves in a way that he sometimes feels vaguely self-conscious over but can still never stop doing because he loves the dogs and talking to them as if they can understand him is just one of several ways of expressing it. Then he tugs on his coat and scarf and locks the door, humming under his breath and unable to stop the small smile that’s working onto his face at the idea of finally having something pleasant to look forward to…and it’s only when he’s heading to the car that the tentative cocoon of happiness he’s been constructing around himself since the phone call abruptly evaporates when in the corner of his eye he sees what he’s convinced is a shadowy figure. Specifically: a shadowy human figure.

Will draws in a deep startled breath as one by one every single hair on the back of his neck stands on
end before swinging round sharply: eyes widening in shock and horribly aware of the way his heart’s pounding in his ears like a piston that’s worked loose from its socket and is hurtling out of control. Then he automatically reaches into his pocket for his gun before remembering that – of course – it’s still in his jacket and therefore locked on one side of the house while Will’s stranded alone on the other with…what? The realisation is a truly wretched one, and a few seconds of paralysing fear then follow where all he’s really aware of is a sense of anguish that if anything happens to him there’ll be no one to take care of the dogs.

Conversely it’s actually this pre-emptive grief that finally compels Will into action and makes him snarl “If you move I’ll shoot you,” into the shadows. Then he mimes removing the gun from his coat and arranges his hands so they’re sufficiently in the shadows to prevent the bluff being discovered. “Come out here with your hands up,” he adds, even louder than before. God knows what he’s going to do when they actually do come out, but an imaginary upper hand is far better than none and if they believe he has a gun there’s far less chance of them trying to overpower him. But no one steps out of the shadows and there’s no answering voice to his own; in fact there’s no signs of life at all beyond the sound of Will’s heartbeat in his ears and the eerie scream from the fields courtesy of the same night creature that disturbed him so badly the evening Hannibal was here. But the yard itself is silent except for the sighing of the wind and when Will’s eyes have adjusted to the darkness a few seconds later it slowly becomes clear that nothing is actually there. How is it even possible? In fact the initial impression of seeing someone is so powerful that it can’t dismiss it in favour of what his own eyes are now telling him and he wavers for a few seconds before taking a couple of steps forward.

Nothing. Then he takes a few more steps and strains his eyes into the depths of the shadows that pool and curdle in the corners like spilled ink. Still nothing. No flicker of movement, no tell-tale sound of breathing, no hint of footsteps – just…nothing.

Will takes another breath, so deep this time that the icy air stings his throat, then exhales it all out again in a long vaporous stream. He can’t allow himself to believe he might actually have been hallucinating so tries to convince himself instead that the figure was just a trick of the light that could have deceived anyone: an illusion constructed from assorted raw materials like anxiety, lack of sleep, and the spectral gloom of the yard that would be enough to inflame even the dullest imagination into seeing phantom figures in the middle of the night. Then he tells himself it’s hardly credible that someone would be standing around in the dead of winter on the off-chance he’d come outside – that the whole idea is ridiculous – because if someone was watching him they’d be doing it from a car, or even simply cut to the chase and attempt to break into the house. And then he wants to say out loud that it’s fine; wants to proclaim it into the air for himself and all the night creatures to hear…only when it comes down to it, he finds that he can’t. Because deep down, in a part of himself he doesn’t want to fully acknowledge, he just knows that someone was there.

But regardless of this silent conviction there’s still no clear action to be taken, no proof of any kind, and nothing at all to challenge except the sighing wind and the spilling silhouettes of an empty yard. So in the end Will does the only thing he reasonably feels that he can do; which is to turn his back on the shadows then get into the car and drive away as if nothing’s happened. Nevertheless the fledging sense of contentment at the idea of an evening with Hannibal has crumbled away and as he stares into the endlessly sinister stretch of road it’s impossible to suppress his renewed sense of churning dread. Please God I just want this to stop, thinks Will with a surge of helplessness: even though he doesn’t believe in God (having never had much evidence that God, in turn, believes in him) and even though he’s not entirely sure what he’s referring to because while it feels like anything at all might happen, nothing tangible actually has. Someone and no one and everything yet nothing…the same contradictory precepts as a Zen kōan. Only this isn’t the kind of wisdom that gets printed on fridge magnets and mass-produced on pastel-hued posters, but the kind that’s been stitched together from shreds of bone and pieces of skin and which, no matter how hard he tries to ignore it, seems to scream at him that somewhere an hour glass has been turned over and the grains of sand are trickling...
down. *Tick tock tick tock*, on and on: until the time runs out and the hour glass shatters and everything finally comes together and ignites.

“Oh *fuck* this,” snaps Will abruptly, suddenly tiring of the whole thing. Outside the window is the scream of tires and blaring glare of other people’s headlights and after taking a few deep breaths he swerves the car to the side of the road and spends a few seconds trying to ease back into something approaching calmness. Briefly Hannibal’s words from the previous phone call come to mind and he turns them over in his head a few times before concluding that there’s an inherent wisdom in them that deserves to be listened to. “*You* wouldn’t be afraid, would you?” he adds, imagining Hannibal’s dark eyes and calmly inscrutable expression. Then he spends a few more seconds experimenting with the possibility of taking all the things that are troubling him and trying to substitute anger as a response to them instead of fear. Omegas, after all, are always encouraged to feel responsible for their problems and to drive the negativity inside themselves like a jagged splinter rather than unleashing outwards at whatever’s trying to hurt them – Hannibal was right to advise him to do the opposite. Then he goes a bit further and tries to imagine the part of himself that’s afraid as a way of emphasising that it is *only* a part: a frightened self, but not his entire self. Not the whole thing.

At the idea of this Will automatically glances at his reflection and the sensation is rather an odd one: the awareness of this fearful, furtive aspect that inhabits its own separate space and requires safety and soothing at the hands of a more competent and self-assured part. It’s not like he’s even sure which one of these personas he identifies with the most; which one is closest to his ‘true’ self. If anything they seem to exist in an uneasy state of conflict, manipulating and discouraging one another and taking it in turns to be the one in the mirror on the basis of who happens to be feeling the most exultant that day; and who, in turn, is the most bewildered and demoralized. They skim around in his subconscious like shadows, weightless and incorporeal and so very hard to pin down…whoever it is that looks askance into the mirror and tempts fate and doesn’t care and the one who stares back with the forlorn face and the sad, troubled eyes – until suddenly they switch places again and the Dark Reflection is the one in control and the frightened self slips away. Nevertheless none of this changes the fact that Hannibal was right and that the opposite of certainty doesn’t have to be doubt at all, but rather imagination; and imagination is something that’s Will’s always had in ready supply. Because as much as his sense of self feels fractured and ravaged, possibly beyond repair, it’s all he has and he’s not just going to abandon it. The self that has empathy, autonomy, imagination and inspiration and which has fought its way through numerous trials with resolution and fortitude – which has steered its own course, made its own rules, and conceded to no one – and emerged at the end of it all from sundry miseries and horrors fundamentally unbowed and unbroken. And even though he knows it’ll be difficult to sustain indefinitely, for those few minutes he finally manages to stop feeling afraid of all the people who are trying to attack and diminish him and experiences a thrilling sense of outrage towards them instead.

“I’ve got you,” says Will out loud to the frightened self in an attempt to reassure it. Then he briefly imagines Hannibal again and can’t help adding ‘*and you’ve got me*’ inside his mind. It still doesn’t answer the question as to who has the Dark Reflection and the awareness of its wild freedom troubles him…although surely even this solution will become clear in time? The opposite of certainty isn’t doubt, after all – it’s imagination. Starting the engine Will casts another glance in the rear view mirror and then finally pulls away: preparing to resume the next stage of a journey which, like so many others, will have Hannibal waiting for him at the end of it.
Chapter 9

Will spends the rest of the journey in a state of grim determination to put the events of the past hour behind him. Yet despite his best efforts the assorted insights linger round the edge of his consciousness with the same nagging urgency as a rotten tooth and he ultimately grows so broodily preoccupied with examining them (then pushing them away, then guiltily allowing them to creep back in again for another inspection) that he ends up taking the wrong exit off the freeway and carries on for several miles before realising his mistake. This means he has to backtrack again and fight his way through the evening traffic with all the gloomy exhaustion of a lone swimmer battling the tide before taking a second wrong turn on the inner beltline – which at that time of evening bares a closer resemblance to the Inner Circle of Hell – the net result being that he gets so spectacularly and irrevocably lost he arrives nearly 20 minutes late to the Hall; and where, unsurprisingly, there’s no sign of Hannibal in the foyer.

Although Will was anticipating something like this his sense of disappointment is still acute, and for a few seconds he struggles with a genuine surge of unhappiness over it. Everyone else in the vicinity appears to be in pairs or groups with only him stood there alone, and there’s something particularly wretched about being in such luxurious surroundings while being forced to witness the excited hum of eagerness and expectancy over an evening that’s lying ahead for everybody but you. In this respect what makes it even worse is comparing his previous light-hearted anticipation with the current sense of isolation, and it’s impossible not to sympathise with the version of himself from only an hour ago and the way it was unknowingly destined to nothing but a sense of failure and anticlimax. And what’s making that even worse is how it proves he can’t even succeed at something so simple as arranging to be in the right place at the right time, which means he’s forced to spend a few more seconds tormenting himself with the image of Hannibal’s growing irritation and impatience whilst waiting for Will to arrive before ultimately shrugging and giving up. He’d most likely have been standing in pretty much the same spot as Will is now, checking his watch and tapping his foot...only he wouldn’t really have done that, because he doesn’t show annoyance in the clichéd way that other people do. He’d just have stood there with an equivalent poise and presence to the Grecian statues at the entrance – and, like the statues, impervious to the passing looks of admiration and interest – before turning round and vanishing into the depths of the auditorium when it was clear that Will couldn’t even manage to meet him on schedule despite several hours’ notice. But I wanted to, thinks Will forlornly. I honestly did. Not that he’ll ever have an opportunity to prove it, because he knows exactly how highly Hannibal values boundaries and etiquette; and that, having been let down once, he almost certainly won’t be making a similar invitation in the future.

“Balls,” mutters Will under his breath. It’s sincerely meant to be inaudible but out of exhaustion and frustration comes out louder than intended and consequently earns him a black look from an elderly man who’s stood nearby in an impeccably well-cut suit and whose moustache has practically started to bristle with disapproval. Will returns the look with gusto and has to stifle an hysterical urge to sidle over and hiss ‘Oh excuse me – I meant testicles’ right in the old bastard’s face; and probably would as well, except that making a scene for the sake of it is not only completely pointless but the type of thing he knows he’d bitterly regret later on. Nevertheless now the engine of unhappiness has been revved up it’s impossible to prevent it hurtling indiscriminately across a whole highway of distresses and disappointments; and in those few seconds he doesn’t just feel crushed over the failure of the evening, but over numerous recent times he’s felt vulnerable or inadequate: every time he’s suspected one of the students has been laughing at him, or someone like Skinner has openly sneered, or Jack’s expressed displeasure with his work...all those endless slings and arrows of rejection and disapproval.

At the thought of the latter Will can feel his shoulders beginning to crumple in a distinctly ominous
way and has a moment of real panic that he’s about to lose control completely. Even worse is that a
couple of nearby alphas are starting to openly stare at him; and which is not only unsettling, but acts
as a silent rebuke that it’s entirely his own fault for applying much less pheromone spray than usual.
At the memory of this Will can feel himself blushing slightly – although perhaps it’s not entirely his
fault, because the stuff is ridiculously expensive and there’s no point in wasting it when Hannibal
knows anyway. It’s not like he cares if Hannibal might prefer his natural scent. Is it? No, definitely
not. Not at all. And besides, Hannibal isn’t here so it’s not even relevant. Oh for God’s sake, thinks
Will briskly, get a grip on yourself you stupid shit. Then he repeats it again and at one point even
considers muttering it out loud: partly because someone needs to offer this sterling advice, but also
because he’s genuinely frightened that if he doesn’t he’s going to allow the strain of the past few
days to get the better of him and end up doing something truly mortifying like crying in the middle of
a foyer surrounded by wealthy alphas in penguin suits. Alphas can’t handle seeing distressed
omegas…they’d probably all tackle him into a pile-up in their eagerness to pat his head and offer
comfort. Even that stupid old bastard with the moustache and the ball aversion would be doing it.
Christ. He’d rather go back home and take his chances with imaginary stalkers; and besides, at least
the dogs will be pleased to see him. Consumed with a sudden urgency to leave, Will hastily roots
around in his pocket for his car keys: and maybe it’s the pre-emptive horror of being swamped by
alphas, or maybe it’s the lingering fear of the scene outside the house – repeatedly pushed away but
still determinedly lurking at the back of his mind – but it means that when someone puts their hand
on his shoulder it makes him jump so violently his feet virtually leave the floor.

“God,” says Will when he lands again. “You really startled me.” Hannibal’s features arrange
themselves into their favourite ‘well, yes – obviously’ smirk. “How the hell do you manage to move
so quietly? I should put a bell on you.”

“Isn’t that what one does with cats? I’d have thought you’d prefer a more canine-orientated solution.
At any rate, you are very welcome to try.” Another faint smirk follows this statement, which this time
Will is tempted to translate as: ‘and if you do, little man, I will end you.’

“I’ll bear it in mind,” replies Will, who’s now struggling not to smirk himself at the idea of Hannibal
in a neat little collar with a bell on the end. “Although you can have this one on me – you deserve
your revenge. I’m really sorry I’m so late.”

“It’s fine. You are not so late as all that.”

“No – I am. Thanks for waiting, I’d assumed you’d gone in.”

“Of course: I was happy to wait. I was trying to get your attention when you arrived but you seemed
rather preoccupied.”

Will makes a non-committal noise in response to this, not least because he suspects his preoccupation
was less to blame than the fact Hannibal’s idea of trying to get someone’s attention was most likely
standing around in a corner looking imposing while quirking a single eyebrow. Impossible, after all,
to imagine him grinning and waving like a normal person. “Well, I’m still sorry,” he adds as
Hannibal begins to smile again. “I got lost.”

“Did you? That’s not like you.”

Will just shrugs, hating how witless the explanation makes him sound but likewise reluctant to
describe the figure in the yard out of fear he’ll make himself look hysterical. Not that a choice
between witless and hysterical is all that appealing…talk about being caught between shit and shite.
He sighs to himself then gazes unhappily at Hannibal over the top of his glasses, completely unaware
“Might I ask why?”

“Oh you know,” says Will vaguely. “Stuff.”

“The same ‘stuff’ we discussed previously?” asks Hannibal. The fastidious way he’s putting quote marks round such a slang term is audible and obvious, and as Will inadvertently rolls his eyes at the sound of it Hannibal’s smile briefly grows broader. “As you know I have an enduring and enthusiastic fascination with stuff – and if you wish to unburden some of yours I’m happy to listen.”

“Don’t we have to go in?” says Will, who’s had a sudden strong impression that Hannibal appears to be smelling him and is struggling not to feel too self-conscious about it.

“There’s still another 20 minutes or so. How much time do you require?”

“I guess a quick drink wouldn’t hurt,” says Will, beginning to perk up slightly. “Only one though – I’m driving.”

“A single drink consumed at speed,” sighs Hannibal. “What a thoroughly wretched concept. Although I suppose we must take our consolations where we can.” He briefly places his hand on Will’s shoulder to steer him in the direction of the bar, and while he removes it almost immediately Will still finds himself in the disorientating state of resenting the unsolicited contact whilst at the same time wishing the hand had lingered a little longer. “Problem?” says Hannibal, catching the small frown that’s just appeared on Will’s face. “Although I hardly know why I’m asking, considering I already know you’re going to insist on everything being fine.”

Will can’t help laughing at the undeniable truth of this and then moves a few paces ahead so he can hold the door open for Hannibal, allowing their shoulders to brush together as he walks past. “I am, as it happens,” he replies. And for those few seconds, it feels like for once it might actually be true.

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In the end they never do go into the auditorium, opting instead to stay in the bar and continue talking until Will finally realises that the concert will be about to start. “It’s all right by me,” says Hannibal when this is pointed out. “Unless you’re particularly eager to go? Personally, I’m content to stay where we are.”

“Sure,” says Will, draining his glass. “I’m happy to stay here as well.”

“Admittedly it’s not the greatest compliment to the Baltimore Philharmonic,” adds Hannibal. “In fact there does seem something slightly degenerate about choosing to loll about in a bar in favour of Mozart’s Requiem.” He briefly looks rather surprised after saying this, as if suddenly realising that he doesn’t entirely know how to loll.

“Degenerate,” repeats Will with relish.

“Naturally it’s my fault for suggesting it. I entirely blame myself.”

“That’s okay,” says Will kindly. “I blame you too.”

“At least we’re in agreement I suppose.”

“Yes. Haven’t we done well?”

“We have done admirably.”
“Well let me get you another drink in the meantime,” says Will with another grin. “We can celebrate our mutual degeneracy.”

“You may be celebrating; I shall be drowning my sorrows. But yes – thank you. A glass of the Barolo.”

“Wine? Oh dear. It looks like someone’s relapsed.”

“I have fallen off the proverbial wagon,” says Hannibal with a slow smile. “Although I promise to keep all my tedious wine observations to myself in the interim.”

“You know I can’t really imagine you falling off anything,” replies Will thoughtfully. “I can’t even imagine you falling over. You’re too…poised.”

“Too poised to obey the laws of gravity? I’m flattered that you think so.”

“Yeah, well. I might just have to push you and see what happens.”

“Then I would fall,” replies Hannibal, completely deadpan. “Although I shall try to do so in as poised a manner as possible if it will keep you happy.”

“Oh yeah? That means technically you’ve just given me permission.”

“Technically, I suppose I have. How very misguided of me.”

This makes Will smile again so Hannibal administers another slow smile of his own then leans a little further back against his seat to acquire a better view whilst wondering how anyone can possibly contrive to be so bright-eyed and lively and so very, very charming. The offensive pheromone spray is also far less apparent than usual, meaning the occasional faint trace of Will’s natural scent is coming through in all its radiance. Has he left it off deliberately or did it simply wear off during the course of the day and he’s forgotten to replenish it? The conscientiousness with which it’s usually applied would suggest the former, although of course it’s impossible to say for certain. Hannibal’s smile then widens very slightly as he permits himself a brief but extremely pleasing image of what it would be like to have Will in a position where it would be sweated off before neatly refocusing his attention into the room again. The bar is still fairly busy with theatre goers, socialites and assorted dignitaries – the usual crowd at an evening like this – and the fact that most of them are alphas makes him aware of a sharp desire to coil himself round Will to keep him away from them. Not that such protection would be either wanted or required…in fact the idea of the outrage it would provoke if attempted is rather amusing, and he can’t help smiling affectionately to himself at the thought of it. Besides, allowing Will to roam around means he gets to savour the sight of him striding determinedly through the throng: looking neither left nor right and refusing to concede even the smallest piece of ground by moving aside for anyone, like a particularly bright comet slicing through a panorama of far dimmer and less impressive stars.

Will, in turn, pays absolutely no attention to the alphas and remains oblivious not only to how several of them glance at him approvingly but the way that Hannibal (who is certainly not oblivious) narrows his eyes into little slits of displeasure at the sight of it. Then he stands patiently at the bar while waiting to be served, mulling over the unexpectedly positive turn that the evening’s taken and trying not to smile to himself too obviously at the thought of it. Everything just feels so natural and easy – even the headaches and abdominal pain are nowhere near as bad as usual – and the resulting flare of optimism has kindled a strong temptation to finally confide in Hannibal about Andrew. Admittedly it’s not like he could do that much to help, but it’s hard to shift the sense that simply telling him will somehow make it seem less crushing.
Will now frowns slightly, trying to make sense of this, and finally decides that it’s because there’s something so containing about Hannibal; something which speaks of safety, calmness and protection. Then his frown deepens because looking to an alpha for protection isn’t a particularly comfortable thought either, and in the end he has to go back to the beginning again and re-calculate all the reasons for speaking out vs. keeping quiet into neat little columns labelled ‘for’ and ‘against’ and ultimately grows so preoccupied that when it’s time to order the drinks he’s completely forgotten what it was that Hannibal had asked for. He can’t actually face going back to check so ends up enduring an excruciating few minutes gesticulating at the bartender – who’s as sleek and well-groomed as a store-front mannequin and who Will can’t help suspecting is examining his cheap clothes and slightly manic expression and wondering how the hell such a hobo managed to bullshit his way past the doorman – and repeating “it starts with a ‘B’!” in an increasingly fraught way as the bartender polishes the same glass over and over with a crisp white cloth while chanting: “Bordeaux? Bardolino? Beaujolais?” like some kind of malevolent wine android. Will’s spirit breaks long before his does and in the end he just gets a glass of Malbec instead, partly for the comedy value but mostly because – who fucking cares anyway? It’s just deceased grape juice when all’s said and done. “Oh, perhaps sir meant Barolo?” says the barman triumphantly as he’s handing Will his change; who in turn makes a big performance out of dropping a single cent into the tip jar in revenge.

The bartender watches the coin’s progress then gives the glass a particularly vigorous rub. “Why thank you sir,” he says with a level of venom that’s actually rather magnificent.

“You’re welcome,” replies Will. Then he picks up the wine and is turning to leave before promptly being distracted again by the sound of a male voice repeating “Excuse me! Sir! Excuse me!” in an irritatingly insistent way. Its shrill persistence and the fact it’s clearly directed at him implies some kind of response is required but Will still doesn’t react straight away: partly because no one ever calls out ‘excuse me sir’ when he’s around (they’re more likely to say ‘stop or I’ll shoot’) but mostly because he doesn’t know the person at all and has no particular desire to rectify this.

“Excuse me,” repeats the man, more determinedly than before.

“Yes?” says Will, finally admitting defeat. “Can I help you?” Despite his best efforts the tone of this comes out far more grudgingly than intended, sounding less like a genuine offer of assistance and more like ‘because even if I can, I’m not actually going to. Bite me’. The questioner obviously feels the same because he flounders a bit then falls silent, which immediately makes Will feel guilty and try to summon a slightly more genuine smile in response.

“I hope you don’t mind me interrupting you?” adds the man; rather insincerely. “Only I couldn’t help notice you were speaking with Dr Lecter.”

“Y-e-s,” says Will, promptly reverting to Grudge Mode.

“I know him you see.”

“Right,” replies Will, now struggling mightily with the temptation to add something deeply sarcastic, possibly along the lines of ‘congratulations’ or ‘good for you’ or even ‘I have precisely zero fucks to give about this. If you wish you may try and count them – my complete and utter absence of fucks.’

“In fact I know him pretty well,” comes the next response, to which Will gives the smallest hint of an eye-roll as if to imply there are so few fucks he gives about this that they’re literally falling from the ceiling.

“You know him too then,” persists the man; and which as a statement is so blindingly obvious that Will can’t actually be bothered to reply to it all. Even so it’s impossible to miss that beneath his ostensibly friendly manner there’s a distinct edge of animosity to the tone in which this is said. In fact
there’s something about his whole demeanour – from the beady little burnt-current eyes, to the pampered glossy beard and fussily arranged necktie, to the way his feet are tip-tapping back and forth across the parquet floor like someone doing a clumsy tap dance (click-click-click) – that strikes Will as almost unbearably irritating. “Well I’m just going over to say hello,” adds the man. Then he throws Will a rather defiant look as if challenging him to do anything about this: completely unaware that Will had already been trying to work out a way of getting Hannibal to take him off his hands and that heading over is entirely consistent with this goal, so – bring it on.

Although Hannibal gives no visible signs of annoyance when he sees the bearded man bearing down on him there’s still something about the way he narrows his eyes that Will suspects is a way of conveying his silent conviction that he’d be hugely obliged if the latter could kindly go and fuck himself. “Franklyn,” he says crisply as they approach the table. “This is unexpected.”

“I hope you don’t mind me cutting in?” says the man – Franklyn – as he begins to shuffle his feet again. “Only I saw your…” Then he pauses and gestures at Will, who immediately interprets this for exactly what it is: a clumsy attempt to encourage Hannibal to clarify the nature of the relationship between them. Hannibal, in turn, gifts Franklyn with one of his most serenely inscrutable smiles (followed up with a long, leisurely stare for good measure) and neglects to answer. “I was at the bar,” persists Franklyn. “And I bumped into your…”

“Yes?” says Hannibal. This time it’s followed with a stare of such excessively chilly smoothness that it would probably be enough to propel someone to slide uphill (before freezing them to death on arrival) and Will finally takes pity on Franklyn at being on the receiving end of it and asks him if he’s had a good evening just to try and keep the conversation going. Franklyn merely thrusts his hands into his pockets in a rather petulant way that’s unintentionally hilarious and pretends not to hear, at which Hannibal – who’s clearly lost all interest – takes a delicate sip from his wineglass before starting to smile.

“You are never going to forgive me for that are you?” he says to Will.

Franklyn, who clearly resents a private joke from which he’s excluded, begins to prickle with envious disapproval. “Did you get the wrong type?” he blurs out, rounding on Will as if he’s a particularly dim five-year old. “What a shame. I know oenology can be rather confusing but it’s better to pay attention because Dr Lecter cares a lot about these things.” Hannibal’s blank stare promptly swivels in Franklyn’s direction, who wriggles awkwardly and clears his throat before adding in a notably more polite tone: “He’s a real connoisseur.”

“Actually he’s just fallen off the wagon,” says Will, at which Hannibal’s mouth twitches very slightly just as Franklyn’s falls open. “And oenology is the science of making wine, not drinking it.”

Franklyn now glances at Will in vague surprise, rather as if the chair had spoken.

“Although it probably should have a scientific name and an honours roll,” adds Will. “Seeing as people take it so unbelievably seriously.”

Franklyn’s expression is now a caricature of the betas in the alleyway and strongly implies that he’d not only been hoping for Will to turn out to be a charmingly decorative halfwit, but doesn’t quite know how to react when confronted with the fact that he appears to have more than two brain cells to rub together. “Yes, well, that’s as may be,” he replies peevishly. “But you still confused the brands of wine.”

“I’m sure I’ll get over it eventually,” says Will in a bored voice.

“Well there’s no need to be so flippant…” begins Franklyn, at which point Hannibal – who up until
now has been observing the exchange in amused silence – abruptly uncurls from his chair and draws himself up to his full height. The motion is extremely calm and controlled without a hint of aggression, but even so there’s something sufficiently imposing about the way he manages to loom over them both that makes Franklyn fall silent before renewing the shuffling motion of his feet across the floor, followed up by an awkward little wriggle for good measure.

“Thank you so much for coming to say good evening,” says Hannibal in a leisurely way. “Although I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse us now.” Franklyn’s face promptly falls at this polite yet obvious dismissal with a kind of puppyish disappointment that can’t help but remind Will of Siemens and his own desperate need for approval. “I shall look forward to seeing you next week as usual,” adds Hannibal with charming civility, upon which Franklyn cheers up again and gives a contented sigh like a lovesick swain; even, at one point, appearing to get perilously close to batting his eyelashes.

“Bye then,” says Will loudly.

Franklyn nods besottedly in Hannibal’s direction then obediently begins to retreat, though not before finding time to shoot Will a look of blatant dislike from over the top of his beard – and which is so incredibly childish that Will suspects he should probably be sticking his tongue out in response. “Who on earth was that?” he says when Franklyn has finally waddled out of view.

“An acquaintance of mine,” replies Hannibal, neatly folding himself back into his chair. “I feel like I ought to apologise on his behalf for being so rude to you.”

“It’s fine. I mean, I appreciate it and all but you don’t have to defend me.”

“I wasn’t aware I was doing that,” says Hannibal, taking another sip of the wine. “I was, however, defending myself – because there is only so much of his conversation that I can tolerate in one sitting and he exceeded the threshold extremely quickly.”

Will tries to smile in response, although even as he’s doing it is aware of how half-hearted and false it must seem so gives it another try with only negligibly improved results. Only it’s hard to appear relaxed and cheerful anymore, because he’s just combined Franklyn’s use of Hannibal’s medical title with the lingering air of deference and realised that, of course, he was actually a patient and not an ‘acquaintance’ at all. Obviously this shouldn’t matter in the grand scheme of things; but somehow it does matter – a lot – because while he’s struck by Hannibal’s professionalism and forbearance in allowing Will to think he’d voluntarily be friends with such a ridiculous person in the service of protecting Franklyn’s privacy, it highlights the inescapable fact that this is essentially what Will is too. In fact the implications of this are downright depressing: no doubt if one of Hannibal’s actual friends appeared right now then Will would likewise be discreetly referred to as an acquaintance, possibly as a colleague…but it would still just be a code for someone Hannibal’s obliged to be kind to as opposed to someone he’s independently sought out. Then he hears Hannibal asking him if anything’s the matter and realises that his unhappiness must have briefly shown on his face.

“I’m fine,” says Will automatically then gives a more convincing imitation of a smile to prove it. Nevertheless he can feel the fledging desire to confide about Andrew immediately withering again before sinking back to its dark hiding place in Will’s internal storage vault for anxiety and sadness. After all, Hannibal’s official role is to support his professional performance not the intimacies of his personal life, and forcing him into disclosures about the latter now feels as if it might be inappropriate. It’s the sort of thing that gets referred to as ‘over-sharing’ and ‘too much information’…the sort of thing a person like Franklyn would do if their roles were reversed. Besides, it’s not like Hannibal could offer any practical input even if Will did tell him. In this respect the same reluctance that led him to avoid confiding in Jack now settles onto the previous layer of evasion and seals the problem up even more, because Will hates the idea of being an object of pity: and given that
there’s nothing anyone can do to help beyond changing the law or fixing his fucked-up biology then he’d rather suffer in dignity and stoicism than wilt into a defeated heap while everyone stands round and feels sorry for him.

“I’m glad you’re fine,” replies Hannibal in a measured way.

“Are you being sarcastic by any chance?”

“Not at all. Just because you’ve turned the answer into something of a cliché doesn’t mean it isn’t true. I was only interested in what you said before.” Will raises his eyebrows and Hannibal leans a little further forward in his chair so they’re directly facing each other. “It bothers you, doesn’t it? The idea of being defended.”

“Not especially,” says Will, who’s struggling not to let his fretfulness show. “Not in itself.”

“Ah, I see – more the assumption that you require it?”

“Yeah, exactly: I get it all the time. And as you’ve probably guessed it makes me a bit defensive, so…yeah. Sorry I guess.”

“It’s fine, if I may borrow your favourite phrase. I wasn’t offended. Merely…intrigued.”

“That’s nice for you,” snaps Will irritably. Then he promptly feels guilty because he knows the frustration is coming from the idea of Hannibal only being kind to him as a doctor rather than as the friend and equal that Will wants him to be – and that while this is disappointing, it’s hardly fair to punish him for being unable to meet expectations that Will’s set up in advance and which were always destined to remain unfulfilled. With an effort he softens his tone and forces himself to relax his posture until he looks more confiding and casual again. “Only it’s annoying, you know?” he adds after a small pause. “If omegas are forceful or confident or try to defend themselves then they get dismissed as pushy and obnoxious.”

“In other words: if they display any of the traits that would be praised in alphas?”

“Yes,” says Will, surprised in spite of himself that Hannibal would concede this so readily.

“I know. And I agree that it’s unfair.”

“It’s more than that. It’s wrong.”

“Of course it is, both in theory and practice; yet see how it persists regardless. All these assumptions we have. They keep omegas badly confined – alphas too, though to a much lesser degree – and insist that because our biology has evolved a certain way then we are obliged to live our lives in the service of it.”

“It’s bullshit,” says Will with genuine anger. “Omegas are less physically strong, true, and we have reproductive capacities that alphas don’t – also true. But that’s it; that’s all it is. And from a few biological realities an entire system’s been built up that’s based on oppression and coercion and denying opportunities, and ‘omegas can bear children so therefore they shouldn’t do anything else.’ I mean honestly. It’s like the alphas think that describing how the world is, and describing how the world should be, is exactly the same thing.”

“The naturalistic fallacy.”

“Exactly. Just because something is natural doesn’t make it right.”
“Or wrong,” adds Hannibal thoughtfully. “The proposition that alphas being in relationships with one another, for example, is often considered morally wrong because it is not ‘natural’. And yet by the same logic one could claim that if death is natural – and really, what could be considered more natural than death? – then to intervene in any way to save a life and interfere with nature’s design is likewise morally flawed. See what happens when we appeal to Mother Nature to set our standards for morality? All our hospitals would close.” Will smiles slightly and Hannibal watches him for a few seconds before leaning in a little closer. “And all our murderers would be celebrated. The Sculptor, for instance: he is merely indulging an ingrained capacity to destroy. It is a capacity that exists in all of us. It is natural.”

“There’s nothing natural about what he does,” replies Will sharply.

“Of course there is,” says Hannibal in the same calm voice. “He is following the urges that most people suppress – cultivating them as the inspirations they are. His error is that he does it in such an artless, graceless, pointless way.” He pauses very slightly and runs his eyes over Will’s face. “And yet you know that the converse exists don’t you? You described it yourself that evening in your house in regards the Chesapeake series. Described it so eloquently, Will; so ardently. And why shouldn’t you? You were appealing to your own perception.” There’s another pause and he leans in a little further still. “Your own insights into what might be considered – natural.”

In the resulting silence Will stiffens slightly before ducking his head so they’re no longer making eye contact. “It’s not the same,” he says in a low voice. “What you’re suggesting…it’s nowhere near the same.”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” replies Hannibal. “Merely playing with ideas.” He darts another quick look at Will, who’s still staring rigidly at his hands. “Only the proposition disturbs you, doesn’t it? Perhaps you don’t want to play anymore.”

Will shrugs and then knots his fingers a little tighter together. “I’m not disturbed.”

“But you are,” replies Hannibal in a tone that’s almost eerily soothing and rhythmic. “Are you concerned we’re getting too close to the truth Will? Becoming too intimate with it?”

“No.”

“I can’t say I blame you,” continues Hannibal, as if Will hasn’t even spoken. Reaching out he gently unknots Will’s fingers and then casually takes hold of his hand in one of his own and slowly traces his forefinger along Will’s palm and across the wrist, tilting his head very slightly while he does it as if the sight is something foreign and infinitely fascinating. “Any kind of intimacy changes one’s perception and threatens our self-control,” adds Hannibal with something almost like tenderness. “Yet here is another paradox, because while we want to remain in control of ourselves and be the arbiter of every thought and sensation we also yearn to give ourselves up to the rapture of losing control. The ecstasy of it: indulging all our dark desires. Just another impulse which is entirely natural; as the Sculptor would no doubt attest if he were here.”

“Only he’s not here, is he?” says Will in a tone that’s now equally intense. “It’s just you and me – playing with ideas.”

Hannibal’s faint smile begins to broaden as he finally lets go of Will’s hand and leans back against the chair. “How I’d like to know more about your ideas Will,” he says softly. “Those private hungers and cravings you have. So natural as they are and so secretly stashed away within your skull. I can almost imagine them: merging in ways that are corrupted and yet so beautifully and artfully displayed.”
Will now leans back himself and regards Hannibal meditatively. “Artful,” he says after another pause. “Don’t you remember what you quoted at me before? That ‘the purpose of Art is to convey the truth of a thing, not to be the truth itself.’”

“Naturally. Artworks are orphan things; their parents create them then abandon their offspring for an audience to describe and interpret.”

“And you think you can interpret me?”

“I think I should like to try.”

“Interpret my ‘ideas,’” says Will quietly. “My ‘inspirations’? Define how innocent or guilty they are?”

“Guilt and innocence are such fixed concepts. Yet see how morality itself is always relative?”

“Of course.”

“And therefore separates matters of fact from matters of value.” Hannibal's Sphinx-like smile briefly flickers across his face. “No single perspective is ever the whole truth after all.”

“I don’t want to sit here talking about the nature of truth,” snaps Will. His voice comes out sharper and more fraught than intended, yet while he hates the way it sounds it’s difficult to prevent it because despite his best efforts the relentless nature of the conversation is beginning to unsettle him.

“No?” says Hannibal. “Then what do you want to talk about?”

He gives Will a long stare from over the top of his wineglass and there’s something about his tone which immediately makes Will sense that the dynamic has shifted, just as it’s done so many times before, and that the tension is about to dissipate before something more innocuous takes its place. And he can’t decide whether it’s him that’s instigated this, or if it was Hannibal, or whether they’ve both altered it together in a silent mutual confederacy of pretending that everything’s conventional and well-adjusted rather than a Siren’s song of darkly suggestive thrills. Nevertheless the spell has undoubtedly been broken and now Hannibal is just being a normal therapist again, while Will’s just a colleague relegated to the role of patient (also normal); and in that moment he doesn’t know which versions of themselves are the real ones, or – even more confusingly – if this is even a sensible question to ask.

“So what shall we discuss?” repeats Hannibal, who seems to be watching him very closely. “Your work? Your health? Something more tangential, perhaps: rules and rubrics and the disorder of things? Or maybe you’d like to tell me why you keep glancing towards the door every few minutes and haven’t been able to fully relax since you arrived?”


“I didn’t imagine it was. If that were the case, I think you would have told me.”

“If that were the case I don’t think I would have needed to tell you.”

“You mean I would’ve known? Yes, I agree – I probably would.”

“Look, it’s nothing,” replies Will defiantly. “I’m…”

“Fine. Yes, I’m aware. You have already said so.”
Will glares back, suddenly tired of the exquisitely delicate tortures that constitute Hannibal’s interrogations. They’re like being presented with a length of silk or velveteen: so temptingly refined and elegant in their flowing graceful folds and it’s only when you’re halfway submerged in it that you realise there are razor blades stitched into the seams. Then he opens his mouth to object, only to be saved the effort of arguing any further when his phone abruptly goes off in his pocket. The noise is shrill and insistent, not unlike a third person trying to noisily claim their share of the conversation, and it’s at this point that the focus of Will’s anxiety promptly halts and switches because there’s no way anyone could be calling at this time about anything good. Will doesn’t have the sort of life where friends ring him drunk and garrulous in the middle of the night or a lover gets in touch to see how he’s doing. A late night call means some calamity is brewing and his face creases into anxious furrows as he turns to Hannibal and says: “I’m sorry, I need to take this.”

“Of course,” replies Hannibal, leaning back again in his chair.

As might have been predicted the call is from Jack. “Will?” he barks out; and the tone of his voice is so weighty with significance that Will’s heart promptly sinks even further because of course it’s going to be bad. “There’s been another one,” says Jack, getting straight to the point. “Sculptor. I need you down here as soon as possible.”

“Another one? So soon?” From the corner of his eye he can see Hannibal begin to slowly uncoil in his chair.

“Yeah. It’s a male victim again.”

“An omega?”

“What else.” A prolonged silence follows this statement, during which Will can feel his shoulders start to tense at the awareness that something else is coming. “We’ve identified him,” Jack finally adds, “and it seems like…”

“What?” There’s no response to this except silence and Will can feel himself starting to tense all over again. “What Jack?” But there’s still no reply and Will can easily imagine the expression on Jack’s face right now: how he’ll be frowning into the phone while drumming his fingers on his desk. In the background the sound of shouts and sirens are clearly audible and it’s depressingly easy to imagine that particular brand of chaos as well. All the dashing and darting and snapping and arguing, and Jack in the middle of it all with his frown and his tapping fingers.

“Look, it’ll be much easier to explain in person,” Jack eventually says. “Just get here as soon as you can.”

He doesn’t add anything else so Will hangs up and gives an inadvertently mournful sigh before attempting to make a few stammered apologies for ending the evening prematurely. “Naturally you must go,” says Hannibal, cutting them off in full flow. “It sounds like an emergency.”

Will sighs again then drags his hand through his hair, exhausted and demoralised at the mere idea of it. “You could say that.”

“Do get in touch if you need anything,” adds Hannibal, briefly looking even more Sphinxxy and pokerfaced than usual. “Although please bear my earlier instructions in mind if you decide to contact me for any other reason than work. If you wish to be whimsical, for example. Or…impulsive.”

But Will just nods distractedly and the next few minutes proceed in virtual silence beyond Hannibal offering to pay the tab for them both – and Will politely ignoring him by dropping some bills on the table – then heading towards the exit as Will strides ahead with his head slightly bowed. Once
outside he turns up his collar as a defence against the cold then stamps his feet a few times on the frosty pavement while trying to work out what to say next. Hannibal’s face, illuminated in the glow of the streetlamps, looks rather unworldly – all planes and sharp angles – and Will gazes wordlessly at it while consumed with the awareness he should just go despite finding it inexplicably difficult to pull away. Why is it so hard? He doesn’t even know. There’s only the sense that once he does then the moment will pass as reality reasserts itself, and the two of them will no longer be dwelling in that wildly outlawed wonderland that seems to soar up between them and blaze away on the horizon far beyond what passes for the real world. If that’s even what it is…Will isn’t sure; he doesn’t have the words for it. And yet a guilty sense of wishing to recapture it has a fervour and urgency that’s overpowering.

“Well, thanks then,” he finally manages to say. “I guess I’ll be seeing you.”

Hannibal makes no response so Will gives an absent half-nod and reluctantly turns to leave, only to move rather too fast and stumble slightly as he catches his foot against an icy stretch of kerbstone. He’s at no real risk of falling over but Hannibal still darts out anyway and takes hold of him with both hands. Then instead of letting go again he just keeps his palms curled round Will’s shoulders before smiling very faintly and slowly sliding them down his arms.

“Careful Will,” says Hannibal in a tone that’s somewhat unsettling in its quiet intensity. “You’re getting close to losing your balance. Becoming unmoored. I know,” he adds just as Will’s opening his mouth to try and respond. “It’s so much to bear sometimes isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” snaps Will. His voice in his own ears seems oddly far away, rather as if he’s speaking from outside of himself, and he’s aware of wanting to struggle without actually being able to.

“But you do,” replies Hannibal, now so soft and resonant he almost sounds like he’s purring. “All the darkness, the dread and the doubt. This work you do so well and the way in which you do it…so very artful and lethal. Sometimes you feel like your mind is breaking.”

Will’s breath catches slightly, aware of how his entire focus is starting to constrict and shrink towards the black soulless eyes staring into his, the low hypnotic voice, and the sensation of warm breath that’s now so close it’s skimming against his eyelashes. The situation is becoming surreal now: delirious and overwhelming. Surely it shouldn’t be possible to feel so vulnerable yet so empowered, so right and so wrong, and such a cold sense of dread yet such a molten sense of yearning all clamouring together at the same time? Then for a few feverish seconds it’s completely impossible not to imagine what it would be like if Hannibal leaned just a little closer – a few inches would be enough – and tried to kiss him. How it would feel to have their lips touch together, the noises they might both make, the way he’d reach up to run his hands through Hannibal’s hair and possibly pull it. To have his face cupped in a warm, firm palm as Hannibal’s tongue slid into his mouth…

“Angelo Della Morte,” adds Hannibal caressingly. He finally releases Will’s arm and reaches up a hand instead so he can trail his forefinger across the tip of Will’s cheekbone and along his jaw before using his thumb to gently brush against his lower lip. “The Angel of Death. In some cultures the angel is a form of righteousness and mercy; a beautiful tragedy with innovation, inspiration, and a dark slender soul. And so much inspiration in you Will, you can’t even comprehend it. The nature of who and what you are: something small, solitary and striving yet with such potential for greatness. A little wild thing. Yet you can never perceive it yourself can you? I have to see it for you; I have to be your eyes, Will, then hold up the looking glass for you to watch the transformation.” Will shakes his head again, even more numbly than before, and Hannibal smiles then finally releases him and takes a step back. “Off you go now Agent Graham,” he says in the same soft voice. “Jack Crawford is calling.”
Will flexes his shoulders as if attempting to shrug off the force of Hannibal’s touch then takes a step back himself. Only he still makes no attempt to walk away and Hannibal’s faint smile reappears as he begins to stare intensely into Will’s face simply to see how long he’ll be able to tolerate it. The gaze begins with Will’s eyes then moves down to his mouth as he charts the curve of the top lip then skims along the lower one before tenderly gliding upwards again; and Will swallows and briefly looks uncomfortable but doesn’t actually move. That’s right my love, thinks Hannibal with a sharp stab of yearning. My beautiful boy. You’re doing so well. So fierce. So fearless; just allow yourself to feel it. Then he inadvertently forgets about everything else himself in favour of stroking his eyes over Will’s face without speaking or moving until the abrupt sound of a cell phone shatters the silent intensity of the moment and makes Will jump. The phone rings on and on, abrasively forcing its way between them like a noisy chaperone and Hannibal, who can curse internally fearsomely and fluently in several different languages, proceeds to do so at length in response to Jack Crawford’s extraordinarily inconsiderate timing.

“I should go,” says Will, his tone oddly mechanical like someone in a trance. Although once again he makes no clear attempt to and a few more seconds pass before he finally drags his eyes away from Hannibal’s face and retrieves the phone from his coat pocket. “Yes Jack,” he tells it when he answers and Hannibal is captivated to notice the faint breathy hitch in his voice when he speaks. “I’m in the city now. Yes. I’m on my way. I’ll be with you in around 20 minutes. Why not? Why can’t you just tell me over the phone…?” Faltering slightly, he casts a final glance at Hannibal then eventually turns round and begins to head in the direction of his car. This time, he does it without looking back.

Hannibal, unfazed by the apparent dismissal, remains where he is so he can admire the sight of Will’s slim young silhouette striding determinedly down the road until it’s swallowed up in the swirls of darkness. From this distance Will looks vulnerable – deceptively so – as if the frozen streaks of shadow are competing to devour him. ‘Even his griefs are a joy long after to one that remembers all that he wrought and endured’ quotes Hannibal softly to himself, powerfully aware of how frustrating it is to be forced to let Will go. In fact the simplicity of the situation even has a certain elegance to it, in that after a lifetime of tempting fate, scorning retribution and evading pain or penance of any kind, it seems that all it’s ultimately taken to overpower him is this diminutive boy with his fine-boned fragile face and beautiful dark mind who’s come along and unknowingly inflicted the most acute punishment possible. So guileless, artless yet so ruthlessly effective – which is to simply take himself away and deny Hannibal access to him. How is it even possible that a single look from Will has the power to instil a sense of restless longing in Hannibal which he has only limited capacity to control? And yet it does. Another sign of your uniqueness, thinks Hannibal tenderly. But, in this moment at least, there’s absolutely nothing else to be done but to continue watching: poised, silent, endlessly patient, and only reluctantly turning to vanish into his own stretch of shadows when Will has finally disappeared from view.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hey my lovelies, sorry this one’s so late and many thanks for your patience. For RL work I’m generally a bit of a sassy Will although when it comes to sharing creative writing I clearly transform into a Franklyn with extras helpings of cheese and disappear into a black hole of cringe that sometimes makes it hard to post. Then I remember that it’s all anonymous and cheer up again. God knows how actual writers manage ;-D

Speaking of which, while I’m fairly used to criticism the animosity towards this fic seems to have got excessive even quicker than usual. Please can all the critical ranting anonymous people (C.R.A.P) kindly rein themselves in a bit and stop complaining at me week after week with special high intensity tantrums (S.H.I.T). Or have the courtesy to make your criticism polite and constructive, because otherwise it’s very off-putting and rude and you will get eat…deleted. Seriously, this is just smutty fanfiction not Great Expectations. Chill out. Or even better have a go at creating your own work rather than tearing down other peoples – I promise you’ll find it far more rewarding in the long run.

Fiinnally, sorry that I keep putting up the chapter count on this: it’s effectively a three act story and we’ve ended up staying in Act 1 way longer than planned due to all the set-up that’s needed for what happens later. In this respect I’m afraid it’s likely to go up again before the fic is finished, so advance warning (and apologies!) to anyone who dislikes long stories. I basically have no self-restraint at all and no editor either, and would undoubtedly benefit from both these things :-D

Katie x

Will drives back to the office in a sort of stupefied haze: clogged with incomprehension on one hand, yet also sharply aware of a need to re-examine what just happened and feeling unable to do so because the implications are too heady and overwhelming. More than that: threatening. Dangerous, even. In fact it’s the surge of emotion that’s unsettling him as much as anything else: so dizzying and unfamiliar as it is, and the way it manages to feel wildly enticing yet deeply ominous all at the same time. If it was a colour it would be a vivid splash of scarlet – the colour of sirens and flames and the sacred bleeding hearts in medieval icons – and when he glances down he half expects to see a crimson coated mist of it swirling round the car. In fact even acknowledging it at all feels like a blaze of risk and raw speculation; yet while common sense and self-preservation are urging him to resist it, the urge is nevertheless impossible to obey. It’s like tempting fate, like someone idling along the edge of a cliff: someone with their eyes closed, whistling to themselves with their hands in their pockets and believing that they’re untouchable – invincible – that they can’t ever fall. That other people might miss their footing and plummet into the depths but not Will, because he’s not like other people and can’t be contained by the same rules. He knows he’s falling back into this belief with blind faith, a type of mindless, unquestioning constancy that’s both reckless and irresponsible. And yet, and yet...

It’s at that moment that Will realises he’s once again deliberately not looking in the overhead mirror as if he’s afraid that the Dark Reflection is going to be lying there waiting to stare back, and the awareness of it makes him wince with frustration before slamming his palm against the steering

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
wheel in an attempt to focus. For God’s sake, he mutters under his breath, get a grip on yourself. Torrents of rain are streaming down the windscreen now and drowning the car in an eerie, watery glow that sends slivers of shadows across Will’s face and hands like phantom shoals as outside the streetlights blaze and other cars shriek and blare – and for a few seconds the intensity of it all briefly makes him want to scream. Then he thinks he actually can hear screaming and starts to panic before realising that it’s only the shrill wail of his cell phone. Jack’s name is flashing up on the screen and the sight of it finally reminds him that he’s about to walk into an office full of alphas whilst wearing hardly any pheromone spray, so promptly snatches at this dilemma as a chance of something practical to think about instead – anything rather than that thing in the mirror and the ghostly rivers of rain. In fact it’s such a welcome distraction that it transforms what would normally be an inconvenience into something of a relief, and he’s almost grateful to be able to turn the car round and take a detour through the city in order to find an all-night pharmacy that’s likely to stock it.

This turns out to be easier said than done, and Will grows unpleasantly aware of the minutes ticking past – and the corresponding image of Jack growing increasingly pissed off – before finally locating a shop that’s still open. As might be expected at this time of night it’s tenanted almost entirely by the shifty and seedy-looking, and Will feels uncomfortably conspicuous in his suit to the extent he fastens his coat up to try and conceal it. Then he joins the back of the queue, twitching with nervous impatience the entire time, and where it’s impossible not to overhear the conversation of a pair of customers in front of him who are excitedly examining The TattleCrime on their cell phones.

“Another one!” exclaims the older of the two men to his companion. “That’s six now. Six.” He pauses and gives a low whistle. “The guy’s on some kind of rampage.”

“Pretty cool,” replies the other laconically.

“If I was an omega I’d be shitting myself. Jesus. Imagine knowing something like that could come after you?”

“It’d blow my mind,” says the younger man, despite having no real appearance of possessing a mind to blow.

“I heard they’re talking of putting a curfew on them until the Sculptor’s caught.”

Will, who hasn’t heard this but finds it extremely easy to imagine, now begins to shuffle irritably at the thought of it. Because of course it would be omegas that get warned to stay off the streets, or are possibly even forced to do so. No one will try and put a curfew on alphas, despite the fact that the Sculptor almost certainly is one.

“Serves the spoilt bitches right,” adds the younger man contemptuously. “If it was betas being targeted nobody would care.”

The tone of this is very decided, as if some sort of stunningly insightful point has just been made, and Will finds it impossible to stifle the sigh of frustration that’s been threatening to work its way out for the past few minutes. And while it’s fairly subdued, it’s still enough to make the older man glance over his shoulder then pause and perform a double-take as he catches sight of Will.

“Hey!” he says eagerly. “Hey, I know you! You’re…”

“No I’m not,” snaps Will.

The man’s formless rubbery face begins to contort into a bizarre combination of offence and disappointment which in other circumstances might be amusing but at the moment just strikes Will as creepy and unsettling. “Oh yeah?” he demands accusingly. “Chill out pal. You don’t even know
what I was going to say.”

“I’m not anyone you would have heard of,” replies Will with equal sharpness. “Pal.” Then he retrieves his own phone from his pocket and makes a play of examining it in what’s an obvious gesture of dismissal. The men shuffle round again muttering ominously, although even after they’ve been served refuse to leave the shop and instead stand a few feet away conversing in low voices and darting unpleasantly beady looks in Will’s direction. Will curses internally when he sees them, although admittedly saves the most extreme cursing for himself at having been so stupid as to get into this situation in the first place. But it was only because you were there, adds Will to himself, half annoyed and half mournful as he briefly imagines Hannibal. In this respect having to buy the spray in front of these assholes feels like some kind of ritual in epic awkwardness, if not outright humiliation, but it’s impossible to go to the office empty-handed and he knows he doesn’t have any choice. As a last resort he asks for it using the generic chemical term rather than the brand name in the vague hope that they won’t recognise what he’s talking about.

“Would you prefer Pherazene or Pherex?” asks the pharmacist, promptly ruining this ploy. “The Pherazene is cheaper but the Pherex is more long-lasting.”

As expected the men’s heads jerk upright like marionettes on strings and the sight of it induces the familiar queasy sense of panic that always hits Will at the idea of being exposed as an omega in public. Then for a few seconds he feels a rush of anger towards Hannibal despite knowing it’s completely unfair: although whether it’s because Hannibal isn’t here to offer protection, or because Will wouldn’t be here at all except for the lure of Hannibal’s company is impossible to say. Nevertheless, it’s still nothing compared to the anger and reproach he feels towards himself.

“Hang on a moment would you?” he says instead, deliberately keeping his voice as casual and level as possible. “I’m not sure to be honest, I just need to check.”

He then has to root around for his cell in order to go through a performance of pretending to make a call to determine the preference of the phantom omega on the other end who’s the true recipient of the spray; and which as a ploy feels faintly ridiculous but ultimately necessary, and he can’t bring himself to fully regret it – not even when he pretends to hang up and the pharmacist smiles sympathetically and says: “Yes omegas often get confused over the medical terms. It can be a bit complex for them, poor things. Next time you should probably just get them to write it down for you beforehand.”

Will yearns to tell him to go and fuck himself but forces out a grudgingly polite smile instead then pockets the spray and attempts to make as quick an escape as possible – not least because he knows the delay will have given the two men sufficient time to do what he was afraid of all along: which is to refer to the numerous available photos on The TattleCrime and confirm that they are, in fact, stood right next to Will Graham. Sure enough he hasn’t even reached the exit before one of them yells out: “Hey! I knew it was you. Hey! Come back here man. Come back! When did you last hear from the Sculptor?”

“My God, is he that FBI guy?” says someone else; and Will abandons restraint and darts out the door then actually runs back to his car before it can occur to any of them to try and chase after him. His heart has started pounding in his ears in a fraught, panicky way and he’s forced to spend a few seconds attempting to calm down and reassure himself that courtesy of the fake phone call no one is any wiser about the fact he’s an omega. And it’s not like they knew for certain it was him. Nevertheless the whole experience has left him feeling unsettled and anxious and it still requires a few more seconds of self-soothing before he’s able to restart the engine and make the rest of the way to the office. Oh God, he’s going to be really late now – which means Jack is going to be pissed off in exact proportion to the lateness. Not that there’s much he can do about it. In fact, all things
considered, Jack should be fucking grateful Will’s managed to get here at all. Pulling up the car he liberally douses himself with the spray and for the first time since leaving Hannibal feels slightly more secure and safe again.

“You took your time,” says Jack accusingly when Will finally sidles in. “I thought you said you were in the city?”

“I was. Traffic was bad.”

“Traffic! At this hour? Which route did you take?”

“The usual,” snaps Will.

Jack makes a huffing noise then seems to notice Will properly for the first time and begins to narrow his eyes. “Were you on a *date*?”

“No,” says Will.

“So why the suit?”

As questions go it’s not entirely unreasonable, although Will still resents the tone in which it’s being asked – not to mention the fact it’s being asked at all. “I always change into this when I get home,” he says irritably. “The dogs refuse to be seen in public with me otherwise.”

Jack makes another huffing noise, although this time of a rather more subdued variety in acknowledgment of the fact he’s being nosy and essentially had that one coming. “Well thanks for joining us,” he adds in a kinder tone. “I know it’s inconvenient.”

“It’s fine,” says Will, trying not to sound too martyred about it. “So what have we got? And what was so important you couldn’t tell me over the phone?”

“Important isn’t exactly the right word,” replies Jack. “More like…complicated. Or maybe it’s not even that; maybe it’s nothing.” Will sighs impatiently and Jack holds up his hands. “Okay, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so cryptic. All right, for starters: does the name James Leyland mean anything to you?”

This time it’s Will’s turn to frown. “No. Should it?”

“He’s the most recent victim. Omega, of course, and found several hours ago in an alleyway on the south side. He had his wallet on him so we were able to ID him immediately. It turns out he was an ex-cop.”

“Oh yeah?” says Will, mildly interested on the grounds that omegas in law enforcement, while not unheard of, are by no means common.

“Yeah. You see, the thing is Will – he used to work at the same place you did.”

“What, in New Orleans?” says Will incredulously. “What was he doing up here.”

“Same as you, I guess: he moved. Actually, why *did* you move? I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned it.”

Seeing as he can hardly reply ‘because I would have been forced to bond with a complete and utter bastard if I didn’t’ Will just shrugs then goes extremely quiet as he begins to gnaw at his thumbnail. His ideal response to the link with Leyland is some kind of breezy, casual gesture – preferably
accompanied by ‘what a weird coincidence!’ – only he can’t quite bring himself to do it owing to the sinking sensation that it’s not a coincidence at all.

“The name isn’t familiar,” he finally replies. “Have you got a picture?” Jack scoops up a manila folder from his desk and rifles through it to retrieve a photocopied driving license which he silently passes over. “Yeah, I recognise him now,” says Will tonelessly a few seconds later. “He always called himself Jim though, not James. He was a homicide detective.”

“Working homicide? Unusual for an omega.”

“Yeah,” replies Will in the same flat voice. “I guess.”

“What was he like?”

“I don’t know. Good, I suppose. He got the job done. People liked him.” In fact Leyland had not been good as opposed to merely competent and Will, for one, had certainly not liked him – but an ingrained reluctance to start trawling up minor grudges and criticism about a recent victim of violent murder makes him hold himself back. “What difference does it make?” he says instead. “We know this wasn’t personal. He wasn’t killed because of what he was like; he was killed because he was an omega.”

Jack goes quiet for a few seconds and Will sighs heavily because he can predict exactly what’s coming. “You know I have to ask…” Jack eventually says.

“Because of the card?”

“Because of the card.”

“Did we have any contact when we were working together? Yes. We did. One case – Richard Black.”

“Who?”

“The Nemesis Killer,” says Will. “At least that was what he called himself. The papers called him the Creole Co-Ed Killer, which he objected to because he thought it made him sound like a sex murderer – despite the fact that’s what he actually was.”

“Nemesis? It sounds like a video game character.”

“A nemesis is a source of defeat or downfall that’s inescapable,” says Will. “In Greek mythology she was the goddess of retribution and vengeance.” He pauses then catches Jack’s eye. “Black claimed the murders were a form of punishment against alphas. By killing omegas he thought he was delivering the ultimate vengeance against a group that had ridiculed and objectified him. Only he got it wrong and most of the victims weren’t even omegas. It’s why the case never got widespread publicity. Probably no one outside the state would even have heard of it”

“He was a beta?”

“Yeah. He was also full of shit. After he was convicted he changed his story completely and insisted he was innocent. A tribunal actually took him seriously; or at least seriously enough to give him an appeal.”

“On what grounds?”

“An insanity plea: false confession due to temporary mental incompetence.”
“It does happen,” says Jack reasonably. “We had one in Baltimore a few years ago. Mark Evans his name was: we used to call him Edward The Confessor because he’d turn up at the station after every high-profile case and insist it was him. They do it for the attention.”

“I know it happens,” snaps Will. “But it’s not what happened there. I have absolutely no doubt that Richard Black killed those students then dreamt up a bullshit story about alphas to try and glorify himself. Then after a few weeks in prison he decided he didn’t like it all that much and tried to lie his way out again.”

“So what role did you and Leyland have?”

“Leyland was the arresting officer. I did the profile and a suspect list but I never even met Richard Black. The only time I saw him was at the trial.” He pauses for a few seconds, giving a small shudder as he remembers the way the cold, dead eyes had flickered over him the entire time he was on the stand. “My role was actually pretty limited.”

“Hardly limited; it sounds like they wouldn’t have found him without you.” Will just shrugs, typically modest, and Jack pointedly clears his throat. “Even so Will, it’s an odd coincidence. Very odd: a purported omega killer with a link to you and the current victim.”

“I know,” says Will unhappily. “Too much of a coincidence to overlook. We need to run checks on the other five and see if there’s any kind of connection to Richard Black.”

“Agreed.” Jack leans over and begins to speed-type into his laptop, pausing every few seconds to glance up at Will. “So, what happened to him?”

“To Black? He died in prison.”

“And did he maintain his innocence?”

“He did – swore blind to the very end that we got the wrong guy.” He hesitates then catches Jack’s eye. “Which we didn’t. There’s no possibility that the real Richard Black is here right now in Baltimore.”

“Mistakes happen Will. You said yourself you never even met him; what if the other officers got it wrong?”

“No way,” says Will firmly. “Everything matched up. Besides, it doesn’t make any sense: even if Richard Black was wrongfully convicted, why would the real killer care? Why would he go after Leyland? Or leave my initials at one of his scenes?”

“Why do these guys do anything?” replies Jack. “Although I agree – it doesn’t seem very likely.”

“It’s not remotely likely. A copycat on the other hand…”

“Oh yes, you mentioned that before. You still think that’s what we’re dealing with?”

“I think it’s possible. I also think Richard Black is an extremely unlikely candidate for inspiring an imitator – although it’s still more plausible than the original killer being at large. It could also be that this has got nothing to do with him and the Sculptor’s motive is something entirely different. On the balance of probability I’d still go for the latter; but we need to do the checks regardless.”

“I’ll get someone on it right now,” says Jack. “Nice work Will. This is the best lead we’ve had so far.”
“Well, we’ll see.”

“Here’s another coincidence for you,” adds Jack, beginning to shuffle papers together. “That guy who was hovering around the field the day we found number five. Do you remember? You said he couldn’t possibly be a hiker.”

“Oh yeah. What about him?”


“Yeah, weird,” agrees Will, even though he’s only half-listening. Beyond the window he can hear the inevitable shrieking commotion as packs of journalists begin to assemble in front of the building. They sound so wild and unrestrained: violent, almost, in their angry indignation. For some reason the expression *baying for blood* comes to mind, despite the fact it’s far too late for that and the blood has long since been spilt. The blood of number six – of Jim Leyland – destined to be followed, no doubt, by that of seven and eight and onwards and up. An endless quantity of blood to bay for.

In spite of himself, he shudders.

*****

Will arrives home so late it’s technically early and as he pulls into the driveway dawn is starting to break overhead. The way it streaks the sky with shades of crimson and purple make it resemble something truly broken – bruised and bleeding – and while the air is growing less vapid as the fog slinks away to wait for nightfall, there’s still something about the scene that’s sufficiently oppressive to make Will hurry into the house even faster than usual. The yard is completely empty with no signs of disturbance, but once he’s greeted and fed the dogs he can’t resist making a point of letting them out to see if they show any interest in the corner where he thought he saw the figure. Sure enough a couple of them make a beeline there and begin to sniff furiously across the ground and against the wall; but likewise they don’t start barking or clawing and seem to lose interest pretty quickly – and which, on reflection, Will decides to use as further reassurance that no one was ever really there.

The most sensible thing to do now would be to go to bed. But after several hours’ worth of meetings, pathology reports and press statements Will’s feeling far too uptight to sleep and in the end retrieves a beer from the fridge along with the remains of a takeout pizza that might just about pass for edible and ferries the whole lot over to his desk where he sits for a few moments gazing into space. It’s too dim to see properly with the little table lamp as his only illumination, but there’s also something about the ambience that he finds soothing and it doesn’t make him want to turn on the overhead light. Just the soft glow of the lamp and the pale sun-blushed air as it filters through the cracks in the curtains and Will alone in the middle of it all: alert and watchful amid the solitude, like the survivor of some strange catastrophe that’s put everyone else to sleep and left him as the only person still awake to reflect on it all.

After a few more minutes of silent staring Will eventually retrieves his journal from the desk drawer and places it carefully in front of him before tracing his fingertips against the cover. Everything’s so quiet…so, so quiet, as if the room itself is holding its breath. *As silent as the grave,* as the saying goes. Although graves are also a place of discretion where secrets are kept and whatever’s revealed can never be known to another person. *I’ll take it with me to the grave*; another expression. Where better to unburden yourself, after all, then inside such concealed and sacred silence? Picking up a pen, he finally starts to write.

*Dear You,*
So it turns out there’s been another one. Although ‘one’ implies the singular and it’s actually a multitude of ones: one more body in the mortuary, one more devastated family, one more reason for everyone to lose their minds – one more to follow on from the five that went before him. You already know that of course, although there’s still something I can tell you about it that you don’t know, which is that I knew him. God, it sounds like a grammar exercise doesn’t it: you know, I knew, we are knowing. Not that I knew him all that well, or even all that recently either. In fact it seems like a whole lifetime ago now, like a memory that belongs to someone else. It’s as if he’s a relic from someone else’s life. Which I suppose he is in a way: I was a different person back then.

Not that any of this changes the fact that I knew him, and he knew me, and now you know about it too. Known, knew, know, no. Don’t you think there’s almost something ironic about that – the way ‘know’ has a ‘no’ hidden away inside it? It’s like knowledge is built upon not knowing at all once you look into the center. Don’t worry by the way; I don’t expect you to agree. You always seem to know. And even if you don’t it’s because you didn’t think it was worth knowing in the first place, so I guess you still wouldn’t care.

Anyway, I spent a lot of time in my other letters telling you about things I don’t know so tonight I want to tell you something that I do. This thing that I know is something I’ve suspected for a while but haven’t been entirely certain of until now: just a lingering hint and a vague impression which has grown stronger and clearer over time until it’s finally vivid enough to reach out a hand and take hold of. Are you listening? I’m going to tell you now.

This thing is: I know that you’re dangerous.

The extent of it remains undetermined, I’ll admit that, but the reality of it is indisputable. I know that you are – I just don’t know how much. Likewise I’m not sure whether you’re aware I’ve worked it out yet. Do you know that I know? I suppose you must do. It’s part of your design isn’t it? It’s difficult to imagine anything happening to you that you weren’t in complete control of, so I have to assume that this is deliberate and you’ve chosen to let me really see you. Or at least you’ve started to: just small gasps of vision, like sips. What I don’t understand yet is how far it’s supposed to go – but then it’s always impossible to be certain of much with you because you’re so indistinct. You become whatever people want you to be. In fact I compared you to a chameleon once. Do you remember? I said you could use charm to blend into your surroundings. Only it’s not just that, is it? It isn’t straightforward camouflage – it’s also what predators do.

To be honest I don’t even really know why I’m telling you any of this. It’s not as if you’d care. Or would you? Would my reaction ever be as interesting or relevant to you as your own? It’s so hard to get past the idea that much of what you do is simply to amuse yourself, as if it’s a human game of chess and I’m just one of the pieces to use until you get bored and choose another one to play with instead.

Oh yeah, the chessboard. I told you about that before; how I wanted to be an opponent. That much at least hasn’t changed, only sometimes I see you as another player, sometimes as a piece, and sometimes I see you as the board itself. Occasionally you’re even all three at the same time. I guess that sounds weird to you doesn’t it? It’s true though. You have a gift for inhabiting different spaces simultaneously. You’re an intellectual shape-shifter. Okay, that definitely sounds weird. What would that even be called? Malleability? Creativity? Adaptation? These things are all considered desirable and a feature of intelligence, yet while I know so many talented people I still don’t know anyone else who could do it. No one except you.

And look, here we are. I’ve come full circle again: from what I think I do know right back to what I know I don’t. A full circle with you in the middle of it – like the ‘no’ in ‘know’ – because I hardly know anything about you at all. But then, really, how much can we ever know about another
person? It’s not like you know everything either. You don’t know how much I think about you, or that I need you, or the way I miss you when you’re not there. You don’t know that I write to you like this. You don’t know that I can’t let go of you.

Dear you, what can I even tell you anymore? What is there left to say? Because the simple truth is that you pierce my mind. You get into my head and linger there and I know I should resent you for it and try to make you stop – and yet no matter how much I try, I always find that I can’t.

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Will finally stumbles into bed around 6am – still wearing his clothes because taking them off feels like far too much effort – and wakes up late morning feeling unpleasantly crumpled and gritty. His cell registers five missed calls from Jack, although considering he’s spent half the night running round the FBI Will feels it can wait another hour or so and goes to have a shower instead without calling back. Then he wraps a blanket round his shoulders and lets the dogs out for a run before assuming his usual sentry post by the window to sip the usual cup of coffee and brood about the fact he’ll almost certainly be seeing Hannibal at the team meeting this afternoon.

In fact thinking about Hannibal at all feels a bit like prodding a bruise to determine how tender and uncomfortable it is and after a few seconds of anxious probing Will can’t help feeling that last night’s ruminations seem rather foreign now; as if the sunlight is bleaching and disinfecting them into half their original potency, and where the impassioned outpouring of emotion seems like it happened to someone else. As if to prove the point he retrieves the journal from where it’s still lying on the desk and bundles it into one of the compartments before firmly closing the drawer on it. Then he returns to the window and nibbles absent-mindedly on his lower lip while watching the familiar danse macabre of the crows. God knows what’s really going on, but once all the hypotheticals are stripped away then the bare facts of the case are that even if Hannibal did have a moment of madness that made him want to bond with a patient (which he obviously wouldn’t), and even if Will didn’t have enormous reservations about the idea of bonding with anyone (which he does) then it still wouldn’t be possible because the legal ownership of Will lies irrevocably with Andrew. Admittedly the days of alphas killing each other over omegas are pretty much over, but Andrew is still extremely vicious and vindictive and while it’s impossible to imagine him being able to inflict physical damage on Hannibal (Will smirks slightly at the idea of it) he can – and absolutely would – take him to court over it.

At the thought of this Will now gives a deep shudder of humiliation, because as a scenario it’s entirely feasible. Such large sums of money are at stake for alphas who purchase omegas that any attempt by another alpha to impinge on them is taken extremely seriously. Nevertheless it’s still impossible to ignore the events of last night completely – and besides, surely anything is better than worrying about the Sculptor – so as a compromise he makes an effort to refocus his attention onto the aspects of it that were more straightforward and therefore less heady and unsettling. Foremost amongst these is his own physical appearance, and rather guiltily he finds himself remembering the approving way Hannibal had run his eyes over the suit. Not that this should be a surprise considering that Hannibal always looks as if he’s strolled from the pages of some glossy magazine or other, and the awareness of the contrast between them briefly makes Will feel unhappy and self-conscious. Then he berates himself for caring about something so stupid and delivers a stern internal lecture about vanity and superficiality; and which is fairly convincing in its way, although by the end of it has still done nothing to remove the feeling that just for once it might be nice for Hannibal to see him when he doesn’t look like he’s just crawled out of a logging cabin.

Will’s laptop is open next to him on the desk and after faltering for a few moments he finally tugs it towards him and gingerly types ‘Being attractive to alphas’ into the search bar, furtive and embarrassed the entire time as if he’s looking up something illegal. Then he pauses and inspects the
words before deciding that they’re too extreme and alters them to ‘getting along with alphas’ instead. Not that this is much better, seeing as all the websites that come up are overflowing with gushingly coy advice which is so incredibly mortifying that he decides, on reflection, that he’d rather die alone and single and half-eaten by his dogs than actually follow any of it. *Wait – what?* thinks Will with alarm. *What the fuck?* Then he reminds himself of his long-held resolution to *always* remain single and that this is less about being attractive in the conventional sense as it is about being smart and personable. The websites refer to this as being ‘chic’ or ‘stylish’, which might be all right for some people (Hannibal, for example) but is not at all appropriate for him. “It’s being *professional,*” says Will triumphantly. Or perhaps it’s partly about being appealing…but no more than that. No more than *partly.* In fact he can rapidly feel himself losing interest in the whole thing and in the end just rummages in the back of the wardrobe for a jacket that’s vaguely smart-looking compared to his usual ones. Although as attempts go to make yourself look professional and/or appealing this actually feels incredibly half-assed, and Will frowns over it for a while before finally changing his shirt for one that’s sleeker and more tailored which he hardly ever wears then running his fingers through his hair a few times. The gushing websites all refer to this as giving your hair ‘bounce’ although he’s adamant that this is not what he’s doing at all (“Bounce, my *ass,*” says Will accusingly towards the laptop) as opposed to just making it appear a bit more vibrant and healthy-looking, thank you very much. Then he’s just contemplating leaving off his aftershave to let his natural scent come through (given that Hannibal’s sense of smell is acute enough to detect it beneath the pheromone spray) and possibly unfastening the top few buttons of the shirt to show off his throat – before rejecting both these things on the grounds that no level of internal bullshit can justify them as being in the service of professionalism – when he’s finally saved from any further deliberations by someone knocking loudly on the door.

A visit this early in the day, or in fact at any time of day, is sufficiently unusual to make Will feel uneasy and his first thought is that it’s going to be Jack breathing fire and brimstone and demanding why Will isn’t in the office. Although there’s no way Jack would haul himself out here; he’d call instead and dispense the fire and brimstone down the phone line rather than deliver it in person. Going downstairs Will falters for a few seconds, torn between a desire to ignore the knocking and resentment of the idea of being afraid to answer his own front door, before finally compromising and slotting on the chain so he can pull it open by a few wary centimetres. Naturally enough it’s not Jack, but contrary to his fledging sense of hope it’s not Hannibal either; and Will is enormously surprised to realise that he’s currently in possession of none other than Siemens shuffling around on his doorstep: pink-cheeked, bright-eyed, and muffled up against the cold in a rather comical-looking scarf whose bold primary colours and general fluffiness make it resemble something a pre-schooler might wear.

“Hey Will!” says Siemens merrily. “Look at you! You look very…” He pauses then gifts Will a slightly blushing look from over the top of his scarf. “You look very well.”

Will blinks a few times then before he can stop himself snaps “What are you doing here?” with an abruptness that’s definitely on the wrong side of rude but which is equally impossible to substitute for something more polite, because honestly – what the hell *is* he doing here?

Siemens’ merry expression begins to fade, rather as if someone has turned down the dial on a dimmer switch. “I just wanted to check you were okay,” he says, beginning to shuffle his feet even more elaborately than before. “You didn’t show up to work this morning. And then, well, I mean it was a bit odd: this guy just turned up looking for you.”

At the sound of this Will is aware of visibly stiffening, even as he’s desperately trying to soothe himself back into calmness. *Don’t panic,* he thinks. *You’re okay, you’re okay.* Nevertheless it feels in that moment as if the sky has grown more ominous and overcast as the clouds descend and the light drains away, and the murder of crows renew their hymn of croaking urgency that’s sufficiently loud
for even Siemens to glance over his shoulder and stare at them.

“What guy?” Will eventually says, trying to keep the anxiety from leaking into his voice. “What do you mean?”

“Zeller told me he’d been asking about you before and that he was probably a journalist.” Siemens hesitates then glances at Will with an expression of wary sympathy. “Which he might be of course. But from my experience…well, I thought he might be a private investigator. He just had that look about him.”

Hearing Siemens say the words aloud makes Will realise that he’d suspected the same himself all along and has been ignoring it from a desperate desire to believe it wasn’t true. He can feel his stomach starting to churn in a horrible, panicky way and in an effort to quell it stares fixedly into the horizon while gripping onto the door handle in an attempt to steady and ground himself.

“You’re not…you’re not in trouble are you?” Siemens asks sympathetically. “I mean, I saw him off for you. I told him he was trespassing on federal property: quoted section 4.2 of the statutory code at him. It was completely irrelevant of course, but he obviously didn’t know that.” His mournful, moon-like face briefly looks hopeful, once again reminding Will of a dog that’s anxious for a kind word. “I don’t think he’ll come back. But I thought you should know. I mean, if someone has put a PI onto you…”

“Thanks,” says Will bleakly.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” replies Will in the same bleak tone. “Not really.”

Siemens shuffles his feet again and Will can’t help reflecting on how it’s easy to focus on his more ridiculous aspects and forget that he’s actually a trained lawyer and, given that he immediately identified the PI for what he was, is clearly possessed of more acumen than most people – including Will – give him credit for. In fact in this respect he’s shown a level of initiative that’s bordering on uncomfortable, and despite the obviously friendly reasons for the visit Will can’t quite keep the sharpness out of his voice when he says: “How did you know where I live?”

“It’s in the file Will,” explains Siemens with evident embarrassment. “Anyone with clearance can look it up.”

Will nods absently while internally cursing himself for forgetting about this and resolving to do something about it as soon as possible. Then he sees Siemens gazing hopefully up at him with dog-like earnestness so forces himself to add: “Thank you for your concern.”

“You’re welcome Will,” replies Siemens, whose metaphorical tail has started to wag again. “Are you sure I can’t help you out with anything? Do you need a ride in?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks. I’ll drive myself.”

“Well okay then,” replies Siemens. Then he shuffles awkwardly for a few more seconds, clearly on the verge of blurtimg something out, and Will sighs to himself as he finally processes the coy glances Siemens is darting in his direction and has a sudden awful realisation at what it’s going to be. “Look Will,” says Siemens, taking a deep breath. “I’ll be heading off now, but before I go I was just wondering…I mean…I just wondered if you happened to be seeing anyone at the moment? Because I thought we could, y’know, maybe hang out some time?” He pauses and stares up beseechingi: hands clasped together like a salesman or possibly someone door-stepping for charity donations. “I
mean if you wanted? I thought we might be able to if...if you wanted?"

Oh fucking fuck, thinks Will gloomily; and despite a sincere amount of effort he knows his reservation must have briefly flickered across his face. “I appreciate you asking,” he says, aware that he’s choosing his words so carefully it’s making him sound stilted and unnatural. “But...”

“...But you’d rather not,” concludes Siemens, suddenly looking so crushed that Will feels genuinely bad for him. “Gosh, I’m sorry Will. I’m horrible at this. To be honest I wasn’t going to say anything at all, only my analyst told me I need to get better at pursuing positive goals.”

The image of this – of Siemens sat in some therapist’s pastel-painted office earnestly discussing the pursuit of Will as a positive goal despite being doomed to failure – has a level of pathos to it that’s almost unbearable and for a few seconds Will feels as if he and Siemens are staring at each other with matching looks of dismay. “It was presumptuous of me,” says Siemens unhappily. “Someone like you...of course you wouldn’t be interested in someone like me. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Will opens his mouth then closes it again and in the end doesn’t answer immediately. He knows his silence is unhelpful – is making an uncomfortable situation even worse – but it’s incredibly difficult to formulate a proper response: partly because Siemens’ awkward embarrassment appears to be contagious, but mostly due to the way this sad scene on the doorstep, for all its foolish mundanity, has stirred something deep inside Will that’s made him genuinely unhappy. Because it should be impossible to take Siemens completely seriously, standing there as he is with his ridiculous name and his pre-schooler scarf and his sad moon-shaped face: and yet there’s nevertheless an element of dignified suffering about the whole thing which makes Will feel in that moment that Siemens cuts a far more impressive figure than Will himself does. Because at least he asked. Even though he knew he’d almost certainly be unsuccessful, he still had the courage to pursue what he wanted. He had the courage to acknowledge it even exists, which is far more than Will has ever been able to manage. Siemens hasn’t taken refuge in layers of denial and evasion. He hasn’t lied to himself and everyone around him, even as Will is doing right now.

Siemens shrugs unhappily like he’s about to wilt, and the sight of it is enough to finally make Will pull himself together and say “It’s fine,” in as kind a tone as possible. “There’s nothing wrong with asking,” he adds after a few seconds pause. “It’s a brave thing to do. I’m usually so scared of rejection I wouldn’t even try for it.”

“Oh yeah?” says Siemens, attempting a smile. “You don’t strike me as someone who scares easily.”

Across the fields the murder of crows are soaring and plummeting and Will stares at them as he briefly remembers of an old observation of Jack’s: ‘Will Graham deals with huge amounts of fear. It comes with his imagination.’ He shrugs slightly. “I am,” is all he says.

“You hide it well, in that case.”

“Thanks,” says Will, trying to sound sincere.

Another torturously awkward pause then follows in which Siemens clears his throat a few times and shuffles his feet so extravagantly they appear to be on fire, while Will seems to have forgotten he’s even there and just stares vaguely into the distance at the spectacle of the pillaging, ragged black bodies of the crows.

“Well, I guess I’ll be heading off now,” Siemens eventually adds. “Did you say you’ll be in later?”

“Yeah. Later.”
“Well, okay then,” says Siemens unhappily, beginning to twist the ends of the scarf together.

“We can go for a coffee sometime if you like?” offers Will, despite not really wanting to. “Y’know – as friends.”

Siemens abandons the scarf then thrusts his hands in his pockets as the mournful look briefly flits across his round face. “Thanks,” he says eventually. “I’d like that…Perhaps this afternoon?”

“No, I won’t have time today. But – maybe sometime.”

Siemens gives a resigned nod, clearly understanding this for the polite boundary-setting it actually is, and for a few seconds the mournfulness seems to melt away as a shadow of something bitter and resentful twists around his mouth in its place. Then the look is gone nearly as fast as it arrived leaving him looking, if possible, even more sad and puppyish than before. “Sometime then,” he repeats unhappily.

“Sure.”

“Well look after yourself,” says Siemens, slowly beginning to retreat towards his car like he’s reluctant to leave. “And Will? I’m sorry for just turning up here. It was a bit forward of me; I guess I should have called instead. I just wanted to see you…I mean, I wanted to see if you were okay.”

“No problem,” says Will, attempting to slide back behind the door.

“And I hope I didn’t freak you out or anything. Y’know – with that stuff about the PI? Seriously Will, if I can help you in anyway? If you need any legal advice?”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” says Will, even though he’s no longer really listening. Because of course it’s not a legal matter; at least not in the sense that the law can protect him. Quite the opposite in fact, seeing that if the stranger at the office really was a private investigator there’s only one person who could possibly have sent him.

Back inside the safety of the house Will draws in a shuddering lungful of air and slowly lets it out again before leaning against the wall with his head tipped back. Almost directly opposite is the hallway mirror and as he stands there in the gloomy half-light he can feel himself consumed with a deep reluctance to catch sight of his face in the glass. Because by now he feels he can tell without even looking that it will be there. Pale and patient and lying in wait: that Dark Reflection of his…his dark mirror image. The one that wanted to beat the drug dealer to death with its bare hands. The one that lives in a twisted, outlawed space just beyond the reach of reality and croons ‘you could kill him, you could kill him’ over and over again like an eerie lullaby intended for nightmares. And standing there, alone in the silence and stillness with nothing but him and the mirror, he finds it impossible not to remember Hannibal’s words from last night in bar: seductive and rhythmic, and resonant with forbidden truths pronounced in a smoky voice. “It’s only natural.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Katarra for suggesting the extension of the chameleon metaphor from an earlier chapter :-)
Chapter 11

The morning manages to drag itself on for an interminable amount on time, limping and staggering like something with broken bones, before it eventually gives up entirely and turns into afternoon; at which point Will finally pulls himself together and obediently gets in his car and drives to work to meet Jack for the scheduled de-brief. The lack of traffic makes the journey much quicker than expected, and Will decides to head to the main pathology lab to wait out the remaining time given that there’s a high chance of finding Siemens loitering around in Price and Zeller’s. This is located at the very top of the building and he waits patiently for the elevator only to find himself flinching as the door slides open and the sight of the shiny panel immediately reminds him of that evening all those weeks ago when he saw the dark reflection in it for the very first time. In fact the whole interior now looks sinister somehow: a stiflingly enclosed metal cage that dangles on wires while shadows collect in the corners and strange faces stare out from the walls. Admittedly the sunlight streaming through the window and the sound of trainees gossiping and laughing down the hall should be more than enough to banish such overwrought ideas; yet in spite of himself he still feels disturbed and unsettled and in the end takes the stairs instead when he’s forced to acknowledge that he can’t get over the idea that the reflection is going to be in there waiting for him.

You’re full of shit, Will mutters to himself, attempting levity. But there’s ultimately nothing humorous or trivial about the memory of the reflection with its glittering eyes and grimly staring face, and as a coping strategy he knows that flippancy is going to be quickly doomed to failure. So he picks up his pace instead, eager now to get to the lab and find a legitimate form of distraction so he doesn’t have to think about it anymore, and pushes open the door then slides inside with something like a small sigh of relief. Beverly is on the phone when he comes in and gestures at him to take a seat; and which she somehow manages to accomplish despite jotting down notes in pencil with one hand while holding the phone in the other before swivelling round to adjust a second pencil which is wound into her long dark hair to keep it off her face in place of a proper clip. Will smiles slightly at the sight of it then settles onto one of the stools and begins to leaf through the stack of autopsy reports while Beverly snaps several variants of “…and I told you that you could have it when it’s ready,” into the phone and twirls the pencil around rather maniacally like a member of a malignantly renegade marching band. Given that Beverly’s temperament leans more in the direction of patience and fair-mindedness as a general rule, Will deduces that the person on the other end is being unreasonable in their request – and most likely has some degree of seniority as well, considering that Beverly is never known to berate or lose her temper with colleagues who are junior to herself. In this respect her promotion to head pathologist was met with a degree of good grace and lack of jealousy or disparagement that is extremely unusual, and her lab is widely perceived as a particularly pleasant and constructive place to work amongst the trainees and younger pathologists. Likewise she’s one of the very few alphas in his entire life to who Will has voluntarily admitted being an omega without having ever found cause to regret it.

“Hey Will,” says Beverly once she’s ended the phone call. “Sorry about that: one of the legal guys hassling me about paperwork. He seems to have forgotten that we don’t actually have a court case yet.”

Will gives a grunt of annoyance then flicks over another page of the reports. “It wasn’t Skinner was it?”

“It was, yeah. How did you know?”

“He was after Price for the same thing.”
“I bet he was,” says Beverly bitterly. “He keeps ranting about efficiency without ever seeming to realise that quality and speed are almost never compatible. Honestly, I don’t think he’d recognise efficiency if he tripped over it in the street.”

Will, who suspects that Skinner wouldn’t recognise efficiency if it stood on his shoulders and shit on his head, politely agrees that this is indeed the case.

“Anyway, my slide printer’s broken again so I’m behind on the new tissue samples.” Beverly gestures accusingly towards the desk at the ancient printer, which is notorious throughout the building for arising from slumber every few years to wreak havoc in the manner of some tentacled Lovecraftian God before sinking back to sleep and biding its time until it decides to rise up and unleash itself again. The printer stares back with a rather triumphant look on its malevolent silver face and Beverly scowls at it then turns towards Will again. “I keep asking Jack to replace it and he never does.”

“He’ll just blame the budgets,” says Will. “I wouldn’t bother if I were you.” Beverly sighs in agreement and Will flicks over the next page of the report then pauses and peers a bit closer at the typescript. “Hey, there’s a mistake in this one. It says internal carotid artery, but it was the external. Look: it’s too high up.”

“Oh, yes, you’re right,” replies Beverly after examining the image herself. “Good spot. Thanks.”

“It’s an odd injury though, don’t you think?” says Will thoughtfully. “The way it extends all the way to the vertebrae?”

“Everything about this case is odd. But yes, I agree, the injury isn’t typical.”

“It’s almost the way someone would cut an animal’s throat,” adds Will after another pause. “None of the others had this did they?”

“No, just this most recent victim. You think it’s relevant?”

“I don’t know. Possibly the Sculptor has experience in a farm or abattoir? Or maybe not; maybe it’s nothing. It’s worth making a note of though.”

“Agreed,” replies Beverly, reaching out again for the pencil. “I’ll send a memo to Jack. He stopped by here this morning actually: he says you knew the guy?”

“No really,” says Will without looking up from the desk. “It was a long time ago.”

“Something to do with whathisname…The Nemesis Killer?”

“Richard Black – don’t buy into any of that grandiose nemesis crap. He wasn’t a ‘source of defeat or downfall that’s inescapable,’ he was a pathetic sex killer who murdered those students because he liked it. And the link with the Sculptor is very implausible. But yeah; Jack’s looking into the backgrounds of the other five victims just to be sure.”

Beverly nods absently then to Will’s relief drops the subject and begins to busy herself with twisting the second pencil more firmly into her hair. “You want to grab something to eat before the meeting?” she asks when she’s finished. “We could go to the cafeteria: it feels like days since I had lunch.”

“Yes,” says Will, getting to his feet; then promptly regrets it because it means Beverly gets a proper look at him and immediately starts to smile in a rather suggestive way. “What?” he snaps, trying not to make his irritation too obvious.
“You look nice,” replies Beverly. “I mean you looked nicer than usual from the neck up, but with the clothes as well…”

“Right, yeah. Thanks.”

“You’ve done something different with your hair. New shirt, new jacket…”

“They’re not new,” protests Will. “I just don’t wear them that often.”

“You’ve left your glasses off too,” adds Beverly with a hint of triumph. “Admit it, Willikins – you’re on the prowl.”

“I am not on the prowl,” says Will with dignity. Beverly adopts an extremely obvious ‘pull the other one it’s got bells on’ face. “I’m not.”

“Well if you’re not you should be,” says Beverly. “Looking like that; if it weren’t for Anneke I’d snap you up myself.”

She laughs good-naturedly to indicate the sheer impossibility of ever wanting anyone else beyond Anneke and Will can’t help smiling too in response – not only because he likes Anneke personally, but from the fact that she and Beverly’s relationship has always seemed like an emblem of what such partnerships ought to be. Because Anneke not only has a good career of her own in publishing, but defies every expectation and constraint of a bonded omega by maintaining her independence and sense of herself, wherein Beverly’s cork board is always full of photos of Anneke receiving awards or travelling to places without Beverly, and Beverly’s conversation is always full of examples of Anneke being forceful and direct and how lucky she is to have someone like Anneke as opposed to Anneke being the fortunate one – which is undoubtedly the role omegas are more usually expected to take. And Anneke herself is warm and witty and endlessly appealing: charming everyone when she turns up at office parties or drops by the lab to see Beverly, with clothes that are always brightly coloured, anecdotes which are always lively and interesting, and long swaying dreadlocks whose tips she dyes vibrant shades of puce or red whenever the fancy takes her. “You should tell her not to,” one of the federal attorneys had once advised Beverly. “It looks so unprofessional.” And Beverly had descended into glorious outrage: not only at the implication that Anneke looked anything less than beautiful and perfect, but the sheer audacity of implying that someone – anyone – had the right to tell Anneke what to do. In fact their dynamic is so extremely unusual in its equality as to appear faintly implausible; and Will wouldn’t have even believed it to be possible if he hadn’t seen it for himself.

“I don’t want to be bonded to anybody,” he now says abruptly – then blushes when he realises he’s inadvertently spoken his thoughts out loud. Beverly raises an eyebrow and he adds, rather awkwardly, “I just wanted to smarten up a bit.”

“Honestly though Will,” replies Beverly with a little smile, “no matter what you say I can’t help feeling someone’s intended to expire with desire when they see you looking like that. Who have you got your eye on?”

“No one,” says Will irritably. “Anyway, even if there was someone, then he…um, or she…I mean not that it matters, because there isn’t anyone.”

“He? Go on Will, who is it? You can tell me.”

“Why does me dressing less scruffily than usual automatically have to be about someone else? What if I just want to do it for myself?”
“Because you’d never bother doing that just for yourself. And you look more than just smart, you look delectable; and I think you’re doing it on purpose. Do you know what you remind me of? That crazy 70s song people always do at karaoke: Wig wam bam, gonna make you my man.”

“Wig – what? What are you even talking about?”

“As if you didn’t know,” says Beverly, smiling into her coffee cup.

“No. No, I really don’t.”

“Wam bam bam, gonna get you if I can.”

“I know you think you’re hilarious, but you’re not.”

“Try a little touch, try a little too much.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” says Will in desperation.

“You’re right,” replies Beverly, relenting a little. “I’m sorry, I’m being stupid.”

“I’m not going to argue with that.”

“I wouldn’t bother with an alpha anyway if I were you; we’re far too much trouble. Find yourself a nice beta instead.”

Will grunts non-committedly and Beverly presses her hand on his shoulder before moving away and beginning to shuffle various papers together. “I’m sorry for teasing you,” she adds. “I get carried away.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not really: I’m turning into one of those awful matchmaker types who tries to pair all their friends off against their will. There’s no reason you can’t be perfectly happy on your own.” She hesitates a few seconds then adds in a gentler voice: “You really sounded as if you meant that before? When you said you don’t want to bond with anyone.”

“I did mean it,” says Will firmly. Then he opens his mouth to add I just want to be close to someone before closing it again in fear of how incredibly feeble this sounds.

“I guess the idea of it might be a bit overwhelming?” suggests Beverly. “Someone as empathetic as you; bonding would be very intense.”

Will hesitates a few seconds then just gives a vague nod in response, once more aware of the familiar urge to confide in someone despite feeling completely unable to do so. Because while Beverly’s point about empathy is undoubtedly true, it’s somehow so much more than that. Even his fear of losing his independence by being reduced to someone’s omega, while easy to explain and simple to understand, isn’t the entire truth on its own. And yet the full truth is such a nebulous, confusing thing that he doesn’t really have the words to explain it to himself: how he yearns for intimacy while simultaneously being terrified of it, and the sense that allowing someone to get close makes him deeply vulnerable to giving them the power to hurt him. Not to mention the fact that once they get too close then there’s no way to prevent them seeing how fatally damaged and unlovable he truly is and rejecting him as a result of it…and that seeing his own negative perception of himself being reflected back via someone else would trigger a level of devastation that Will really doesn’t think he can bear.
“If you ever want to talk about it?” ventures Beverly. “We could go for a drink sometime if you wanted? Not that we have to talk about that – we can easily talk about other things. In fact we could go to a karaoke bar and I’ll sing that wig wam bam song as punishment for being so annoying.”

Will starts to smile and carefully rearranges his own stack of papers before finally glancing up. “Sure,” he says. “That would be nice. Only – not karaoke.”

“Not karaoke. And honestly Will, you look great. It’s good to see. To be honest I was a bit worried about you before. I thought you might be getting sick.”

“I have felt a lot better recently,” agrees Will, then experiences a jolt of surprise as he realises he’s been so preoccupied with his numerous other problems that he’s briefly lost sight of the fact he actually does feel much better. In fact not only has the pain nearly vanished, but the tremor has gone from his hands and the memory problems have more than halved; and which, taken together, is strong proof that all those doctors did get it wrong after all and his use of the suppressants isn’t having undue adverse effects. At the thought of this he begins to cheer up again, not least because it might be possible to obtain the next batch by prescription rather than having to run the gauntlet of any more alleyways.

“Much better…” begins Beverly, although the rest of the sentence is lost when the door to the lab flies open and Price and Zeller some tumbling in. “What on earth?” adds Beverly with poorly concealed annoyance.

“Sanctuary! Sanctuary!” shrieks Price. “We come to seek asylum.”

“Skinner and Siemens are in our lab,” adds Zeller in explanation, “which means we have to hide out in yours ‘til they’ve gone.”

“Not all day you can’t,” says Beverly firmly.

“You mean you’re going to refuse us shelter in our time of need?” replies Price indignantly, beginning to rifle through a tray of samples on the desk. “What a heartless young woman you are Dr Katz.”

Beverly leans over and whisks the tray to one side. “Then you’re going to have to man up, Dr Price, and throw them out yourself.”

“We’ve tried. They won’t go.”

“Then you’ll have to try harder.”

“I suppose we could always try and smoke them out,” says Price thoughtfully. “I know how to make mustard gas.”

“It’s not like they even have any reason to be there,” adds Zeller. “They’ve got nothing to do with the medical side. Well, I know why Siemens is there – he wants to marry Will.”

Beverly turns round with her eyebrows raised. “Don’t even think it,” says Will loudly.

“Well he does,” adds Zeller, taking a bite from an apple that Beverly has left on her desk. “He’s always talking about you and getting all starry eyed.”

“Can’t you go and lure them out Will?” urges Price. “Go on – take one for the team. They keep trying to reorganise my files and it’s driving me mad. Siemens in particular has a level of ineptitude that borders on impressive. I’d say he was ham-fisted, only that such a description does a disservice
“He’s not so bad,” says Will vaguely. “I guess he means well.”

“But Skinner means badly,” replies Zeller. “And the two of them always appear in a pair. Can’t you go and lure them out? Just walk past the door a few times and Siemens will go after you which means Skinner will go after him.”

“If I ever get haemorrhoids,” adds Price to no one in particular, “I shall name then Skinner and Siemens.”

“No,” says Will firmly.

“Oh well, then we may be here for some time,” says Price, settling into Beverly’s chair in a determined way that makes it clear he has no intention of moving again anytime soon. “We’ll have to take it in turns to be look out while someone else goes to forage for food.”

“You two are ridiculous,” says Beverly. “I suppose I’ll have to go and throw them out myself?”

“If you would that’d be marvellous,” replies Price, stretching his legs out in front of him. “Seeing as Will refuses to be live bait. Are you sure we can’t persuade you by the way, Will? In fact no doubt it would work equally well for Mr Skinner: he seems unaccountably fascinated with you as well. I caught him trying to get into your office this morning.”

“What?” says Will sharply.

“Just stood there in the hallway knocking and rattling on the door handle,” adds Price. “It’s clearly locked,’ I said to him; he just gave me one of those glares of his and stalked off. So if you would consider being live bait, I’m sure it would work incredibly well. In fact you’re looking rather more spry than usual: Mr Siemens in particular won’t be able to resist.”

Price adopts a cynical expression that’s not dissimilar to Beverly’s from earlier and Will has a new surge of something that’s partly embarrassment and partly annoyance at the idea of Hannibal being on the receiving end of similar insinuation about Will himself. Oh God, it’s so horribly easy to imagine it too: one of Hannibal’s wealthy sophisticated friends, possibly another doctor – and almost certainly another alpha – taking him to one side for a spot of good-natured teasing about Will’s obvious admiration. The way he trails round after you; don’t you think you should let him down gently? Omegas are so impressionable, they always get overly attached.” And Hannibal, smiling slightly and shrugging before promising to explain to Will that as much as he respects him and appreciates his company, genuine friendship is out of the question and they can never be on closer terms than that of doctor and patient…

“Will?” says Price. “Are you even listening to a word I’m saying?”

Will struggles to find the energy to insist that he is and ultimately gives up. “No.”

“I said that man came back this morning. The one we thought might be a journalist.”

Will opens his mouth to say that he already knows – before remembering that this will require explaining exactly how he knows – so promptly shuts it again. “I suppose one has to admire his tenacity if nothing else,” adds Price. “You might want to send him off yourself – he’s obviously not
“Yeah,” says Will after a strained pause. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Oh God, here comes Jack!” calls Zeller, who appears to have put himself on sentry duty and has his head half wedged round the door. “I bet he makes us go back to our own lab.”

“You know this is actually rather fun,” replies Price happily. “It reminds me of my college days; just like hiding out from the dean.”

“He’s got someone with him,” adds Zeller. “I bet you anything it’s Skinner…oh no it’s okay, it’s just Dr Lecter.”

Will shuffles awkwardly in his chair at the sound of this, trying and failing to wrestle his emotions into some sort of order before making an abruptly panicked decision that he can’t possibly face his first meeting with Hannibal since last night’s fraught encounter to be in front of an audience with no warning and therefore no time to prepare himself. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he says now, quickly getting to his feet and retreating towards the rear exit. “I just need to get that, um, stuff. For Jack.”

“What stuff?” asks Price. “And why are you wriggling around so much? You look like you need the bathroom.”

“The…reports,” says Will vaguely. “I left them in my car.” Then he dashes out before anyone can delay him further and sprints down the back stairwell so there’s no chance of bumping into Jack and Hannibal on their way up. Oh God, this is ridiculous – why is he being so gauche? It’s actually pretty humiliating; bullshit of proportions that are borderline *epic*. A Giza Pyramid of Bullshit, in fact. A Rhodesian Colossus of Bullshit. Then he spends so long berating himself (*Hanging Gardens of Bullshit, Elgin Marbles of Bullshit, engraved Elf Palaces of Bullshit…*) that he misses the right floor and has to retrace his steps in order to reach the entrance to the foyer, despite not having any real idea of what to do once he gets there. The janitor darts him a look of surprise when he materialises from via the fire exit, and internally Will begins to curse himself all over again for behaving in such a stupid way. Although at least this current plan – embarrassing as it is – has the consolation of allowing a bit of a breathing space to get himself together before having to face Hannibal again so perhaps it’s not so bad as all that. He can just saunter in casually halfway through the conversation, somewhat prepared and a bit less anxious, and it might not feel as tense as it would have done otherwise.

To kill a bit more time Will decides he might as well go to his car; especially considering that he’s going to have to pretend he’s searched it for the non-existent reports before claiming he’s left them at home instead when he comes back empty-handed. Christ. Surely being socially awkward never used to be so complicated? It’s uncomfortably cold outside without his coat and he speeds up a little before spotting the unmistakable gleam of Hannibal’s Bentley – and finding it impossible to resist taking a detour past it, despite despising himself the entire time for doing something so pathetic – when he suddenly hears someone calling his name. The voice is raspy and rather metallic sounding, almost as if the speaker has a throat full of staples, and when he turns round he sees a man with a long, tapering horse-like face who’s stood a few paces away by the hood of a dirty sedan that he appears to have just climbed out of.

“Will Graham,” he says, and the scraping voice is shot through with a note of triumph. “I knew it was you.”

Will can’t help stiffening slightly at this ominous statement and stands there for a few seconds feeling warily alert and poised to run yet likewise deeply reluctant to show anything that could be interpreted as fear or submission. “Oh yeah?” he says, and in spite of himself he’s pleased at how casual he
manages to make his voice sound. “And you are…?” With a bit of effort he works in a clear dash of disinterest – disdain, even – as if the man’s mere existence is of such profound irrelevance he can barely be bothered to comment on it. “And make it quick. I’m in a hurry.”

“You always seem to be in a hurry,” replies the man, and his voice contains the same clear trace of gloating as previously. “I’ve been trying to pin you down for a while now and everyone kept telling me I’d just missed you.” He smiles suggestively, flashing yellow teeth that are as large and uneven as tombstones to match the horse-like face. “Got you now though haven’t I?”

“What are you talking about?” snaps Will. “We haven’t even met before.”

“No – no, we haven’t. And we probably won’t again.” He pauses and slowly runs his eyes over Will’s face in a show of inspection that’s equal parts offensive and obvious. “Shame really. You look like someone I’d enjoy getting to know a little better. But I just wanted to see you Will, that’s all. The famous Will Graham. I just wanted to see you in person. And now I have.”

Will’s stare of contempt appears coolly controlled and appraising; yet inside he’s churning with foreboding because having processed various factors with lightning speed – the furtive manner, the clumsy attempt at a power-play – he’s convinced that this man and the private detective are undoubtedly one and the same. And what’s even worse is that the air of triumph is clearly coming from the fact that he’s just achieved the objective for which he must have been hired in the first place: to identify Will in person and confirm exactly where he can be found. Whether the rest of his odd manner is subterfuge, or some kind of creepy mind game or, God forbid, is actually genuine is impossible to say; but while he doesn’t know that Will’s recognised him for what he really is, the knowledge doesn’t make Will feel at any particular advantage. In fact it’s no advantage at all: Will could turn round now and instruct him to drop the bullshit and go back and tell Andrew to fuck himself and it wouldn’t make any difference. With an enormous effort he tries to stem the roiling sense of panic, floundering for something to catch hold of amidst the wreckage before alighting on the thought of the heat suppressants. Because as long as he’s got them, and as long as they’re working, Andrew’s claim on him diminishes substantially. That’s enough. Isn’t it? It’ll have to be enough.

The detective, wrongly interpreting Will’s strained silence as a sign of weakness, assumes a smug and somewhat predatory expression before taking a few steps closer; and the awareness of it is enough to jolt Will out of his anxious introspection and take a step forward himself in preparation of ordering this creepy asshole to fuck off away from him. Only it turns out not to be necessary after all, because he seems to have noticed something over Will’s shoulder that’s made him stop in his tracks before shuffling slightly and moving backwards again; and Will is briefly confused as to what could have happened to cause him to lose his composure when a familiar voice says: “Is there a problem here?”

“Hey man, there’s no problem,” replies the detective after a small pause. “I’ll be heading off in a minute. I just saw Will and wanted to meet him. That’s all.” The tone of his voice has noticeably altered from before, being far more courteous and ingratiating in an obvious attempt to please, and Will can’t help reflecting – rather enviously – how Hannibal possesses an almost supernatural ability to do nothing beyond standing there with an expression of polite interest on his face while still managing to silently communicate the fact that if you even think about fucking with him then he’ll happily kick your ass. “He’s sort of famous,” adds the detective as if trying to justify himself further. “I just couldn’t resist. Y’know what I mean?”

Hannibal’s dark eyes leisurely scan themselves across the man’s face before finally swivelling onto Will. “Beverly said you’d left some papers in your car,” he says calmly, “which reminded me that I’d likewise left my diary in mine. It would appear that we’re as absent-minded as each another.”
Will makes a non-committal noise in response, unable to decide if he entirely believes this (given how hard it is to imagine Hannibal forgetting anything) while struggling to shift the suspicion that he merely wanted an excuse to come and check up on him after hearing how Will had darted out the room. Then he processes the way that Hannibal is staring at the detective and decides, on reflection, that this display of ultra-casualness is probably more for the latter’s benefit than Will’s. In fact the expression ‘lulling into a false sense of security’ comes to mind, even though it’s not really all that suitable. After all, it’s hardly like Hannibal is going to start kicking him round the parking lot… although admittedly it would be rather fun to watch if he did.

“This yours?” the detective is now asking, tapping his hand against the hood of the Bentley.

Hannibal’s eyes slide down to the hand then elevate back upwards again. “It is, yes.”

“It’s nice.”

“Thank you,” says Hannibal politely.

“Beautiful in fact,” adds the detective. “I like beautiful things.” Only this time he’s not looking at the car at all, but rather straight at Will; who notices immediately and struggles not to snarl at him in response.

“I’d be happy to pass on a contact for the dealership,” replies Hannibal without missing a beat. “Do you happen to have a business card?”

“Ah, yeah, sure,” says the detective, who’s obviously pleased that someone has assumed he’d be able to afford one. “Right here.” He hands over a rather grubby-looking card and Will darts a furtive glance at it to see what occupation is listed. He’s hardly expecting it to say ‘private detective’ (and of course it doesn’t, instead being labelled ‘home security consultant’) although it hardly makes any difference and he ends up wondering why he even bothered. Because he knows this is what the man is – and, more to the point, that Andrew is the one who hired him. As it happens the texture and dimensions of the card are pretty much identical to the one found on the fifth Sculptor victim, although it’s not that much of a coincidence as far as these things go and hardly seems worth paying further attention to. There’s only so much variety that can be expected from a business card after all; half the state is probably carrying similar.

At some point Hannibal seems to have positioned himself between the detective and Will so that the latter now has to peer round his shoulder in order to catch Will’s eye again. “I guess I’ll be heading off now,” he says, narrowing his own eyes which are pale and practically lashless with a faint pinkish tinge like a rat. “It was nice to meet you Will.” Hannibal turns and gives him a long, slow stare and he clears his throat with an awkward scraping sound. “Mr Graham, I mean. Perhaps I’ll see you around some time?”

“That’s very unlikely,” snaps Will, unable to contain himself any longer. “And do me a favour would you? Tell him no.”

The detective’s face flickers slightly, although he recovers himself almost immediately. “I don’t know what you mean pal,” he says, careless and casual. “Who are you talking about?”

Will leans back a little then folds his arms and delivers an accusing stare of his own; and the detective glances from him to Hannibal then clears his throat again before the long horse-like face arranges itself into the semblance of a smile. “Hey, you never know,” he says. “I might bump into you again one day…now I know where to find you.”

“Try it,” says Will ominously.
This time the detective fails in his attempt to smile again and just tips his head in Will’s direction in a rather insolent way before retreating to his car – completely unaware the entire time of two sets of eyes beaming into the back of his head. “I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me,” Hannibal finally says over the revving noise of the engine, “but I intend to ask all the same. What was that about?”

“I don’t know,” replies Will. “I’ve never met him before.” Then he hesitates and jams his hands into his pockets, overwhelmed all over again at the impossibility of confiding about Andrew despite desperately wanting to. Hannibal stares back in the usual impassive way and Will thinks of the heat suppressants and the lifeline they undoubtedly offer and tries to rally himself a bit. “It’s kind of a crossed-wires situation,” he eventually adds. “He’s got the wrong idea about a couple of things: he thinks the situation’s one way and it’s actually another. You know?”

“No,” says Hannibal. “From that description I don’t know anything at all.”

Will laughs slightly before shivering as a particularly vicious gust of wind cuts across the thin material of his shirt. Hannibal makes a regretful noise at the sight of it and Will has a sudden sense that he might be about to offer him his own coat and tries to think of a way to avert it before something so embarrassing can actually happen. “Look, let’s go in,” he says. “Jack’ll be wondering what’s happened to us.”

“You don’t need to get anything from your car?”

“No,” says Will. “I don’t suppose you do either, do you?”

“No,” replies Hannibal with a faint smile. Will catches his eye and begins to smile too and Hannibal takes a step closer. “You look very…well,” he adds, flicking his gaze across Will’s face and then down over his clothes. “Better than you have for some time.”

“Thanks,” says Will, rather shyly. Then he goes completely silent because the advice from all those crappy websites has started to replay in his mind and he’s overcome with horror at the idea he might be inadvertently batting his eyelashes or something equally awful. Oh God…he’s not is he? Christ. This is terrible. It’s entirely Hannibal’s fault for being so suave and imposing. As if reading his mind Hannibal moves a little closer still, smoothly insinuating his way into Will’s space as if he has an imperishable right to be in it, and Will promptly realises that he’s grown so obsessed with not accidentally fluttering his eyelashes that he’s gone too far the other way and is now stood with both eyes fixed rigidly open like someone tragically struck down with paralysis.

“I suppose there’s no real reason for me to remark on it,” adds Hannibal. “It’s less than 24 hours since I last saw you after all.” He pauses thoughtfully then strokes his gaze across Will’s face again. “Why does it feel so much longer?”

“It doesn’t,” snaps Will impatiently, aware on some level that he’s being a rude little shit but unable to suppress his resentment at – once again – being toyed about with in this way.

“But it does,” replies Hannibal, clearly undeterred. “A quality in yourself perhaps? Artistry demands attention and absorbs imagination after all. It alters one’s perception; perhaps you’re starting to alter mine? You’ve certainly performed enough contortions on your own.” Will darts him an angry look and Hannibal smiles very faintly in silent acknowledgement of last night’s incendiary conversation about what might, or might not, be considered natural. “Art for art’s sake, and artistry by proxy,” adds Hannibal, and his now voice feels vaguely unsettling in its level of forceful concentration. Although it’s still a strangely beautiful voice, reflects Will hazily. Husky, slow and caressing—even now. Even when imbued with the smoulder of unspoken hazards; even when it’s about to tell him things that he’s not certain he’s ready to hear. Then Hannibal takes another step closer and Will feels like wincing with frustration all over again because of course it’s far more than just that isn’t it? It
more than the enigmas and insinuations and strangely thrilling verbal parries – it’s just the sheer fucking contrast between them. It’s the fact that Hannibal is eternally fascinating whereas Will is desperately uninspired; that he’s light on his feet while Will casts a shadow and the way he can devise and discard his own rules of cascading and fiendish complexity as he goes along, while Will trails behind inhibited by rules and rationalisation. Hannibal is an object of indefinite idealisation. Like a genuine artwork, with his patrician bone structure and dark eyes and aristocratic bearing, imbued with all his different hues and tints – from Stygian to luminous – whereas Will is toiling away with a palette that’s far more conventional and commonplace: a lot of labour for little result. And he wants so badly to be able to saunter away without a backward glance; to tell Hannibal that these odd mind games are growing tedious and why can’t he just find something else to amuse himself with – and he deeply resents the fact that he can’t.

“I do feel better,” Will finally replies, partly because it’s true but mostly in a defiant attempt to force the conversation back onto more normal and less unsettling lines. “I’ve felt better for a while now actually.” As he’s speaking he’s aware of the wind blowing his hair into his eyes rather furiously and begins to frown with annoyance at it; and Hannibal watches too then reaches out to deftly smooth it away before allowing his index finger to skim along the tip of Will’s cheekbone.

“You look it,” he says softly. “Whatever the cause, I hope it continues.”

Just like last night it’s a startlingly intimate gesture, yet while a part of Will suspects he ought to be offended the manner in which it’s done feels more about appreciation than invasiveness: the sort of gently reverent way that someone might run their hand against a statue or the wooden frame of a painting, and which seems less about a coarse desire to touch than simply a tactile wish to appraise the thing you’ve seen which pleases you. Then he struggles against a brief urge to close his eyes, aware of how the sensation of Hannibal’s skin against his seems to have a powerfully seductive effect that’s both grounding and unshaking at the same time. In fact it’s a perfect storm of contradiction: a reminder of why, as always, he can never bring himself to walk away despite reinforcing exactly why he probably should. Nevertheless, it’s still enough to quell his internal riot of doubts and second-guessing and replace them instead with a calm acceptance of the situation and a willingness to continue playing the game for just a little longer – if for no better reason than simply to see what might happen. How is it even possible for someone’s attention to be so addictive? Fleetingly he thinks of the crack houses he’s sometimes had to scour through in search of suspects: the rapture and the ruin and the constant glassy-eyed conviction that it’s ‘just this one last time’ as the crooked figures blinked into the darkness and fantasised night after night that the fragile, lethal love they had crafted between themselves and the drugs could last forever. Obsession. Craving. The one last fix that never was. Yet even the awareness of it can’t change the undeniable sense of charge and chemistry and as Hannibal’s finger gently strokes down his face he not only doesn’t pull away but maintains eye contact the entire time without flinching.

“I hope so too,” he finally replies. “I guess I’ll have to see what happens.”

Hannibal stares back rather soulfully. “And what do you want to happen?”

“That’s quite a question,” says Will after another pause. “Different things I guess. Sometimes I know more about what I don’t want; other times…not so much. Sometimes I feel like I don’t know anything at all.”

“And yet knowing is never enough on its own,” replies Hannibal. He trails a fingertip along Will’s jaw before removing his hand entirely; and even though it was there for seconds only, Will immediately feels aware of the lack of it. “We become so preoccupied with the urgency of knowing; sometimes one simply needs to do.”
“Then hopefully I’ll do the right thing.”

“And you think you’ll know what that is?” asks Hannibal, who’s started to smile again.

“No,” says Will, who’s now smiling too. “Probably not. But then right and wrong are always relative aren’t they? You said so yourself.” He stares back silently, defiant and unafraid, whereas Hannibal – extremely unusually – doesn’t appear to have a ready reply to hand and merely gazes back somewhat rapturously instead; and which immediately makes Will smile even more at the sense of having managed to have the last word.

From across the carpark there’s the sound of the door clattering open shortly followed by Jack’s voice. “Will!” he yells. “You still out here? Get those reports, can’t you, and come back in – everyone’s waiting.”

“Oh my way,” Will calls back without moving his eyes from Hannibal’s face.

“Another talent of yours it would seem,” says Hannibal, returning the stare. “To be so sought after and waited upon. The imperative hardly matters: whether it’s with tolerance, or impatience, or a quiet anticipation – how willing we all are to wait for you.”

“You think so?” says Will bleakly, briefly thinking of Andrew.

“Of course,” replies Hannibal. “Even you are waiting: waiting to know and accept the essence of yourself. You’re waiting so patiently aren’t you Will? You’ve been waiting your entire life.” Will continues to stare back silently, unable to fully acknowledge the implications of this, and Hannibal slowly strokes his eyes across his face for a second time in a way that lingers across Will’s lips and eyes. “Not that waiting is any particular virtue in itself,” he adds eventually. “It’s only when one can appreciate the value of what is being waited for. And likewise, of course, to understand exactly why it is that one is prepared to wait.”

The way in which this is said has a trace of something like tenderness beneath the usual deadpan tone which isn’t normally there; and Will meets Hannibal’s eye again and finds himself unable to look away just as Jack’s voice comes floating over again, even louder this time and with an added twist of annoyance: “Will.”

“And here we have someone who is not prepared to wait,” says Hannibal lightly. “Perhaps someone should inform him that anything truly worth having is worth waiting for.”

“Maybe,” says Will. “Although something tells me he won’t particularly want to hear it.” Hannibal nods in acknowledgement then narrows his eyes rather malevolently in Jack’s direction which makes Will laugh. Then without even thinking about it he reaches out and places his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder: easy and casual as if it’s supposed be there, like he’s performed the gesture a hundred times before, and complete unaware of the way it makes Hannibal’s expression soften in response. “Come on then,” he says. “Let’s go.”

As he’s turning away it vaguely occurs to Will that he never actually got as far as his car, even though the realisation is a fleeting one and only seems to matter in terms of whether anyone noticed and how he can explain the lack of the reports to Jack. In that moment it never occurs to him that another opportunity may have been missed. Why would it? It’s just the same car in the same bay in the parking lot, the same as it always is. There’s nothing significant about it; and it’s because of this that there’s no way he can possibly know the repercussions of walking away from it when he did. No way he can know it means he’s going to miss the flat white business card that’s been tucked onto the windshield, and which in the next few hours is destined to blow away unnoticed and unremarked as it carries with it a single word printed in the centre in stark black letters: Nemesis.
Chapter 12

Hey my lovelies, happy Saturday. Now – don’t read the chapter! Before you do anything else nip over to Tumblr and feast your eyes on the beautiful art that Nightroxy has done for Chapter 11. This is really stunning, and all the hugs and thanks to a wonderful artist for being so generous with their time and talent :-)

A few weeks later sees Will sitting on a bench in the park with his phone in one hand, a thermos of coffee in the other, and his briefcase propped on his left side while Hannibal sits close by on the right. In theory Will supposes that Hannibal ought to feel like a much less familiar accessory than the other things, but even though they’ve only recently begun the routine of going to the park together every lunchtime it already feels like an established custom; and one in which Hannibal has managed to acquire all the easy informality of something that’s been in Will’s life for far longer than he actually has.

In this respect Will can’t quite pinpoint exactly how the arrangement started – if it was him who first suggested it, or whether it was Hannibal – only that he can no longer imagine doing anything else and can sometimes barely even remember what it was like to spend lunchtimes in any other way. He also actively looks forward to it now (on some occasions going so far as to hover hopefully by the office window for the sight of the Bentley sweeping into the carpark at midday) and is even content to tolerate the good-natured teasing from the likes of Beverly about having a secret admirer whenever he vanishes from the building and returns an hour later looking bright-eyed and smiling. If Hannibal is already at the FBI for some meeting or other then it’s generally Will who drives, but if he’s coming over from his own office then Will is the one who gets chauffeured about and comes dashing down the stairs to climb into the car; and where Hannibal always says (which is also now part of the custom) “Same as usual?” and to which Will always replies “Yes, why not.” Sometimes he thinks he might say no and suggest somewhere else, but Hannibal never seems to expect any different answer and the truth is that Will rather likes the park. Or at least he likes going there with Hannibal, because it means they can arrange themselves on the same bench by the lakeside and either discuss the case or merely sit in companionable silence while Hannibal produces a steaming thermos of coffee and neat Tupperware containers whose contents are always deceptively simple yet unfailing delicious: soda bread stuffed with salmon and crème fraîche; chicken escalope with rocket leaves, sage and lemon; fried gnocci drenched in pesto and parmesan; or delicate prawns that swim in fragrant sauces of white wine, parsley and garlic. An awareness of the care-taking instincts that omegas are supposed to arouse in alphas had initially made Will uncomfortable in accepting these small attentions, but after several weeks of it he’s become convinced that Hannibal merely takes a satisfaction in feeding him that has less to do with gender than it does with an hedonic appreciation of the food itself. In fact on the rare occasions that Will isn’t able to come to the park then Hannibal merely drops off a parcel of food for him to eat at his desk – and Will no longer minds this either.

“Richard Black’s prison records have arrived,” says Will now, finally glancing up from his phone. “It took ages to get them released. Jack ended up having to ring the governor himself.” He smiles slightly at the memory. “I could hear him bellowing all the way down the corridor. Talk about pulling rank.”

“I can imagine,” replies Hannibal, who always finds other people’s clumsy displays of dominance to
be highly tedious compared to the more elegant charms of manoeuvring and manipulation. At the thought of it he gives a small, fastidious eye-roll. “No doubt he enjoyed himself immensely.”

“Hmmm.”

“Although still to the purpose of course: you now have your information on The Nemesis Killer.”

“Oh not you as well. I keep telling everyone to stop calling him that.”

“What’s in a name?” quotes Hannibal thoughtfully. “I suppose the grandiosity of it appealed to him.”

“Yeah exactly. The newspaper nickname suited him a lot better: The Creole Co-Ed Killer.”

“Didn’t you tell me he coined the term ‘Nemesis’ himself?”

“Because he claimed the murders were revenge against alphas,” replies Will with obvious contempt. “I didn’t buy it then and I don’t buy it now.”

“It’s intriguing though,” says Hannibal, beginning to look thoughtful again. “And you must concede that it adds a new dimension to the Sculptor murders: if they really are an homage to Richard Black. After all, you said from the very beginning you thought a copycat was at work.”

“I also said I couldn’t explain why anyone would want to pay tribute to that asshole. Or how anyone would have even heard of him; the whole case was so incredibly low key.”

“How dismissive you are of your own insights,” says Hannibal fondly. “Considering that Richard Black is the most concrete association to the Sculptor that’s so far been found. I agree it raises more questions than it answers of course; but if there is a link, I’m sure you’ll find it.”

Will pulls a sceptical face. “What, you really think there might be one?”

“I don’t know: I’d have to see his prison files. Bring them round one evening and we can go through them together. I’ll make you dinner.”

“Okay, thanks,” says Will, sounding pleased.

“You’re welcome.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got a pen to hand have you?” adds Will, who’s been rooting around in his pockets with mounting irritation and returning each time empty-handed. “I can’t find mine. I must have dropped it.” Hannibal wordlessly passes one over – a gleaming Montblanc fountain pen with a slim gold line running down both sides – and Will takes it then gives a hiss of annoyance when he blots the paper on the first few strokes.

“It’s because the nib adapts to the angle and style of its owner’s handwriting,” says Hannibal sardonically. “The pen is a monogamous instrument.”

“Not anymore it’s not. It’s just cheated on you.”

“It is at your disposal,” replies Hannibal with a smile.

Will makes an amused noise in response (mostly because only Hannibal could anthropomorphize an overpriced pen with such impressive gravitas…for some reason Hamlet declaiming to Yorick’s skull comes to mind), then renews scribbling into his notebook. “Your fingers seem a little stiff,” adds Hannibal after watching his progress for a few more seconds. “You’re not cold are you?”
“I’m all right,” replies Will without looking up. “Are you? We can leave if you are.” Then it occurs to him that they’re getting perilously close to fussing over each other like a pair of old women and resolves to let the subject drop. In fact it is rather too chilly to remain comfortably outside for much longer, but even though the weather’s deteriorated since their arrangement was first made Will always feels reluctant to leave until the hour is up.

“Jack Crawford is still insisting on a press conference,” adds Hannibal, who’s now returned to flicking through the newspaper with his usual supernatural speed. “I’ve advised him against it repeatedly. As have you. The man is completely impossible.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s the stubbornness I find most irritating,” says Hannibal witheringly.

“Oh let it go,” replies Will, who’s already heard variations of this complaint several times before.

“Yes, but you know he can never admit when he’s wrong.”

Will smiles to himself then reaches out and gives Hannibal a nudge with his foot. “Seriously though – let it go. Impossible, stubborn, can’t admit he’s wrong. You sound like his bitter ex-boyfriend.”

“You know I have nothing sensible with which to respond to that,” says Hannibal serenely, returning the pressure on Will’s foot. “You may consider yourself to have shocked me into silence.”

“Good.”

“Actually no, I do have one observation. Namely that I now have another crime to add to Jack’s existing list, in that he never warned me what I was taking on when I agreed to work with you.”

“It serves you right for freelancing as a babysitter,” says Will smugly. “You should have stayed doing therapy for wealthy alphas.”

“I should – you are quite right. You have forced me to confront my limitations.”

“And what a limitation it is; being a nanny for the FBI.” Will pauses then smirks slightly. “A Nannibal.”

“Such things you say to me,” replies Hannibal in a martyred tone.

Will smirks again then puts down the notebook so he can rummage for his gloves and tighten his scarf more securely round his throat. “You are cold aren’t you,” adds Hannibal. “I suspected as much.”

“Well so are you. You won’t admit it either.”

Hannibal smiles too then wordlessly lifts his arm and wraps it round Will’s shoulder to pull him closer. “Shared body heat,” he adds, retuming back to the newspaper. “An indispensable skill for any self-respecting nanny.” In fact the speed and smoothness with which he does it are such that Will barely has time to register it’s happened at all before he’s found himself pressed against Hannibal’s chest and is able to realise, with a jolt of surprise, that his initial response isn’t aversion or awkwardness but something more like comfort. In this respect it probably ought to feel inappropriate to be sat there entwined together on a park bench, but it actually really doesn’t. It feels… nice. Natural. So in the end he just gives a small sigh of contentment then swivels round so his head is tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin and he can manoeuvre his notebook into a comfortable position for reading. Hannibal obligingly shifts to the side to give Will more room then returns to silently reading...
himself, every so often moving his face so that his cheekbone brushes against Will’s hair.

After a while it occurs to Will that he seems to have gone into a rather embarrassing trance-like state that involves nestling up against Hannibal’s chest with his eyes half-closed while Hannibal rhythmically strokes his shoulder and stops brushing his cheek against Will’s hair in favour of just resting his face against it instead. Although Hannibal doesn’t appear to be remotely embarrassed or self-conscious about this, so Will supposes there’s no real reason why he should be either. “You seem very tired,” adds Hannibal gently, taking a few seconds to move his hand upwards from Will’s shoulder to caress the back of his neck. “Have you not been sleeping?”

“I don’t know,” says Will, shifting slightly to give the hand better access. “I guess so.”

“Jack’s working you too hard.”

“Not really.” Hannibal doesn’t reply and Will tugs the edge of his coat. “Hey, don’t say anything to him will you? Seriously – I don’t want you to.”

“Oh I see; you’re concerned I’m going to intervene on your behalf.”

“Don’t,” says Will firmly. Hannibal makes an amused sound then gives the newspaper a determined rustle in response; and the fact that he hasn’t agreed not to makes Will pretty certain that Jack’s destined to find himself on the receiving end of a lecture nonetheless. Although in all honesty the idea of Jack being lectured into submission is actually pretty entertaining (not least because Hannibal’s ability to administer lectures is almost certainly higher than Jack’s capacity to withstand them), so in the end he lets the subject drop and concentrates on burying a bit further beneath Hannibal’s arm before stowing his notebook into his pocket so he can join Hannibal in reading the newspaper.

“Look at you now,” says Hannibal, slowly smoothing his palm across Will’s neck again. “How charming you can be when you try. It’s rather irresistible.”

Will (who finds the idea of being thought charming somewhat mortifying rather than irresistible), makes a non-committal grunting noise in retaliation then buries even further beneath Hannibal’s arm so if he happens to be blushing there’s no risk of it being spotted. The next few minutes then pass in companionable silence interspersed with the occasional good-natured bickering over what to read next (with Will dismissing the finance section as ‘dull as hell’ and Hannibal refusing point blank to go anywhere near the sporting pages) when the solitude is finally interrupted in the form of a young male omega walking past with a stroller. He appears to be heading for a bench opposite theirs and after a while Will abandons the newspaper and grows preoccupied with watching him instead; not least because it’s so unusual to see another one close up and the sight has aroused a curious blend of solidarity mixed with curiosity. The omega’s face has an oddly vacant expression on it, rather as if he’s examining some internal landscape far removed from the reality of a frigid park on a winter’s afternoon, and even when he’s only a few yards away he still doesn’t seem to register that anyone else is nearby. Then he deposits his backpack on the bench and prepares to sit down, at which point he’s finally close enough for Will to see the unmistakable scar of an alpha bite on the back of his neck. Despite knowing exactly what it is and how it got there, the brief glimpse of it still manages to be deeply shocking: raised and raw-looking, with jagged uneven edges as if the flesh has been torn away.

“Look at that bite!” says Will in horror.

“Where?”

“There.” With an effort he lowers his voice, although it hardly seems to matter given that the young
omega doesn’t give the slightest indication of having heard him or even acknowledging that he’s there. Hannibal obediently puts down the newspaper and subtly glances over himself at the same moment as Will automatically straightens up then shuffles back towards his half of the bench. He knows he probably sounds naïve – childish even, at such an overreaction – but the simple fact is that he hasn’t seen all that many bites in real life and the sight of it has unsettled him. Most omegas cover them with their hair after all, and Will isn’t on sufficiently intimate terms with any others to have been personally shown one. On the other hand the ones he’s seen in text books have always appeared neat and precise: little arrangements of dentition scars that dot across the skin with the same delicate uniformity as braille and bearing no resemblance to the violent brand-like wound that’s currently in front of him

“It’s not untypical,” replies Hannibal, who appears to have lost interest and returned to his newspaper again. “Perhaps a little pronounced, although I’ve seen worse. A male alpha by the look of it, and a first bond for the omega. The tissue is hypertrophic which makes the bite appear deeper than it is.”

Will just shakes his head and doesn’t answer. Because no degree of medical rationales can alter the fact that the bite looks vicious; a gesture of possession that seems to have far more to do with ownership than with love. Subconsciously he finds himself touching his own neck in sympathy, appalled at the idea of how much it must have hurt.

“It’s not as painful as it looks,” says Hannibal, noting the gesture and correctly interpreting what it means. “When omegas are…” He pauses tactfully. “Receptive, then the glands on the back of the neck trigger a release of endorphins. Peptides in the alpha’s saliva have the same effect. It’s the body’s…”

“The body’s natural painkillers,” snaps Will. “They activate the opioid receptors. See? I know what they are.”

“I can imagine it’s unnerving seeing it close up,” replies Hannibal calmly. Reaching out he takes hold of Will’s hand and gently guides it away from his neck, briefly allowing their fingers to tangle together before letting go. “It’s still an injury after all.”

“And they’re not always receptive. It’s a complete myth that omegas settle for the first alpha they see when they’re in heat. Need and desire…they’re not the same.”

“I know that Will.”

“A complete myth,” adds Will with clear bitterness. “And one that alphas have been responsible for spreading.”

This time Hannibal doesn’t respond at all, obviously sensing that any attempt at discussion is only going to irritate Will further, so instead just places his hand over Will’s again and gently massages his wrist with his thumb. As an attempt at soothing it’s unexpectedly effective and Will takes a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down while struggling with a wave of embarrassment over his previous outburst. Hannibal quietly returns to reading the paper without letting go of his hand and Will shuffles unhappily but still can’t force himself to stop watching the omega; and who in turn is clearly still oblivious to Will’s scrutiny and is now engaged with forlornly sketching into a large spiral-bound notebook while absent-mindedly rocking the stroller back and forward with his foot.

After a while the child inside begins to wail – a sound always guaranteed to set Will’s teeth on edge – and the omega sighs and lays aside the sketchbook to tend to the pram’s squalling contents until it’s calmed down. There’s nothing obviously unhappy or resentful about the way he does it and his expression is one of patient resignation more than anything else; but Will still can’t help sending silent waves of sympathy in his direction – which promptly double in magnitude when a second stranger turns up who’s quite obviously the alpha.
Even by alpha standards he’s extremely tall and broad and he pauses and darts Will a look of blatant curiosity before catching sight of Hannibal and quickly turning his head again in a way that makes Will long to yell that another alpha is the least of his problems and Will’s more than capable of kicking his smug, stupid ass all on his own. Then he realises the reason the other alpha moved away so quickly is because Hannibal is beaming a volcanic variant of the ‘don’t even think about fucking with me’ expression in his direction, and so promptly feels irritated with him instead for regressing to posturing alpha bullshit and behaving as if Will is a passive piece of property to be squabbled over simply because he happens to be an omega. In fact Hannibal has now tightened his grip on Will’s wrist to a point that’s almost painful – and doesn’t appear to have plans for releasing him anytime soon – so Will sighs to himself all over again then mentally triples the strength of his sympathy waves towards the other omega, whose sketchbook seems to have vanished into the depths of his backpack and who is now sat bolt upright with his hands folded neatly in his lap as he responds to whatever crap the alpha’s no doubt saying to him with a look of studiously polite concentration on his face.

Will watches them for a while longer and is appalled to find himself secretly hoping that the alpha might be disagreeable to the omega in some way just so it would give Will an excuse to go over and yell at him. Although he doesn’t do anything that could remotely be construed as abusive; and notwithstanding that horrific scar of the omega’s pale, vulnerable neck he undoubtedly seems harmless enough. Affectionate even, particularly in the way he leans over the stroller and babbles some happy nonsense to the baby inside. And yet there’s still something about the way he interacts with the omega – the possessive hand on the shoulder; the complacent, self-satisfied smile – that’s enough to make Will look at him and loathe him. Hannibal, likewise, is still showing no signs of turning off the ‘fuck with me at your own risk’ expression and Will half hopes that the other alpha might catch sight of it and be scared off in the same way he was before. Although unfortunately the first version appears to have worked a bit too well, because the alpha has obviously positioned himself in a way that means he can avoid looking in Hannibal’s direction at all and has instead settled onto the bench himself and begun reading a magazine. Every so often he breaks off to show something in it to the omega who nods and smiles in response; and when he’s not nodding and smiling then he’s examining the contents of the stroller or gazing into space – although at no point does he make any attempt to retrieve the sketchbook and resume drawing while the alpha is there. Only once does the omega finally catch Will’s eye and give a very faint smile; and it occurs to Will that he’s probably assumed Will is doing the exact same thing as he is – obediently sitting with his alpha and doing his best to be attractive and available until the alpha finally leaves and you can go back to being yourself for a few hours until the alpha comes back and you stop being you and have to be their omega again. It’s the reality of being a bonded omega after all. Nothing is really left for yourself because it all gets submerged into someone else; and all you get in return is a livid gash of ownership on the back of your neck and someone to dictate and manoeuvre your every action like a pretty, useless marionette dangling on a string.

Will knows that he’s being ridiculous of course: looking at a stranger and trying to construct a whole narrative for them. The omega might have actively wanted this type of life. He might have grown up thinking of nothing else, fantasising all day and dreaming all night of when the time would come that he’d be whisked away by a wealthy alpha and provided with an endless supply of screaming strollers to push around parks. It may well be that the alpha encourages his art, actively supports it even, and that the omega is entirely content: fulfilled and free. Yet Will can’t help glancing at the sad young face: and he just knows, deep down, that he’s not.

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Will spends the rest of the lunch hour in a state of pensiveness, reluctant to leave yet equally unable to gravitate back towards Hannibal’s side of the bench again either. In fact amongst his numerous other sources of brooding is a new conviction that if he’d been sat alone then the other alpha would
never have noticed him and it was the way he was draped halfway across Hannibal’s lap that immediately identified him as an omega – and in this respect the intensity with which he feels like he wants to be Hannibal’s arms again is bothering him, because it represents a need for protection and comfort that Will’s reluctant to acknowledge he requires, as well as a yearning for intimacy that he’s convinced will make him vulnerable in the long-term. To be honest he’s not sure how it’s even possible to be so drawn to something that fundamentally unsettles you – and doesn’t have the energy right now to try and work it out – and when Hannibal puts a hand on his arm he inadvertently flinches.

“What’s the matter Will?” asks Hannibal calmly.

“Nothing. Nothing’s the matter.”

“You seem tense. Restless.”

“I’m not.” Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Will blushes very faintly at such an obvious lie. “I have to see the doctor this afternoon,” he adds, hoping this might sound like a convincing excuse. “And, y’know – I don’t like going.”

“Is he an alpha?” asks Hannibal, whose eyes have started to narrow.

“She. Actually I don’t know; I have no idea.”

“Would you like me to come with you?”

“No,” says Will quickly, internally cringing at the idea of it. “I mean, I appreciate you offering, but…”

“But you don’t want to be nannied?”

Will starts to smile in spite of himself. “No.”

“You’ve seemed so much better in the last few weeks,” adds Hannibal, slowly flicking his eyes across Will’s face. “The physical recovery is most obvious, but mentally you’re also much improved. You’re more…purposeful.”

“It’s not like I was indecisive before,” says Will defensively.

“I know you weren’t; perhaps purposeful is the wrong choice of word. How about animated? Or vigorous? Or maybe it’s not the addition of one thing as much as the retreat of something else. You seem less inhibited.” Hannibal smiles very faintly. “It’s as if your emotions were being muted by those suppressants and you’re slowly waking up again. Coming back to life, as it were.”

Will gives a small frown at this, because surely he wasn’t that sedated to begin with? He’d have noticed if he was; someone would have told him. Hannibal, evidently, has an odd definition of what constitutes animation. “Anyway I’m still taking them,” he adds, “so the difference can’t be as big as all that.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” replies Hannibal, whose smile now seems to have turned inwards on itself as if enjoying some private joke. “Regardless of the cause the main thing is that you’re feeling better.”

Will nods appreciatively at this, although neglects to add that the main reason he’s visiting the doctor is to obtain more suppressants. The disappearance of the side effects has kindled a hope that he might be able to get them legally without further violent rendezvous in alleyways and idea of it is cheering him up considerably, despite the fact it’ll require running the gauntlet of Dr Reynold’s waiting room
with its primly disapproving receptionist and acres of corpse-blue plush. *Or Dr Reynolds herself* amends Will, remembering how her manner last time was so patronising and unhelpful. But it has to be done, not least because of the horrifying spectre of Andrew and the lawyers and the heat suppressants being the most promising means of banishing them. In fact when the detective first materialised in the parking lot Will had spent the following few days in a state of tortured anticipation that his presence would surely herald the arrival of Andrew; and despite there still being no sign of him, it feels far too premature – if not outright dangerous – to take it for granted that he’s not going to turn up. Rather than returning to work Will therefore gets Hannibal to drop him in the city centre with the intention of heading to the clinic directly to try and get the whole ordeal over with as quickly as possible.

“I’m sorry by the way,” adds Will as he’s unfastening his seatbelt.

“For what?”

“This afternoon: I know I was a bit odd.”

“No more than usual,” replies Hannibal with a smile.

“Yeah, well. It was…”

“It was seeing that bite,” says Hannibal. “I know.” He waits a few seconds and then, when it’s clear Will isn’t going to elaborate: “It’s obvious that something is troubling you.” Will bites his lip and still refuses to reply, and Hannibal adds in a gentler voice: “It’s also obvious that you don’t feel able to talk about it. But when you *are* – you know where I am.”

“Thank you,” replies Will hesitantly. Glancing down he realises that his hand (that traitorous bastard), has started reaching out so that Hannibal can take hold of it, seemingly without any kind of conscious permission from Will’s brain. “I’d like to,” he eventually adds. “It’s just...it’s complicated. It’s *really* complicated.”

“I know,” is all Hannibal says, and nothing in his expression indicates his extreme private frustration that this is proving so impossible to establish. Given the impending results of the new tablets he’s recently increased his own surveillance of Will to a maximum level, even following him by car on numerous occasions, and yet despite the scrutiny absolutely no new evidence has ever presented itself. Will never appears to do anything beyond drive to work or drive home again, and where he barricades himself inside without ever giving the appearance of meeting with anyone or going anywhere. *Something* is clearly happening of course; yet short of prising Will apart like a clam there’s no obvious way to discover what it is. On an impulse Hannibal now reaches out and covetously strokes his fingers through Will’s hair, admiring how beautiful he looks while wishing a way could be contrived of levering his skull open and inspecting all the thoughts and impulses existing there. *I would be so gentle,* thinks Hannibal, regretful at this denied opportunity. *I don’t want to hurt you; I only wish to know you.*

“I’ll try,” adds Will, leaning into the touch. “Someday I’ll try and explain.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” replies Hannibal, reluctantly letting Will go so he can climb out the car. “And let me know if you need anything in the meantime won’t you?”

“Thanks.”

“Otherwise I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Definitely,” says Will. “Same time as usual.” Then he smiles rather shyly though the window before
heading off towards the clinic, aware of how Hannibal is parked up watching until he’s got inside and unable to stop himself feeling touched, albeit faintly irritated, by the obvious show of protectiveness. Unlike last time the building seems almost deserted, and while the waiting room is just as pale and blue and plushy as he remembers it (and the receptionist several orders of magnitude more irritating) it turns out he’s not destined to endure either of them for very long as the clinic is running on time for once and he’s able to go through after only five minutes of waiting. Dr Reynolds is sat behind her desk as he walks in, looking so serene and inscrutable that it’s almost like she never left it since the last meeting and just lives here all the time amongst the plush, pot plants and Claude Monet prints in a state of perpetual availability that only needs the presence of a patient to make her real. It’s actually a bit weird, like one of those philosophical thought experiments on perception: *if a tree falls in a forest and no one is round to hear it, does it make a sound…?*

“Mr Graham?”

It’s at this point that Will realises he’s staring into space having a pointless mental ramble about non-existent trees in imaginary forests (which as a choice of occupation seems like a pursuit for only the saddest of bastards) so straightens up in his chair and politely makes his request for a new prescription of suppressants. Dr Reynolds’ mouth and forehead promptly arrange themselves into an expression that Will decides could most kindly be described as ‘concerned irritation’ and his heart sinks at the sight of it, because only a few seconds in has already made it depressingly obvious how this appointment is destined to go. She has a thin, tanned face with eyes that are very bright and brown and it’s this combined with the obvious annoyance that makes him think of an eagle or possibly some kind of woodland creature that’s wise yet wary and sets great store by its wits. “I sympathise with your situation Mr Graham,” Dr Reynolds says now in a brisk, doctorly tone. “I really do. But what you’re proposing is medically irresponsible.”

“I know,” says Will patiently, “but that was before.” Silently he wishes he could snap at her to stop *telling* him how sorry she is and just fucking well show it instead by giving him what he needs. “Things have changed since then.”

“How?”

“The side effects have gone.”

“That’s impossible,” says Dr Reynolds firmly. “What do you mean?”

Will blinks a few times, unsure of how to respond. In fact it’s like that tree all over again: *if there’s no one to experience the side effects, do they really exist?* “I haven’t had any for weeks,” he finally says. “It’s much better now.”

“You’ve still been taking the suppressants?” asks Dr Reynolds, suddenly looking beady; and Will realises he’s going to have to tread extremely carefully to avoid giving even the smallest hint of where he got them. “You have haven’t you?” adds Dr Reynolds. “Mr Graham. After everything I told you?”

The condescending tone of voice is enough to make Will shift from contrite to irritated in a matter of seconds before silently promising himself that if she even gets close to calling him ‘a silly boy’ then it’ll trigger a tantrum of epic magnitude. “I was desperate,” he says flatly, even though the past tense is inappropriate because it’s not as if the desperation has gone away. “I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t have to.”

“Well you shouldn’t have,” snaps Dr Reynolds. “I couldn’t have been any clearer about the damage you’re going to do to yourself; that you might have *already* done to yourself. My advice to you is to let yourself go through a heat cycle – and the sooner the better.”
“And I told you that I can’t possibly…”

“I understand about the situation with your alpha,” interrupts Dr Reynold. “You explained it very clearly. But there are other options, at least in the short-term. You could just make arrangements privately.”

She follows this up with a glance that’s loaded with discreet implication and Will promptly squirms at the sight of it because he’s well aware that she’s referring to the practice of alphas paying omegas for a chance to take care of them during their heats. In principle the trade is frowned upon, although it’s still extremely common – not least because it’s the only opportunity that the many alphas who can’t afford to pay for bonding rights will ever have to experience actual sex with an omega. In fact a year or two of hiring himself out in this way could probably raise enough money for Will to never have to work again: but he can’t bear the idea of some anonymous alpha having their hands all over him and, even more importantly, wouldn’t trust them not to lose control of themselves and end up biting him without permission. Celibacy is infinitely preferable and in this respect he’s pretty much lived like a beta in the time since escaping from Andrew, having only had sex with a number of beta women – which was pleasant enough although not particularly memorable – and with one other man, also a beta, which was disastrous. He’d insisted on calling Will ‘baby’ the entire time and chanting ‘You like that? Yeah? You like that?’ while Will, staring numbly at the ceiling like someone at the dentist, hadn’t had the heart to announce ‘No actually, since you ask – in fact I’ve been at autopsies with more life than this.’ The beta, on the other hand, had clearly liked it enormously (although at least someone did) and proved it by lasting less than a minute before coming with a loud roar that caused one of his neighbours to bang on the partition wall in protest and bellow that he was an inconsiderate shit. And Will had half-wanted to join forces with the neighbour and yell back ‘yeah you’re right, oh my God – he’s shit’ although of course he didn't, because he didn't want to hurt the beta’s feelings. Afterwards the beta had slumped forward and murmured “Jesus Bill, you’re fucking gorgeous – let’s do this again” and Will had been so far beyond the point of caring he couldn’t even be bothered to point out that the stupid bastard had got his name wrong so had just dived out from underneath him instead and tugged his clothes back on before nearly falling down the stairs in his hurry to leave. The memory of it now makes him feel vaguely depressed and reminds him all over again why he’s effectively given up on sex – although even that poor hapless beta with the horrible limp penis that slapped around wetly like a dead fish would be a million times more preferable to letting himself be mauled about by some random alpha just to get through a heat.

“Mr Graham?”

Will clears his throat awkwardly then shakes his head. “No,” he says firmly. “I don’t want to do that.”

“Then what do you suggest?” replies Dr Reynolds, even though the clearly rhetorical tone of the question implies that she neither wants nor expects an answer. “I can’t account for why the side effects have remitted without running some tests, but whatever the reason there’s no doubt it’s only temporary.” She pauses and glares at him over the top of her glasses. “I can’t possibly allow you to take any more of those pills.”

Will struggles not to return the glare and then falls silent for a few seconds instead, internally brooding over the fact that the improvement undoubtedly dates from the night in the alleyway and the new supply of tablets. The packaging looked identical to his previous supply, but perhaps there really was something different inside? “The heat suppressants,” he finally says, doing his best to sound casual. “Are there ones available which would minimise the reaction I was having before? A different type of compound?”

“We’ve been through this at your last appointment,” replies Dr Reynolds with poorly concealed
impatience. “Yes, there are drugs, but they’re still experimental so the guidelines aren’t established. You’d need an extraordinarily skilled prescriber to be able to gauge the dose. I’d struggle to calculate it myself, I don’t mind admitting it – you’d need a very precise grasp of the chemistry to get it right.” She gives a discreet little cough. “The thing is Mr Graham, even if these new compounds were widely available – which they’re not – your insurance plan wouldn’t come anywhere near covering them. They’re extremely expensive.”

“What are they called?” asks Will, making a mental note to look them up with another dealer.

Dr Reynolds reels off a couple of names which Will carefully commits to memory before adding even more casually than before: “Any side effects to those ones?”

“They can affect the central nervous system so the side effects are mostly psychological. Aggression. Loss of inhibition. Emotional reactivity. But if you’re thinking of trying to get hold of them I’d advise against it.”

“Why?”

“No local omega clinics would be able to prescribe them for starters; you’d need to go to a university hospital and even then the chances are they wouldn’t be able to give them to you. But you see those tablets wouldn’t solve your problem either because they’re not intended to suppress heats indefinitely. They’re more of a short-term solution.” Will’s face promptly falls with dismay and Dr Reynolds adds, for what feels like the fiftieth time: “I told you so before.”

“Then can’t I have another trial of my previous ones?” Dr Reynolds starts shaking her head before he’s even finished and he adds, with unintended urgency: “I know you find it hard to believe but the symptoms really have disappeared. If you examine me you’ll see for yourself.”

Dr Reynolds abruptly pushes back her chair, and while the resulting scraping noise isn’t particularly loud its suddenness still causes Will to jump. “Mr Graham,” she says crisply. “I’m afraid this conversation is over. What you’re asking me to do could cost me my license. I’m sincerely sorry for the situation you’re in but poisoning yourself half to death with heat suppressants is not the solution to it.”

Seeing as he’d been expecting this Will can’t be bothered to get too downcast about it and instead just nods half-heartedly as his thoughts hurtle back to the best way of locating a new dealer for an illegal supply. Dr Reynolds gives a low sigh in return, obviously interpreting his sudden silence as unhappiness. “Why not look into our counselling service?” she says in a kinder voice. “I know you weren’t interested before, but if you change your mind…?”

“Sure,” replies Will. “Why not?” Then he leans forward in his chair and pretends to look appreciative: not because he gives the slightest shit about counselling, but because he can tell from the way her eyes are sliding towards the cabinet that the contact details for the counsellors must be stored in there – which means that when she turns round to retrieve them he can duck over and swipe a page from the prescription pad that’s lying on the desk. It won’t be enough to secure some long-term suppressants which require approval from a second doctor; although he can still get himself some emergency 48-hour ones with it and that, at least, is better than nothing. Dr Reynolds finally turns round again with a frown of annoyance running between her eyebrows and Will neatly palms the sheet of paper into his pocket and resumes the same look of vapid politeness of before. “I seem to have run out of flyers,” adds Dr Reynolds. “Let me write you their details instead.”

“Thanks,” says Will, attempting to sound sincere. Dr Reynolds nods in response then scribbles an email and phone number onto the back of one of her own business cards before handing it over. Added to the private detective’s and the one from the murder scene the card could be a third triplet
from a matching trio, and the reminder of the two main problems in his life – Andrew and the Sculptor – makes him scrub his hand across his face with a sudden overwhelming sense of exhaustion.

“I know it’s not much,” adds Dr Reynolds, catching sight of the look. “But I really hope things work out for you Mr Graham. And if I could give you those tablets I would.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Do consider the counselling won’t you? You might be surprised how helpful it can be to have someone to listen.”

Very briefly, Will finds his thoughts straying to Hannibal. “Yes,” he replies. “I know it can.”

“I really do understand how hard it can be for omegas,” adds Dr Reynolds, shooting Will a rather owlish look from over the top of her glasses. “I see it all the time. Betas too, though admittedly in a different way. It’s really not easy living in a society where a single group holds so much influence and there’s no doubt that some alphas can be absolutely monstrous when it suits them.” She pauses, suddenly looking thoughtful. “You know I’m honestly not sure what’s worse: having a monster that loves you or hates you. Not that alphas hate betas of course, but they certainly see them as dispensable. Yet they love omegas and treat them almost as badly.”

Will catches her eye at the last part, although he doesn’t reply immediately because once again she’s posed a question to which he has no easy answer. Fleetingly he thinks of the various alphas in his life: Hannibal, Jack, Andrew… it’s not like any of them love him. He supposes Andrew might be considered to have a degree of desire, although even that isn’t entirely the right word because it implies a level of emotional investment. Andrew, on the other hand, effectively sees Will in terms of property and his desire is no more nuanced or meaningful than the way he might desire a particular car or a vintage bottle of wine. What Dr Reynolds is describing seems more closely aligned with power – and the exercise of it to subdue someone else just because you can – than it does to anything that could reasonably be described as love. Admittedly that’s not true for a couple like Beverly and Anneke, although gender hardly seems relevant in their case because what draws them together is more about their similarities than their differences; and what differences do exist are a source of compatibility which enhances and fascinates rather than divides. At any rate having a monster that loves you or hates you is different to one that intends to oppress you. Then he glances down at the business card again and for some reason Hannibal’s earlier observation comes to mind: He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not himself become a monster…

“Alphas,” says Dr Reynolds with obvious disdain.

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Afterwards Will trails back to the office at the slowest pace possible, desperate to spin out the journey owing to a sudden reluctance to spend any longer than absolutely necessary in the stifling, despairing aura of the investigation. Killing time: it’s such a bleak expression if you think about it too hard, as if all the seconds and minutes are left murdered and mangled and bleeding behind you. Dr Reynolds’ grim observations on the nature of alphas have likewise struck a nerve, and in an attempt at distraction Will makes an effort to reorient himself to the calm contentment he felt at lunchtime with Hannibal’s arms wrapped round him before that other alpha turned up to ruin it. In fact the scene on the park bench now feels like a little oasis of calm amidst all the doubt and anxiety, and thinking of Hannibal again he experiences a sudden powerful rush of affection towards him for how endlessly tolerant he is of Will’s assorted sharp edges and mercurial moods. The affection, in turn, then starts to get mingled in with guilt for being so rude and short-tempered towards him after seeing the bite; and the combination of the two – plus the need for killing a bit more time – provides Will
with a sudden surge of inspiration to do something that might serve as a combined gesture of appreciation as well as apology. What though? It’s actually pretty difficult. Nevertheless there’s a sense of excitement in devising such a novel and unexpected idea which makes Will reluctant to abandon it and he stops walking and frowns to himself for a few seconds as he considers the problem. Hannibal, after all, isn’t exactly the type of person who’s easy to buy for; yet while something like a bottle of wine would be the most obvious solution he feels that he wants to show a bit of initiative beyond the usual clichés.

The clinic is located in a distinctly more up-market part of the city and Will glances round for a while for inspiration before finally spotting a shop at the very end of the block boasting ‘antiques, curios and collectibles’ on its elaborate gilt-edged signage. This seems fairly promising – at least more so than the dreaded bottle of wine – and being so close to it at the same time as having the idea of buying a gift has a level of synchronicity to it that appeals to him and is enough to propel him down the street and straight inside. The interior is dim and cozy with a real fire crackling merrily in a Victorian style grate, yet while it’s a nice respite from the icy street the sheer scale of items on offer seems to amplify the problem rather than solve it, because despite an abundance of choice none of it manages to be quite right for what he has in mind. It can’t be anything too big – an item of furniture, for example, being completely out of the question – and it can’t be too intimate in the manner of jewellery or grooming products; yet while he’s initially drawn to the idea of something quirky like antique medical equipment, everything on offer is so expensive as to be rendered ostentatious and therefore embarrassing and over the top.

In fact it seems rather impossible to ever find something suitable, and Will is starting to contemplate giving up the scheme entirely when his attention is finally caught by an Edwardian tea set arranged in pride of place by one of the display cabinets. Each cup is wafer thin, adorned with delicate whorls and soft curves across the handles and painted in deep rich blue with coils of white and the occasional shimmer of gold gilding that must have cost some long-dead craftsman hours of painstaking effort to produce. Hannibal has a fondness for tea, albeit the rare expensive type that Will’s never heard of – chaykhana and oolong and lemongrass chai – and looking now at the beautiful gleaming porcelain it’s impossible not to think how much Hannibal would probably like to have it. Nevertheless he still falters for a few seconds, unable not to struggle against the lunatic impulse to buy such an odd gift. In fact from one of his rare visits to the house he knows that Hannibal already possesses something similar, although while it’s no doubt far more valuable than this one is, Will still feels it’s nowhere near as beautiful. There’s also the issue of Will probably feeling far too awkward to ever summon up the courage to actually hand it over; yet the idea of Hannibal’s pleasure at something so lovely and unusual as the tea set undoubtedly is finally wins out, and after a few more seconds he abandons restraint and goes ahead to make the purchase –feeling only marginally less furtive than when he was in the pharmacy the other night getting the pheromone spray.

“They’re beautiful aren’t they,” says the storekeeper, tenderly placing the cups into a little wooden box filled with shavings with all the gentle reverence of someone laying sleeping babies into cribs. “A gift? Or are you treating yourself?”

“No,” replies Will, trying not to marvel too much at the idea of the sort of life that involves sauntering out at your lunchbreak to buy yourself antique tea sets on a whim. “It’s a gift.”

The woman smiles at this then begins to swaddle the cups in layers of tissue paper like she’s tucking them in. “How lovely. Someone special?”

Will can feel himself starting to blush, despite knowing that she’s just making conversation and can’t possibly care one way or the other. “Yes,” he finally replies. “Someone special.”
This elicits a warmly benevolent beam in response, rather as if it’s a source of profound personal satisfaction to the storekeeper that Will has someone special to buy over-priced tea sets for – and in spite of himself Will can’t help smiling back for exactly the same reason. Then he hands over his credit card before carefully stowing the box and its cargo of sleeping teacups under his arm and returning to the office, feeling absurdly happy the entire time despite a lingering suspicion that it was a stupid thing to have done. To his surprise Hannibal’s Bentley is parked in the lot and Will pauses a few seconds then removes his coat and stashes the box underneath it on the off chance they might bump into each other in the corridor. In this respect he decides that Hannibal is almost certainly going to be in Jack’s office (most likely lecturing him about Will), so silently creeps past it on the way to his own and conceals the box in his desk before wearily starting to sift through the stack of memos and papers that have been dumped on top of it. Nearly all of these relate to the Sculptor case, and he skims through them with quick efficiency before arriving at a new report about a recent homicide and going completely still. Then he draws in a sharp breath and peers a bit closer: not so much at the scribbled details of the autopsy in Price’s extravagant handwriting, shocking as they are in their lurid descriptions of ‘extensive mutilations’ and ‘post-mortem removal of the liver,’ but at the photograph of the victim. And the reason for this is because regardless of what logic dictates, you always assume it’s going to be of some random unfortunate soul who you never knew existed until you found a likeness of his dead body on your desk. You don’t expect it to be the same body you last saw living only weeks ago: a warm, breathing body that stood in a parking lot and tried to stare you into submission because it had been hired to hunt you down. Will’s job is volatile and savage, and it’s never shown any inclination to conform to a predictable order, and yet there are still things you come to expect and those that you don’t; and what you don’t expect is for a private investigator to be sent in pursuit of you only to discover a short time later that you’re the one who’s destined to try and solve his murder.

In spite of himself Will gives a low sigh at the unnerving, eerie improbability of it then runs his hand over his face in an attempt to focus and resume his inspection of the report. And if nothing else it’s certainly worthy of inspection, because while the details are scant and clinical – not nearly enough for most people to make anything of – to Will there’s still something tantalizing familiar stitched into the papery skin of the pages that’s enough to completely capture his attention in his attempt to unpick and unravel it. Normally when he does this there’s a sense of constructing a protective barrier in his mind that prevents him from merging too closely in interpreting the person responsible: a slicing, swaying choreograph of perception with himself on one side of the pendulum and the perpetrator on the other. Will’s sense of self and the Other’s sense of self – object and subject – distinct and separate. Only it’s curiously absent on this occasion and for a few feverish seconds he has no real sense of where he starts and the Other ends, as if someone has cut the pendulum string. Blurred and blended together…just as Hannibal had said about Will and the Chesapeake series: ‘You don’t see the world the same way he does, yet you can assume his point of view.’

Will frowns again and snaps his eyes open – struggling against a sense of dark fascination, even of excitement, that feel vaguely inappropriate given the undeniable grimness of it – before making a concerted effort to renew his concentration and start again from the beginning. It’s a demanding task that’s impossible not to feel unsettled by, and he gradually grows so absorbed that he loses track of his surroundings and becomes oblivious to the sound of the trainees talking outside or the hum of the janitor’s vacuum or the sound of sirens from beyond the window. A lull then follows where it all goes quiet again, but Will still doesn’t register the sound of Hannibal and Jack talking together on the way to Jack’s office or, a few minutes later, the footsteps in the corridor outside – and which start off soft and faint, but slowly grow louder and louder until they finally reach Will’s office and come to a dead halt outside. But Will remains so preoccupied that he doesn’t notice; doesn’t even notice the creaking noise as the door is pushed open – doesn’t notice anything at all until the sound of a voice forces him back into the room as a herald that everything, finally, is about to fall apart.
It’s a low voice. A voice that murmurs in a horribly familiar way as it snakes and slithers its way across the room. “Hello Will,” says the voice. “Long time no see.”

When reflecting back on it later, Will is struck by how his reaction in those few surreal seconds hadn’t been to yell or shout but simply to stay rigid and motionless in his chair and excavate a long-forgotten memory of when he was much younger and had fallen from the branch of a tree during some childish game and jolted every gasp of air from his chest when he landed. The descent itself had been almost peaceful – soundless seconds of floating freefall as the world flashed by in sky and clouds and the leaves of the tree: all calm spectators without care or emotion and completely impervious to the plight of a small plummeting body. But the impact itself blazed scarlet with pain and shock when the ground finally reared up to meet him and he lay there like a broken bird as his father screamed with fear and came running and Will gazed up at the empty sky and wondered if this was what dying felt like. That long-forgotten sensation is the same one he experiences now. It’s as if he can no longer breathe or stir himself, can no longer operate on even a counterfeit level of competence. Can’t think. Can’t be. Can’t do anything except slowly suffocate in the agonised silence in which nobody moves or speaks and where his mind goes completely blank as if it’s been bleached bare by the combined force of fear and total disbelief. Because it hardly feels real, or possible, that such a thing could be happening. It really shouldn’t be possible…even though it clearly is.

The owner of the voice stares back the entire time, head slightly on one side as if relishing the spectacle of Will’s obvious shock, then takes a few steps closer before calmly closing the door and twisting the key to lock it – and it’s the sound of this amidst all the silence that finally jolts Will back to life. Christ, get yourself together, hisses an angry, desperate part of his mind. Do it NOW. Your entire future depends on it. Then the moment has passed and with a massive level of effort he carefully lays down the report before leaning back in his chair and forcing himself to look straight ahead as he replies, with a lying calmness he doesn’t remotely feel: “Hello Andrew.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Just as a heads-up this chapter is quite angsty, so please proceed with caution if that’s something you’re not in the mood to read right now. For everyone else – don’t worry, I promise all this set-up is for a reason and that things are going to be getting a lot better for Will (IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN) very, very soon. In fact they’re getting so much better for him I’ve had to put the chapter count up again ;-) #BringOnTheHannigram

Despite such a simple opening no one seems to have anything else to say, and for an agonised stretch of time there’s nothing to respond to at all beyond the sound of silence. Will isn’t sure how long it lasts. Only that so much silence feels deeply surreal: not least because it doesn’t bear the slightest resemblance to the numerous versions of this first meeting that he’s tormentedly scripted out in his head beforehand. But then nothing ever works out as it should, so perhaps it’s not surprising that what should have been a moment flooded with drama and crisis is ultimately nothing but Andrew standing there in an expensive-looking suit with a very faint smile on his face and Will staring up at him with an expression of frozen horror. In this respect they’re both so rigid they could be waxworks of themselves, or even a photograph; and it vaguely occurs to Will that they look like the freeze-frame at the end of a weekly serial just as the music starts to play and the announcer’s voice tells the audience to tune in next week to see what happens next. In fact everything has exactly that sort of stilted, unnatural quality: all the silence and surrealness and the expensive suit and the frozen face. They feel like props or charades; they don’t feel like something that happens to real people. The director needs to intervene and shout “Cut! It’s a wrap. Nice work guys…” and he and Andrew could shake hands and go back to their actual lives: lives where they don’t really know each other at all and this hideous scene doesn’t even exist beyond the imagination of a scriptwriter.

In the end it’s Andrew who seems to tire of the silence first and make an attempt to break it. He does this by clearing his throat, and there’s something about the stupid mundanity of the gesture that reminds Will how successfully he’s managed to mould Andrew into something of a monster – and how contradictory this image is to the reality of what’s now stood in front of him. In his mind Andrew has become a malevolent being who’s all-seeing, all-knowing, lacking in any kind of mercy or restraint, and whose sole designation and design is to make Will’s life as tormented as possible. Yet seeing him now there’s a weird sense of anti-climax in how incredibly ordinary he looks. He could be anyone in fact. Perhaps a little taller than average, a bit more good-looking than is considered typical, but certainly nothing that would stand out as unsettling in anyway. No one passing him in the street would notice him beyond thinking that he appears to be a handsome, capable-looking alpha; the kind of all-American prototype that lounges on yachts or strolls along beaches in bare feet and whose general life resembles a Tommy Hilfiger commercial which smells like money and sounds like success, and whose component parts comprise canapés and waitstaff and martinis in slender long-stemmed glasses which are sipped on green lawns where the sun always shines. Certainly they wouldn’t consider him a sufficiently serious adversary to justify the months of fear and constant running that Will’s expended on him. There’s no fangs, no claws, no forked tail: yet nevertheless an adversary is exactly what he is and Will knows that he can’t allow himself to forget this for even a second. Instinctively he now pushes back the chair and gets to his feet, aware of how sitting down means Andrew is looking down at him and hating the level of submission it implies.
“The key,” he says sharply. “Give it back to me.”

“What, that’s all I get? No welcome?” Will stares back stony-faced and Andrew gives a crooked smile then tosses over the key which Will neatly catches one-handed. “I’m not trying to trap you or anything,” adds Andrew in a conciliatory tone that Will knows from long experience isn’t remotely genuine. “I just don’t want anyone disturbing us. Let’s face it Will, we’ve got quite a lot of catching up to do.”

Will replaces the key on his desk then leans back and stares at Andrew from over the top of his glasses with poorly-concealed loathing. "No," he says. “Not really.”

Andrew has always possessed an internal catalogue of smiles that can be tailored to every possible occasion via assorted quirks of lips and teeth: the sardonic smile, the charming smile, the smile of malevolent relish. The one he selects now is of the distinctly patronising variety – like he’s oblivious to the way Will is bristling with angry aversion and thinks he’s being adorably pouty instead – and having put the smile on he now adjusts it slightly then beams it in Will’s direction for several seconds before strolling towards the bookcase and beginning to casually inspect the rows of files. “Put those down,” snaps Will.

“You’ve done all right for yourself haven’t you?” replies Andrew without bothering to look round. There’s an obvious note of approval in his voice, although Will knows it has nothing to do with respect or admiration but is merely an expression of how he feels Will’s status and newfound position reflect well on him personally. In this respect Will’s achievements and aptitudes, even his physical appearance, mean nothing – and have never meant anything – beyond how they make Andrew feel, rather as if Will is merely an avatar for Andrew’s sense of his own entitlement. “I thought omegas weren’t encouraged to work in law enforcement,” adds Andrew in an overly casual way that immediately strikes Will as ominous. “At least not without rigorous background checks.”

He pauses in flicking through the files and glances over his shoulder at Will before smirking and swivelling round again. “Be honest: how many of them know?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” says Will quickly, trying to ignore the way his heart has begun to pound. “Of course they know.”

“All of them?”

“Yes,” snaps Will. Not that Hannibal, Jack and Beverly could in any way be reasonably considered as ‘all’ – but at least Andrew doesn’t know that. In this respect the terror of it becoming common knowledge has caused Will more than one sleepless night in the past, not least because of the horrific obstacles and discrimination he’d inevitably face from the numerous alphas and betas who are less open-minded. In fact the mere idea of it is causing his hands to shake with anxiety and he quickly tucks them into his pockets so that Andrew won’t see and suspect.

“That’s good,” replies Andrew in the same casual voice. “I guess I won’t have to disclose it to them then, will I? Technically it would be my responsibility…if they didn’t already know.”

Will bites his lip with distress before realising that Andrew’s getting ready to move again so immediately forces his expression into one of bored indifference. “You know how I found you of course,” adds Andrew, carelessly tossing the file onto the table so that the papers spill and swirl across the floor. “I would have shown up a lot sooner but there were a couple of things I needed to arrange before I could come and get you.”

“Yeah,” says Will flatly. “I bet there were.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” adds Andrew with a malevolent little smile. “You must have been
expecting me straight away once you met Chris. He told me you’d worked out he was a private investigator. What was it you said to him again honey? Remind me would you.”

Will folds his arms and glares back, refusing to be intimidated. “I said ‘Tell him no’.”

“Tell him no,” repeats Andrew sardonically. “Well you’ll be glad to hear that he passed the message on. Looks like I didn’t listen though, doesn’t it? I never take no for an answer Will, you should have realised that by now.” He pauses then smiles again. “Ironic really isn’t it? If I’d just waited a few more weeks for The Sculptor case to blow up I wouldn’t have even needed a PI: I could have just looked on the TattleCrime and found you myself. The fact you worked out what he was gave you a bit of warning.”

“Of course I worked it out,” snaps Will. “He wasn’t exactly subtle.”

“No, I guess he wasn’t. Don’t think I was under-estimating you there by the way; I warned him several times that he had to be careful with you but he thought I was exaggerating.” Andrew smirks then adopts an unnervingly accurate impression of the detective’s accent. “‘With respect sir he’s only an omega.’ That’s what he said to me. ‘How smart can he really be?’”

Will automatically glances down at the autopsy report, still splayed open on his desk in all its gory glory. “Looks like he underestimated a few things,” he says tonelessly.

“Hmmm. Perhaps. At the very least you were obviously more than he bargained for. He thought you were just going to be some pretty little idiot and instead he ended up with a bad-tempered little troublemaker facing off with him in a parking lot. He should have listened to me shouldn’t he? Not that he minded all that much. In fact it seemed like he was quite taken with you.”

“Not any more he won’t be,” says Will. He pauses then waves his hand down at the report. “I suppose you know he’s dead?”

“What, Chris?” barks Andrew, sounding genuinely surprised. “Let me see.” He moves towards the desk in several quick strides and Will likewise takes a few steps back so they’re not in touching distance. “Jesus,” says Andrew, running his eyes over the page before dropping it down again with a wince of distaste. “What a fucking mess.”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it,” replies Will sarcastically.

“As far as I knew his main line of business was missing persons,” muses Andrew who’s obviously decided to ignore this. “He was operating more in the big league than I thought; he must have got mixed up with someone serious to do that to him. Drugs, perhaps.” He pauses then gives another unpleasant smile. “You really are bad, bad luck aren’t you sweetheart? How is it that this kind of stuff just follows you round?”

With a twinge of unease Will realises that there’s an intrinsic truth to this that he doesn’t quite know how to respond to and Andrew leans back on his heels and begins to smile a little more broadly. “You’re wasting your time coming here,” says Will sharply, seeing the smile and immediately resenting it. “I want you to go.”

“I guess you do,” replies Andrew in a leisurely way. “Only it’s not quite as simple as that. You don’t just get to stamp your little feet at me and order me to leave; not after what you did. You’ve caused me a lot of hassle Will. A lot.”

“Yeah, it’s not like you gave me any in return is it?” snaps Will. “Putting me in the hospital, for example.”
“Will, honey – don’t start that with me again. You’re acting like I did it on purpose. How the hell was I supposed to know you’d have a reaction like that? How could anyone have known?”

“Oh well; that’s all right then isn’t it?”

“You know I’d never have hurt you deliberately,” says Andrew. As he’s speaking Will can see his eyes sliding towards his reflection in the window pane, briefly pursing his lips and furrowing his brow as if rehearsing the martyred expression of ‘wronged alpha’ that he intends to use in front of the judge. “Even the doctors were surprised,” adds Andrew, finally turning back again. “Besides, it would never have happened at all if you’d just levelled with me about all that medication you were taking.”

“So it’s my fault?” says Will incredulously.

“Well of course it was your fault,” snaps Andrew, the good-humoured façade abruptly vanishing. “Although to be honest I blame your old man more than you. He sat there and lied through his teeth about how you were the ideal mate; he was so desperate for the money he’d have said anything.”

“Bullshit. I told you I didn’t want a family. I couldn’t have made it any clearer.”

“He lied to me from the start,” continues Andrew, who’s obviously decided to have one of his convenient bouts of deafness and disregard anything that contradicts the version of events where he’s the one in the right. “He swore blind that I’d be guaranteed to have you knocked up in the first year. The old bastard spent hours waxing lyrical about how you were the perfect omega. Docile, affectionate; he even said you were obedient. It’s not my fault he was a goddamned liar.”

And it’s not my fault you’re a fucking idiot, thinks Will contemptuously. “You knew what you were getting into,” he says out loud. “I never told you anything that wasn’t true. Why would I? I never wanted it.”

“Only it’s not really up to you is it?” snaps Andrew. “Jesus Will, you always did this; always acted as if you have the same authority as an alpha. You’re an omega: deal with it. That means you do what you’re told.”

“Then go and buy another one,” hisses Will. “And see if you have better luck next time.”

Andrew rifles through his internal smile inventory and summons up a particularly leering, patronising specimen that’s heralded with a little flourish of teeth to announce its arrival. “But I can’t just buy another one baby,” he replies, the tone exaggeratedly reasonable as if he’s talking to a wayward five year old. “You guys are very expensive. Anyway…what if I don’t want another one? What if I want you?”

“Then you’re out of luck,” shoots back Will. “We’re not bonded; you can’t make me do anything.”

“Nice try,” says Andrew with obvious sarcasm, “but we both know that’s not quite true. You see I have a little bit of paper in my safe with both our names on it that says the exact opposite.” Will shakes his head stubbornly and takes a step backwards and Andrew gives a long sigh like someone with the weight of the world on their shoulders before clasping his long thin fingers together. “You’re so unreasonable Will,” he says with regret, rather as if Will’s refusal to agree is some sort of tragic impairment or disability that’s more worthy of pity than anger. “Why do you always act this way? You bring out the worst in me every single time. I’m not like this with anyone else except you.”

“Well stop hanging out with me then. Problem solved.”
“Because, doll face, I paid a lot of money for an omega and now that I own one I’m not inclined to let it go wandering off all by its silly little self. Besides, like I said, you’ve caused me an incredible amount of hassle. You owe me Will. Do you have any idea how bad it looks when your omega runs out on you? It makes people question your authority. I lost two promotions at work after you disappeared.”

Will just glares in response to this and Andrew laughs at the sight of it and takes a few steps closer. “I remember that look,” he says mockingly. “It means you’re going to be stubborn about it. You’ve got guts Will, I’ll give you that. Look, I don’t want this to get any uglier than it needs to, but like it or not we’re kind of stuck together.”

“Bullshit. How are we? We’re not bonded.”

Andrew waves this point away with a little wave of the wrist which makes his long fingers flicker and scuttle like the bones of a singularly pale and spindly crab. “I’m more than willing to compromise,” he says in a tone that’s dripping with false friendliness. “For starters, I’m not planning to take you down south with me. I can easily get a transfer up here so you could keep your job. At least… I’d let you do it part-time. Anyway it’s not like you’d need to work, I’d give you a very generous allowance. You’d love it Will, it’d be great. You could, y’know, do all kinds of stuff…” He pauses then looks thoughtful, as if trying to picture all the possible things Will could do.

“Let me guess,” replies Will sarcastically. “I could have lunch and go shopping. Are you out of your mind?”

“I can get us a really nice place in the city,” continues Andrew as if Will hasn’t spoken. “A penthouse apartment. Far better than whatever shack you’re stuck in right now. You can even have your own room to give you a bit of space; whatever you want.”

“Which is exactly what you promised before. And look how that turned out.”

“I mean it this time. Think about it Will. Having me around would make your life so much easier.” He’s edging closer and closer now, using his greater height and strength to try and box Will in, and Will automatically spins round and pretends to stare out the window just so it’ll give him an excuse not to look at one another. “You need an alpha to take care of you,” says Andrew in a soft, insinuating tone that’s obviously supposed to be inviting. “All omegas do: it’s what you’re designed for.” Moving even closer he finally comes to a halt directly behind and then inhales deeply before his breath catches slightly and he presses his face against Will’s neck just below his hair. “Oh Will,” he says quietly. “Baby. You’re getting so close. I can smell it on you.”

Will, staring fixedly out the window, immediately feels his heart sink at the sound of the words. And it really does: as if the sick plunge of despair has the capacity to transcend metaphor and manifest as a defeated plummeting sensation in the chest. Because while they’re not bonded, Andrew’s still spent more time with him than any other alpha and can claim a level of attunement which makes it highly plausible he’d be able to detect an oncoming heat. For a few seconds he can feel darkness crowding his vision and is madly aware of the way he’s begun shaking his head in an urgent, wordless expression of denial. Because of course Andrew is lying. He must be. It’s not possible, thinks Will desperately. It’s NOT. There’s no way the suppressants could suddenly have stopped working. Besides, he’s spent far more time with Hannibal recently who hasn’t even hinted at it – and surely he would have done?

“You’re just as pretty as I remember,” murmurs Andrew, who still has his face pressed against Will’s neck. “You haven’t lost it. You just need a bit of polish and then you’d be perfect.” Reaching round he begins to slide his hands along Will’s arms in what’s impossible to interpret as anything other than a casual gesture of ownership. “God Will, I thought I was going to be angry when I saw you; I was
so sure I was going to be angry. And now you're here all I want to do is take you back to my hotel and fuck you. You need a proper knot in you, don’t you baby? That’s all you need. That would stop you freaking out all the time.”

Glancing down Will can see that he’s gripping so tightly onto the window ledge that his knuckles have gone white. And it’s not from fear, or even from anger, but simply from the shocked awareness of how incredibly easy it would be to swing round right now and seize Andrew by the throat. He wouldn’t even need a weapon to get the job done: his own bare hands would be enough. In fact the temptation to do it is so powerful that it makes him draw in his breath then screw his eyes closed in an attempt to banish the urge before forcing himself to calm down and sensibly consider his options. Hannibal, for example, is only in the next room and Will is sure if he shouted loud enough he would hear him. In fact even if he didn’t shout then Hannibal would probably still know, because such is the intensely ineffable strength of the connection between them that Will feels like somehow Hannibal would just be able to sense that Will needed him – that nothing more than raised voices would be enough. But in spite of himself he can’t quite bear the indignity of calling for help and having to be rescued like some sort of powerless victim; not least because long experience has taught him that showing any form of vulnerability or weakness in front of Andrew is a fatal tactical error. He’s going to have to get out of this by himself – just as he always has.

“Come back to the hotel,” Andrew is now saying, his voice slightly muffled from where he’s begun to rub his face against Will’s hair. “I’ve got my driver waiting outside: we could be there in 20 minutes. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, I won’t force you. We can take our time. Just let me get to know you again.” He lets go of Will’s arms and moves his palms upwards so he can take hold of his shoulders instead and rub his thumbs along each slim ridge of bone. “Look at you baby, you’re so tense. You’re scared aren’t you even if you won’t admit it? It’s okay to be scared; omegas are meant to be scared of alphas. Why don’t I gentle you? You never let me before – you always said you’d never let an alpha touch you that way. Would you let me do it now Will? I promise you’d enjoy it, I’d make it so good for you.”

As Andrew slides his hands towards the collar of Will’s shirt, attempting to flick the buttons open, Will is unable to stand it anymore and violently pulls away. “You need to leave,” he snaps. “Now. Jack Crawford is due here any minute.”

“Is he though? I don’t know if I believe you Will. Are you lying to me again?”

“You’ll be thrown out. You can’t just come into the FBI without clearance.”

“You mean you’re worried I’ll get into trouble?” says Andrew sarcastically. “That’s very considerate of you.” Nevertheless he finally moves away and Will lets out a long breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. “At least you’re wearing that spray,” adds Andrew, casually draping himself against the side of Will’s desk. “That’s good Will. It’s very good; I’m proud of you.”

“Don’t be. It’s not like I was doing it for you.”

“Have you had any other alphas sniffing round you while I was gone?” adds Andrew, beginning to narrow his eyes.

“No.”

“I bet you have.”

“I haven’t.”

“Course you have,” says Andrew briskly. “You don’t need to lie to me; I’m not angry with you
about it. You didn’t have me to see them off for you so it was kind of inevitable. Anyway, alphas always found you irresistible. The guys at work could never stop going on about my cute little omega – it made it even worse when you ran off.”

“I haven’t,” replies Will through gritted teeth.

“What about your boss?” persists Andrew, who’s incapable of letting a subject drop until he’s bored with it himself. “That Crawford guy? I bet he’s been trying to get you bent over his desk since the first day you’ve been here. Tell him from me that if he comes anywhere near you I’ll have him in front of a judge within 24 hours on an ownership claim. And after that…” Andrew gives a small smile then thoughtfully inspects his fingernails. “After that I’ll kill him.”

Will makes a derisive snorting noise and Andrew’s head snaps upright with a look of such deep menace that Will can feel his throat go dry at the sight of it. “I’m serious Will,” says Andrew quietly. “Don’t fuck with me. I’m not prepared for anyone else to get their hands on my property. And as for you: you need to stop causing all this drama and learn your fucking place. I was serious with my offer before but if you don’t start behaving yourself then the deal’s off. You’re coming back to me Will, let’s be very clear about that. And you can do it the easy way, or you can do it the hard way, but it doesn’t change the fact that you’re going to give me what I paid for when I put out all that money for you in the first place.”

“Try it,” snaps Will. “I’ll do a countersuit for maltreatment.”

“Oh that’s cute Will. That’s very cute; only who do you think’s going to take it seriously? A crazy little omega like you. You obviously need someone to look after you – if anything they’ll be thanking me for being prepared to take responsibility. I mean, who else would put up with you? You might be a pretty face Will, but let’s be real here: there’s hardly going to be a line of alphas queuing up to take you on for the long-term. They might like the look of you, but once anyone gets to know you…well; let’s just say the packaging is a lot more appealing than the actual contents.”

Will blinks a few times, stung by what he privately considers the essential truth of this, although he doesn’t betray even a hint of the unhappiness in his expression as he replies in a flat, level voice: “A hypothetical queue of alphas is hardly relevant to this, is it?”

“Not relevant? Yeah, whatever – you keep telling yourself that Will.” With a visible effort Andrew takes a deep breath and attempts to calm down, having obviously remembered that the game plan is to appear reasonable and considerate and that it’s not exactly working out as intended. “Look – honey – you know you need to come back. I don’t want to get the law involved but if you don’t give me any other choice then I’ll have to. Why let it get that far? I’ve told you I’m prepared to compromise. You’d have exactly the same life you’ve got now. Only better, because you’d have me to look after you.”

“No. How many more times do I have to say it? And I don’t need anyone to look after me.”

Beneath Andrew’s right eye a muscle is starting to spasm and twitch: a sure sign that he’s struggling not to lose his temper. “Alright,” he says with another deep breath. “Look, I get it – you’ve had a shock with me just turning up here. I’m sorry, okay? I probably should have called ahead but I wanted to see you. You just need some time to get used to the idea. I’ll come back tomorrow and we can talk some more. How about that? I’ll take you to dinner.”

This time Will doesn’t even bother to reply but just shakes his head very slowly and firmly; and Andrew gives a faint smile in return then goes eerily still for a few seconds before darting out and grabbing hold of Will’s shoulders, spinning him round and pushing him against the wall face first. “The stubbornness is very cute,” he says softly, straight into Will’s ear. “It’s also useless. The more
you resist the worse you’re going to make it for yourself.” Letting go of Will’s shoulders he takes hold of his waist instead, digging his fingers so hard into the hip bones that Will has to bite his lip to stifle the gasp of pain he wants to make. “Whatever crap you were taking before clearly isn’t working now baby,” says Andrew in the same tone of softly suggestive menace. “You’re going to come on any time now, and when you do there isn’t a judge in the whole country that won’t give me formal custody. And get this through your stupid little head: if you end up dragging me through the courts then you-will-regret-it. You can forget about being allowed to work. You can forget about leaving the fucking house. I’ll put a collar on you for starters; is that what you want? Is that what you’re going to force me to do? Because I will. And after that I’ll keep you in lock-down 24/7, whether you’re having a heat or not.”

He loosens his grip as if he’s about to let Will go, then rather than releasing him thrusts his body even harder forward until his face is being crushed against the wall. And Will, in turn, briefly forgets about struggling and goes completely rigid instead as his attention shrinks and constricts to the presence of a weird throbbing noise that it takes him a few seconds to realise is the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. The echo of it pulses and thrashes like a bird trapped in a cage, and if he focusses on it too much there’s an irresistible impression of how it sounds like the crooning voice of the dark reflection as each throb pulsates and solidifies and slowly turns into words: you-could-kill-him-you-could-kill-him. In fact the urge to attack is overpowering now: stronger even than the urge to escape, and subsuming his entire physical sense of himself like a chrysalis or a second sheaf of skin. An assault on an alpha by an omega is taken extremely seriously – often seen as a sign of instability and punishable by forced confinement – yet even though he knows there could be grave repercussions for what he’s about to do, the need is so strong that he abandons any last remains of self-restraint and does it anyway. Taking a deep breath, Will viciously kicks out from behind until he feels Andrew grunt and loosen his grip then drives his elbow into Andrew’s ribs so he can roughly twist himself free. The subsequent surge of power is exhilarating, and while he knows he could – and should – just leave it there he can’t stop himself now: and with a rush of energy that feels vaguely primal in its intensity he shoots out his right hand to land a brutal punch on the bottom of Andrew’s face. His fist connects to flesh with a deeply satisfying crunch and the force is so extreme that it sends Andrew staggering backwards against the desk in a crumpled heap.

Will casually straightens his jacket then leans back against the wall and regards Andrew with a level of disgust that’s practically blistering. “Let’s get one thing clear,” he says, his voice low and intense. “Touch me like that again and…” I’ll-kill-you I’ll-kill-you “…I’ll break your jaw.”

Andrew makes another grunting sound – a weird, bestial amalgam that’s partly pain but mostly shock – and stares back with eyes that are virtually glistening with rage. “That really wasn’t smart,” he says softly. Raising his right hand he touches his face then holds it out to inspect the smears of blood. “An omega attacking an alpha? No honey, not smart at all. You dare try that a second time and I’ll have you in an institution so fast your feet won’t touch the floor.”

“Get out,” hisses Will.

Andrew goes silent for a few seconds, clearly considering his next move, and when he finally speaks Will can easily recognise the abrupt change in tactic: a shift from rage to condescension, as if Will is so stupid and trivial that he’s not even worth being angry over. “You always were ungrateful,” sighs Andrew, and once more it’s the way one might address a child. “How many other alphas do you think would be anything like as patient with you as I’ve been? It’s never enough for you is it Will? No matter what anyone does for you, you always want more. And for someone who’s constantly whining about how he’s smart enough to have a job you’re being unbelievably dumb. You can throw as many tantrums as you like, but all you’re doing is prolonging the inevitable.” Starting to smile again he straightens up to his full height and regards Will with something like amusement. “The weird thing is I’d be lying if I said I don’t enjoy the way you try and fight me all the time. You
want to know why, baby? It’s because it makes breaking you that much more enjoyable. Like a little wild animal, Will. My father owned a ranch when I was a kid. Did I ever tell you that? I used to help with breaking in the horses. I was very good at it. I never met one I couldn’t get the better of.”

Will takes a sudden step forward and Andrew, clearly wary of being punched again, abruptly steps away to the side. “I’ll give you a week,” he says with barely concealed venom. “Call it a gesture of good will. That’s enough time to make any arrangements you need to, then after that I expect to find you with your bags packed and ready to move into a place up here with me. If not then the deal’s off and I take you down south again – by force. I know how much you hate scenes Will; I’m trying to do you a favour here. But if I have to come back and carry you off over my fucking shoulder in front of half the FBI then I will; and you know as well as I do that legally there isn’t one single thing they can do to stop me.”

“No,” repeats Will firmly; because surely if he says it enough times it’ll take on some kind of meaning? “No. Forget it. It’s not going to happen.”

This time Andrew doesn’t bother replying at all; just smiles instead before insolently leaning over and running a finger across Will’s cheekbone. It’s the same gesture a dealer might use to inspect an antique or a breeder to determine a horse’s pedigree: the mark of someone appraising a possession. “All the trouble I’ve gone to to get your attention,” he says softly. “You have no idea what I’ve done.”

“I don’t care.”

“No, I guess you don’t. You really are ungrateful aren’t you? Such a little brat, Will. You’re going to have to work very hard to make it up to me.”

“Fuck you.”

Andrew laughs outright and then pats the side of Will’s face. “Actually baby, I think you’ll find it’s the other way round. Why do you think I laid out so much money for you? It wasn’t exactly your sparkling wit and charming personality.” Turning round he now casually inspects his reflection in the window pane and adjusts his tie and smooths back his hair before retrieving his briefcase and stashing his coat over his arm. “I’m going to enjoy having you back Will,” he adds thoughtfully. “Then I’m going to enjoy having you on your back, if you’ll excuse the pun. The thing is, if you weren’t so stupid and stubborn you’d enjoy it too. You’d be a lot a lot happier if you could just accept what you are and stop fighting it. You’re not supposed to be out here getting battered about in the FBI. You always thought you were stronger than you really are. In your head you’re some big-shot investigator when in reality you’re just a frail little omega who’s one push away from a mental breakdown and can’t admit when he’s in too deep.”

Will lets out a low breath from between his teeth then leans back against the wall again with his arms folded. “You done?”

“I’m done.”

“Fine. Then listen, and understand this: lawyer up. Because there is no way I’m ever coming back by choice.”

“You really still think you’ve got a say in all this?” Andrew sighs then shakes his head with a gesture that half stylised as pity and half as contempt. “You’re an arrogant little bastard aren’t you? Then it looks like I’ll see you in court.”

“And I’ll see you in hell,” snarls Will.
“You don’t know what hell is,” replies Andrew in a voice so wreathed in venom it takes every shred of self-control for Will to not wince at the sound of it. “Seems as if you want to find out. Keep pushing me like this and I’m going to make you very – very – sorry.”

“You’re repeating yourself,” says Will contemptuously. “You think you can walk in here and threaten me? I’ve dealt with a lot worse than you before now; just take a ticket and join the back of the fucking line.”

“Oh yeah, The Sculptor is trying to get your attention isn’t he?” says Andrew with a weird little smile. “I read all about it. You really know how to pick them don’t you darling. I should probably be careful – people are going to think I’m as crazy as you are. Only the problem is Will: you belong to me. And until I say so, that means you don’t get to do shit without my permission.” Pausing on his way to the door he turns round and jabs a finger in Will’s direction. “One week. And don’t even think about running because there’s nowhere you can go I won’t find you. Then when I have my hands on that little neck of yours I’ll get a court order and have you tagged.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” says Will in horror.

“I’m sure you’re right,” replies Andrew with a smirk. “I’m sure I wouldn’t really dare. Why don’t you try running off and find out? Someone as unstable as you Will – they’d not only agree they’d be asking why I hadn’t done it sooner. And you know you’re not going to be able to pull one of those tags off: you’d have to dig it out with a scalpel.”

“You’re wasting your time – and money,” snaps Will, and through an epic force of effort he manages to stop the desperation leaking into his voice. “There’s no court in the world that would make me go back to you. Not after what you did.”

“I guess we’ll find out won’t we? Only – spoilers, Will – you already know you’re wrong. What happened was an accident. And every single doctor who saw you will back me up. It was completely your fault for poisoning yourself with all that medication; and do you really think an alpha judge is going to take your side over mine and an entire medical team?” Will goes quiet, unable to summon up the futility of a response to this, and Andrew laughs again. “Good boy,” he says. “That’s more like it. You’re cute when you’re being feisty but the depressed look is pretty good on you too. And I meant what I said – come back without a fight and you can carry on living up here and I’ll let you keep your job…at least, I will for a little while. Put me through the hassle of a court case and I’ll get you back anyway. Only I promise you this Will: I’ll make you sorrier than you’ve ever been in your life.”

*****

Jack is on the phone when Will comes stumbling into his office a few moments later: eyes wild and haunted-looking and with a face that’s noticeably pale, yet somehow, through an almost supernatural application of effort, still managing to keep the worst of the panic in check. Jack nods in acknowledgement when he pushes the door open then gestures wordlessly at him to take a seat. “On Friday,” he says irritably into the phone. “I’ve told you before. Yes. No. No, Friday. How many more times?”

Will gnaws fretfully on his thumbnail while trying not to twitch too visibly with impatience. “Friday!” roars Jack. “And I don’t want to hear any more about it until then.” Slamming down the receiver he turns and grimaces at Will. “Goddamn attorneys. Honestly, you won’t believe what they’re asking for now...” Then he seems to notice Will properly for the first time and the rest of the sentence trails off as he begins to frown and lean forward in his chair. “Hey you okay?” he says in a kinder voice. Will nods numbly and Jack, who isn’t normally one for clichés or metaphor, frowns even further and adds: “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”
“Do you know where Hannibal is?” blurts out Will. “His phone’s turned off.”

“You just missed him actually, he was here ten minutes ago.” Jack grimaces again. “Talking about you as it happens; apparently I’m pushing you too hard. Judging by the state of you I’m inclined to agree with him.”

“Well where did he go? Is he still here?”

“He said he wanted to speak with Alana about something. She did a guest lecture this afternoon, they’ll probably still be in the auditorium. Or maybe round the parking lot…Hey – hey! Sit down. What’s going on with you Will?”

“Nothing.”

“Rubbish. Something’s obviously happened: you look like hell.”

Although *what does hell even look like?* thinks Will wildly. Hell, after all, should surely be fiery and riotous as opposed to pale and strained and defeated-looking with grazed knuckles and bruises on its hip bones? Andrew’s vow to make his life a living hell then briefly flares into his mind; even though that doesn’t really fit either, because the hell of the Bible and Renaissance art is filled with leering, capering demons and flaming pits of sulphur and what’s the point of those when all you need for Paradise Lost is a luxurious house that you’re not allowed to leave and a life you can’t claim as your own? “*Will,*” repeats Jack, more loudly this time and obviously alarmed by Will’s blankly rigid expression. “Sit down please. You’re not leaving here ‘til you explain what’s happened.”

“Stop telling me what do to!” explodes Will, then sees the hurt expression on Jack’s face so takes a deep breath and makes a visible effort to try and calm down. “I’m sorry,” he adds in a quieter voice. “I’ll explain later. In fact I’ll have to explain later. But right now I really need to speak with Hannibal.”

Jack sighs then reaches over and gives Will’s hand a clumsy yet kindly pat. “Go on then,” he says. “I worry about you is all.”

“I’m fine,” replies Will mechanically. Jack raises his eyebrows. “Yeah okay, I’m not. But it isn’t really something you can help me with.”

“It’s a medical issue?” asks Jack tactfully.

“Not exactly.”

“But you think Hannibal can sort it out?”

“Maybe not,” replies Will, briefly struggling to stop the sense of raw desperation from showing on his face. “Most likely not. But…but I just need to tell him anyway.”

*****

Outside it’s already growing dark as Hannibal pauses in front of Alana’s car, both of them illuminated by the glow of the streetlamps like willowy streaks of crimson and black in their respective coats. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be more use,” says Alana, tightening her scarf around her throat. “But you know how he is.” Hannibal inclines his head to indicate that he does and Alana gives a small shrug in return. “Whoever really knows what’s going on with Will? He just gets that closed-down look on his face and insists that he’s…”

“…Fine. Yes, I know: that particular scenario is very familiar. Yet he is clearly *not* fine.”
“I’ve tried reaching out to him,” says Alana. “I’m sure you have too.”

“I have and with a similar lack of results. Although I suppose we can hardly blame him. A forced confidence, after all, is a rather counterfeit way to confide.” Hannibal gives a small shrug of his own, and which is rather more forceful than Alana’s version although equally graceful in the way he manages to curl his shoulder blades round. “At any rate I appreciate you humouring me; these regular enquiries must be becoming a bore.”

“Not at all. I’m always happy to look out for Will. You know that.”

“I do, yes. In you he is very fortunate in his choice of friends.”

“Likewise.”

“I appreciate the endorsement,” says Hannibal with a smile. “Although I don’t suppose he would see it that way. I can imagine his irritation if he finds out I’ve been asking people about him behind his back.”

“I know. He’s so guarded.”

“He is,” agrees Hannibal thoughtfully. “It makes one wonder what he feels he has to work so hard to defend.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” adds Alana. “Anything he needs.” Then she smiles and gently presses her hand against Hannibal’s forearm. “And don’t be a stranger yourself. You know you don’t have to wait until there’s a problem with Will to look me up.”

The way she says this is completely casual and uncontrived, and Hannibal in turn feels no reservations about leaning forward so he can press a kiss against her smooth, scented cheek. “You’re so European,” says Alana affectionately. “Mostly we just clank our jawbones together over here.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I can’t entirely purge my continental affectations. Will often says the same.”

“I know he does. He never talks about himself but he’s always very happy to talk about you.” Hannibal delivers one of more inscrutably Sphinxy smiles in response and Alana smiles back at the level of restraint that prevents him angling for further details in the same way most people would. “He talks about you and you’re talking about him: maybe you should just cut out the middleman and talk to each other.”

“I suppose we should. In fact when expressed that way it appears that we’re actually both rather stupid.”

Alana laughs out loud at this then briefly replaces her hand on Hannibal’s arm. “You know, I wouldn’t presume to say the same for you but I think Will would be a lot happier if he really was that stupid.”

“Yes indeed – the comfort of oblivion.”

“Exactly. His intelligence always seems like another cross for him to bear. I’d like to think you can help him learn to wear it as well as you do.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal with his most impressive poker face. “I’d like to think so too.”

“Well if you need a middleman in the meantime,” adds Alana. “You know where I am. Now let me have a continental moment myself.” She presses a delicate kiss against Hannibal’s face then leans
back and smiles again before rubbing his cheekbone with her thumb. “Ah, I’m sorry, I’ve got lipstick on you. I suppose the ladies of Europe do it more elegantly.”

“Not at all. And certainly with nowhere near as much appeal.”

“Oh stop it,” says Alana merrily. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I thought I was European?”

“You’re both. Now stop trying to charm me, you’re going to make me late for my date.”

“That would be unforgivably rude of me,” says Hannibal with another smile. He stands aside to wave her off while Alana smiles and waves back – and the dim inky duskiness that saturates and swirls around them is so complete that neither of them notice Will several metres away; stood by the entire time and nearly wholly obscured by the shadows.

As vantage points go Will’s position offers the considerable comforts of secrecy; yet in that moment it strikes him that it actually incorporates the worst of both possible worlds, in that he’s too far away to hear what the two of them are saying yet still close enough to see them and therefore torment himself with imagining it. Although the suggestiveness of the latter is so strong as to essentially eliminate the need for the former; because what else, really, could they possibly be saying to one another? It’s enough to see the way that Alana reaches out once – then twice – and casually strokes Hannibal’s arm with all the familiarity of someone who’s performed a similar gesture a hundred times before. It’s enough to see the way that he kisses her cheek and she touches her hand against his face, or the way she keeps saying things to him which make him smile and look unexpectedly animated, as if the typical marble-like impassiveness has heard something to breathe warm life into it. Yet if all these things are the kindling then the accelerant which sets them alight is the fact that while Will doesn’t know for certain Alana’s an omega, she certainly looks as though she might be. And, even more to the point, would be the type of omega that’s a million miles removed from the type that Will is: the type that’s intelligent, sophisticated, beautiful and restrained, and who’s assertive without being strident and demure without being shy. Stood there by her sleekly gleaming car she and Hannibal resemble a couple from an art postcard, or possibly some expensive advertisement for a luxury lifestyle product: the type that ordinary people like Will are intended to wistfully gaze at and think ‘If I could only spend enough money, and invest enough time, then I too might be happy and beautiful and successful and in love; just the way that these people are.’

In those few seconds, breached and stranded alone in the shadows, Will realises that he doesn’t feel angry – because right does he have to be? – and he doesn’t even feel particularly resentful either, because of course Hannibal was always destined to gravitate towards someone like Alana rather than someone like Will. More than anything else he just feels a wave of grief for the fact that yet another thing has been lost. Another version of Paradise Lost, in fact…another version of hell. And then beneath the sadness is something less profound yet almost equally painful, which is the awareness of being presumptuous and ridiculous to have allowed even the faintest hint of such a longing to steal through in the first place.

Will knows he should just leave now to prevent the risk of being seen, but still can’t resist allowing himself one final yearning stare in Hannibal’s direction as a sort of farewell gesture: although even this is destined to be disappointed because Hannibal, unaware of Will’s silent veiled vigil from the shadows, now abruptly turns round and vanishes in the direction of his own car. So Will watches him go then retreats back towards the building just as quietly as he arrived and without making any attempt to catch Hannibal’s attention. There’s no point now – not anymore – because he knows that he’s not going to tell him about Andrew. Of course there was no real point in telling him before beyond the hope of emotional comfort; but while there’s no doubt it would still be on offer, Will’s
sense of pride no longer wants the comfort in the same way if it means having to share Hannibal’s interest and support with someone who has a greater claim to it. In fact it’s so miserably easy to imagine: Hannibal and Alana reclining round the house being elegant and beautiful together, possibly over a dinner table with silver candlesticks or maybe even in bed, and Hannibal saying ‘You’ll never guess what’s happened with Will.’ And Alana listening in shocked sympathy with her head on one side and a lock of dark hair tumbling prettily across her forehead as she holds forth about what a shame it is, and how dreadful, and if only there was something they could do because aren’t the laws barbaric? And then, bit by bit, they’d lose interest. Hannibal would stroke Alana’s face and brush the strand of hair out the way and Alana would curl up next to his chest, and they’d gradually grow so preoccupied with each other that they’d be glad of an excuse – any excuse – to bask in the warm, rosy glow of their own togetherness and forget about the sordid realities of someone else’s life and problems that exist in the frozen wilderness beyond their own snug circle of two.

Looking down Will realises he’s dug his nails so deep into his palms he’s almost drawn blood and the surge of pain is enough to force his attention back to the present and pull himself together. Because of course whether or not Hannibal and Alana are a couple doesn’t matter. It doesn’t, does it? It’s not even relevant. It doesn’t have the slightest bearing on the problem at hand. A problem which is quickly forming itself into the greatest problem of Will’s life; even his life, with so many problems in it. Somewhat trance-like he heads back to his office again in a slowly mechanical way – one foot in front of the other, left, right, left, right – then locks the door behind him and roots around in his desk for the bottle of whiskey that’s stashed away in the bottom drawer. The whiskey was a gift from Jack, whose idea of Christmas presents for his team has a tendency to run along the more stolidly unimaginative lines (alcohol for the men; perfume for the women) and then, because he doesn’t have a glass, unpacks one of the teacups and uses that instead. His hand is remarkably steady all things considered and he places it flat on the desk and examines it with something like pride, because right now comfort is in such short supply that even something as trivial as a steady hand can’t be taken for granted. From outside in the corridor comes the sound of knocking and Will stiffens in his chair before hearing someone calling his name and realising it’s only Siemens, so ignores him and pours out another measure of whiskey which he knocks back in one go.

It’s getting dark in earnest now but Will doesn’t want to turn on the light and advertise his presence to anyone walking past so just sits in the gloom instead with the glow of the streetlights as his only illumination. Think, he mutters to himself. Think, think! There must be something. There must be something to make Andrew go away. Only there doesn’t appear to be anything, and so Will pours out the bottle for a third time and then drags a weary hand over his face. Hannibal is probably at Alana’s house by now; or maybe she’s gone to his? Perhaps he’ll take her to the concert that he was supposed to see when Will was there but ended up in the bar all night instead. Not that it really matters, does it? Not really: not in the grand scheme of things. It doesn’t matter at all.

“Matter does not really exist,” Hannibal said once. “The concept is entirely contradictory, an abstract universal.” Like matter and anti-matter…opposites attract. Like himself and Will as wildly opposing counterparts: north and south, left and right and wrong. The unstoppable force and the immovable object. Like polarities, drawn together by nature and instinct. And yet ‘matter’ means something counts. It means it signifies; it means it wasn’t all for nothing.

Will takes another deep breath and then reaches out with the hand that’s so steady and picks up the teacup again to swallow down the whiskey in a bitter stinging draught. Then he slowly draws back his arm and throws the cup against the wall, because there’s something so perfect about the way all that fragile flawless porcelain shatters into a hundred little fragments that catch the remains of the dying light on their way down.
Dear You,

It’s getting closer now to the end of the week.

This means the deadline is coming; it means everything’s going to collapse. And as I watch it happen my dread starts to escalate and I try to understand how it’s possible to be in so much pain when I’m not bruised or bleeding – not injured in any conceivable way – yet still feel as if I’m shattering inside. To be honest I think this is what it feels like to finally lose control. It’s like gathering everything that matters to you into your arms then flinging yourself from something near and high, because once you’re airborne the only thing left to do is submit to the free-fall and accept the inevitability of sailing down while surrendering to the loss of yourself. The anticipation is the hardest – those last few seconds when you and everything that matters are stood by the edge of the cliff – but once you’ve committed to the decision it’s supposed to bring a certain sense of peace.

At least…I guess that’s how it would work in theory. Only I have a problem with it in practice, because I know I’m not ready yet to just let go and accept the inevitable. I’m waiting, you see. I’m waiting for the disaster that my life’s become to somehow grow bearable again – and meaningful, and mine – because it might be a collection of catastrophes but it’s the only one I have and it’s still valuable to me. I want to protect and preserve it. Don’t get me wrong though; I know I don’t have to do this. I know I’m allowed to give up. I know I’m allowed to think ‘this future with Andrew is inescapable so I may as well stop fighting and accept it’. But I can’t. Would you like to know what else I can’t seem to accept? It’s you, of course. It’s always you. Because I can’t seem to let go of you either, even though I know I should.

I’m not supposed to miss you like this, am I? I’m not supposed to care. I’m not supposed to make you my prerogative when I was only ever your alternative. God it’s all so strange, because in many ways I hardly know you at all. It doesn’t even make sense to write to you like this; something that you’ll never be able to read. Yet none of this changes the fact that you weren’t just a muse, or a realisation, or a passing thought or idea or inspiration; you were everything – and I know now that if anybody could have saved me, that person would have been you. In fact it’s because you meant so much that I couldn’t comprehend or express it, and now I guess I’ll never have an opportunity to let you know. So what’s the point in denying it? None: no point at all. My conscience and rational brain is attempting to persuade me into believing something that my mind, heart, body and soul all know is a hopeless, helpless lie. The way I feel and think about you isn’t going to expire. It’s not going to die. It’s not going to go away. I can club it and pound it and kick it all I want, it just limps off and lays dormant, recuperating and convalescing, then comes back twice as vital as before and wrecks me.

The dual demands of clinging on and letting go…I don’t know which is harder. I even dreamt about you last night. In fact it was so vivid it was more like dreaming while I was awake, and it was the sort of dream that I can imagine having for the rest of my life: dreaming that you’re still here and that you’re speaking to me, that your eyes have met mine, that you’re touching me…right until the moment that I wake up cold and afraid and alone and have to reconcile with losing and letting go of you all over again. I guess that means I’ll never have a chance to stop missing you because I’ll never stop needing you: you’ll be walking away from me over and over again every morning of every day for as long as I live. I’m not even complaining about it. It’s inevitable, I suppose; it’s just the way it is. Loss and longing…you never get one without the other.
At other times I imagine what it might be like to run into you several years from now. I’d have been forced to stop working by then so it would be in a theatre or restaurant, somewhere like that. Somewhere luxurious and impersonal. You’d be there with Alana and happy, and I’d be there with Andrew and not. And our eyes would meet from across the room and we’d think ‘Oh yes, we knew each other once, we touched each other; once we nearly kissed. Just once. It was a long time ago now, but once we did.’ Then maybe we’d make some meaningless small talk, and I’d have to introduce you to Andrew and you’d run your eyes over him and give that very faint half-smile that you always do. Then we’d walk away in separate directions and I’d have no idea what was going through your head, but deep down in myself I know I’d be thinking: ‘It wasn’t supposed to end like this.’ Because that was never my version: other people, people like Alana and Andrew, should never have mattered because me and you were always supposed to be more important. Above others. Us against the world. And the worlds we lived in were different but somehow never all that far apart. We saw the same sky after all, the same stars. Didn’t we? You know that it’s true. Some of our stars were the same.

At other times I just think about the small stupid things, like how I sometimes used to snap at you; the way I’d tell you how annoying you could be. At the time I meant it: that voice of yours, the relentless insights…like elegant instruments of torture. But you see the thing is, I’ve finally realized that nothing ever sounded so compelling as the way you spoke to me – and that nothing is so desolate as the sound of the silence you’ve left behind you now that you’re not here. It hurts to miss you. It sounds ridiculous to say I’m broken-hearted because we weren’t lovers and we weren’t in love. In fact when I flung all that porcelain against the wall I thought that might have been the sound of my heart breaking, but it wasn’t really. It’s not that sort of rupture. It’s not about dramatic gestures in dark rooms or the sound of shattered teacups, it’s more like a quiet sense of yearning that something irrereplaceable has been taken away. I wonder what you’d say if I told you my heart feels broken? You’d probably ask if it was in pieces and I’d tell you that it was. You’d look thoughtful then: other people’s pain always interests you. Maybe you’d say ‘In that case create art with it, Will. Make a mosaic or a tableau – sculpt something striking from the fragments.’ Or maybe you wouldn’t say that? Maybe you wouldn’t say anything at all.

The thing is, I feel like you walked away that night with the essence of me in the palm of your hands – mind, heart, spirit and soul, all dripping and gore-stained – and I don’t even care, and I don’t want them back. You could have flayed me, if you’d wanted to. You could have stripped me to the bone and then disappeared clutching sheaves of my skin and I still wouldn’t care. And the reason I don’t is because my true self isn’t what I believed it to be, or even what I wish it was, but what I’ve spent my entire life trying to hide from myself and conceal from the world. I’ve constantly been surrounded by people who rewarded me for pretending to be something I’m not and I’ve always blindly done what they’ve asked of me. In fact I’ve spent my whole life as the property of other people: I’ve always been someone else’s expectation, or their problem, or their project; I’ve never just been myself. The only time I thought it might be possible was when I was with you.

This is why I’ll miss you. It’s why no matter who I meet in the future and how much they might inspire me, no one will ever quite be able to take your place. Dear you, you were such a beautiful bit of chaos…I can’t bring myself to regret you. In fact I don’t regret any of it, and if I had the time again I’d still want you. Always. No matter how many lives, or lifetimes, or different versions of ourselves, no matter how many people warned me away or how many times I told myself ‘no’ – it wouldn’t matter, not any of it. Because at the end of it all – at the end of everything – I’d always still find you, and I’d always still want you.

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“What’s the matter with Will?” says Price a few days later as he and Zeller are sifting through tissue samples in the lab. “He’s been acting a little odd.”
“Will’s always a little odd.”

“More than a little then.” Price pauses then squints accusingly at Zeller from over the top of his safety goggles. “A lot odd.”

“You’re the one who’s odd. Why do you insist on wearing those things all the time? They make you look like a giant fly.”

“Musca domestica,” says Price with a hint of smugness.

“Yeah, like I said: a giant fly. And I honestly don’t know what the matter is with Will. Whenever you ask him he says he’s fine.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” replies Price firmly. “He always says he’s fine.”

“Well whatever it is it hasn’t affected his work,” says Zeller, beginning to lay out specimen trays for Price before having to be asked. “Did you hear how he was able to link the first Sculptor victim to the Richard Black case? You know – the Nemesis killer. That’s one and six confirmed now: and I bet you he finds a link with the other four.”

“Once again that doesn’t mean anything,” says Price. He frowns even harder, then to emphasise the point begins to brandish his pipette at Zeller like someone waving a stick for a dog. “Will always works well, he’s always odd, and he always tells you he’s fine. In fact it’s a perfect hat-trick where he’s concerned: and it doesn’t alter the fact that there’s clearly something wrong with him.”

“Be quiet, he’s coming,” mutters Zeller in an undertone. As Will pushes open the door, he clears his throat then picks up a bag of swabs that’s lying nearby and waves them at Price. “What do you think?” he says loudly.

“Yes, all of them,” replies Price, equally loudly. “Oh, hello Will, I didn’t see you there.”

Will nods in acknowledgement but doesn’t offer any further response, opting instead to sit at one of the nearby desks and begin to scribble rather furiously into the log book. “I gather congratulations are in order,” persists Price. “What’s all this I hear about you linking The Sculptor’s first victim with the Nemesis murders?”

“For God’s sake,” explodes Will, flinging down his pen with a sharp crack. “Why does everyone insist on calling him that?” Price raises his eyebrows and Will briefly looks unhappy before lowering his head and staring at the desk again. “Sorry,” he says in a quieter voice. “Just ignore me, I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s no problem,” says Price kindly. Catching Zeller’s eye, he silently mouths: What did I tell you?

“It is,” replies Will in the same strained voice. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you that way. It’s just that Richard Black was an arrogant bastard and I know how much he would’ve loved the idea of being remembered as ‘The Nemesis.’ Using his real name seems a way of denying him the satisfaction.”

“Quite right too,” says Price briskly. “These dramatic nicknames always give them an aura of power and mystique that they really don’t deserve.”

“Anyway, you heard right,” adds Will. Picking up the pen again he begins to spin it between his fingers, although still makes no move to look up from the desk. “The Sculptor’s first victim was the jury forewoman at Black’s trial.”

Price gives a low whistle. “So it’s true. There really is a connection between The Sculptor and The
N…and Richard Black.”

“Yeah,” replies Will unhappily. “It’s certainly starting to look that way. Unless it’s all a monumental coincidence; we’ll have to see if anything comes back with the other four.”

“Jeez, you did the profile that caught Black didn’t you?” says Zeller. Price scowls at him and he hastily amends it to: “Not that The Sculptor would be dumb enough to come after an FBI agent.”

“Of course not,” says Price, nodding so vigorously the goggles fall off.

“Anyway,” adds Zeller reassuringly, “he only targets omegas.”

“Yeah,” says Will, continuing his intense staring at the desk. “I know he does.”

“Although I thought you said the first victim was a jury forewoman? I wouldn’t have thought omegas were allowed to do that? Or at least that it would be more difficult for them.”

“Then I suppose she probably lied about it,” says Will tonelessly. “People do.”

“So which is it for The Sculptor then? Is it omegas, or is it people linked with the conviction of Richard Black? They were all found locally after all. I thought the Richard Black case happened down south?”

“I don’t know,” says Will irritably. “What am I, psychic?”

There’s an awkward pause. “Maybe it’s both?” suggests Zeller.

“Maybe: or maybe it’s neither. Why do you all keep expecting me to have chapter and fucking verse on Richard Black?” This time it’s Zeller who raises his eyebrows and Will takes his glasses off and drags his hand across his face. “What I said before,” he adds. “‘I’m sorry’ and ‘ignore me.’ Times ten.”

“It’s fine Will,” says Zeller kindly. “No harm done.”

Will nods wordlessly then puts his glasses back on and finally raises his head. “Look, I should probably get going,” he says in a strained voice. “I might…I don’t know. I might work from home today.”

“Good idea,” replies Price heartily. “In fact why not take the rest of the afternoon off? Seeing as the whole investigation is running on your insights I think you’ve more than earned it.”

“Yeah. Maybe I will.”

“And give one of us a call if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” says Will. Pushing back the chair he gets to his feet and slowly begins to gather up his coat and briefcase in a methodical, overly-cautious way as if it’s the type of task that demands extreme concentration. Zeller and Price exchange another concerned look with one another then abruptly straighten their faces as Will turns round.

“Oh by the way, I nearly forgot,” adds Price. “Hannibal’s looking for you.”

Will stiffness slightly. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes, he was in here about half an hour ago. He’ll probably be in Jack’s office if you want to catch him before you leave?”
“Sure,” says Will vaguely. “I’ll do that.”

“And take care, won’t you?”

“Always have,” replies Will in the same flat voice. Then he closes the lab door behind him and does a quick scan along the corridor to check the coast is clear before taking a sharp left turn rather than the usual right to avoid going anywhere near Jack’s office. As a strategy this admittedly seems rather cowardly, although considering that he’s really not in the mood for any awkward confrontations with Hannibal he can’t bring himself to care about it too much – and is just in the middle of privately congratulating himself for having dodged a bullet when he swerves round the corner and promptly bowls straight into Siemens instead.

“Will!” exclaims Siemens. “Careful there buddy, I almost knocked you over.” Darting out a hand he puts his palm on Will’s shoulder to steady him, letting it linger for just a fraction longer than necessary before finally removing it again. “Although it’s a neat coincidence because I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I wanted to ask if you might…”

As an opening gambit it seems harmless enough, yet Will still begins to bristle with such obvious antagonism that it makes Siemens falter for a few seconds before falling completely silent. Will, in turn, suspects that he’s being unreasonable and yet can’t avoid the fact that his desire to do it is far stronger than the trouble it would take to stop himself. Because the simple fact is that the sight of Siemens’ beaming face, as cheerful and oblivious as an eager piglet, is a painful reminder of how Will’s initial sympathy towards him was based on how Siemens’ forlorn pining echoed Will’s own ambivalent attachment towards Hannibal. The sense of allowing himself to be imposed on for so long – and for such a pitiful reason – now feels humiliating, and his resentment of it causes him to speak rather more harshly than intended. “Look,” he snaps into the resulting awkward silence, “you’re being really inappropriate here. Back off. I’m not going on a date with you and you need to understand that.”

Siemens gives a self-conscious cough and shuffles his feet before rallying enough to shoot Will a distinctly grudging look. “Actually,” he says, “I wasn’t going to ask that.”

“Good,” replies Will, refusing to feel guilty.

Siemens re-enacts his previous combination of gestures (cough-shuffle-scowl), and Will watches his progress with an awful sort of fascination while struggling against an overpowering urge to clout his briefcase straight into the shiny pink face. “If you’ll excuse me saying so,” adds Siemens with unusual fierceness, “I think you need to calm down a bit: you need to calm down Will. I apologised for my behaviour before. I got the wrong idea I admit, but it was never my intention to offend you. And I haven’t been near you since then.”

“Then why have you been hanging round the lab?” demands Will. Irritation is making him defensive now, although he also can’t help feeling guiltily aware of what a charge he’s getting out of being hostile. “You and Skinner? You’re in there constantly and neither of you have any real reason to be.”

“Skinner is after those reports from Dr Price,” says Siemens, whose normally pink complexion is adopting an unpleasant, mottled-red texture that resembles a slab of hashed beef. “And I wanted to tell you about the PI. You know: the one who was after you.”

“Of course I know,” snaps Will. “What about him?”

“I reported him,” says Siemens with a note of triumph. “For entering FBI property on false pretences. I was trying to do you a favour. I thought you’d be pleased.”
“When?” says Will accusingly. “When did you do that?”

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday? Don’t you know he’s dead?”

“Dead? The private investigator?”

“Yes. Dead.”

“Dead?” repeats Siemens, in tones of such utter incomprehension that Will has to resist the urge to yell ‘Yes! Fucking dead!’ at high volume, possibly accompanied by the Monty Python list of euphemisms for illustrative purposes (he is no more, he’s ceased to be, he’s expired and gone to meet his maker, bereft of life he rests in peace, he is an ex-person…) “Well that is unexpected,” says Siemens eventually, his mouth popping into a little ‘o’ of surprise. “I can hardly believe that he’s…”

“Dead,” says Will malevolently. “Yes. Demised. Deceased. It happened a few days ago – he was murdered.”

“Murdered,” repeats Siemens.

At this point Will makes an executive decision that he can’t possibly face spending the next few minutes repeating variations of ‘Murdered. Murdered? Yes! Fucking murdered!’ on an eternal loop, so doesn’t even bother responding to this and curtly announces his intentions to leave instead. Siemens blinks a few times in silent resentment and Will growls internally then reluctantly forces himself to grate out: “Thank you for trying to help.”

Siemens sniffs dismissively in response – at which point Will yearns to add ‘Only joking! You can ram your help up your ass’ – before shooting Will a sly look from beneath his pale eyelashes. “Murdered,” he repeats softly. “Bad luck for him then; although I guess you must be relieved.”

“Hardly,” snaps Will, immediately resenting the implications of this. “A man’s dead after all. Anyway I spoke to him while he was here. It was no big deal.” Siemens raises his eyebrows incredulously, which inspires Will to defiantly add: “In fact it turned out he’d got the wrong person.”

Not that this is remotely close to what happened; and even as he’s speaking, Will is unpleasantly aware of how he’s getting overcome with a furtive, instinctive need to try and justify himself. Although of course this is ridiculous – there’s no need to do it (no need at all), because no one would ever assume he’d had any involvement with the detective’s murder. No one would think that, not even Skinner. Andrew’s explanation is the most likely one after all: private detection is a sordid, precarious choice of work and the man clearly got himself mixed up with something more threatening and complex than he had the skills to manage. Nevertheless the sickly insinuating quality of Siemens’ expression is something Will doesn’t definitely want to deal with anymore, so sharply turns his back on him without any further attempts at explanation and strides off in the direction of the exit instead – and where he grows so intensely and gloomily preoccupied that he doesn’t register the sound of his name being called from across the hall. Pausing at the doorway to fasten his scarf, he jumps sharply at the sudden sensation of a hand on his shoulder.

“For God’s sake,” snaps Will when he lands again. “You startled me. What’s the matter with you? Why do you always have to do that?”

“I apologise,” replies Hannibal. “But you didn’t seem to hear me.” Will frowns back mutinously and Hannibal raises his eyebrows slightly before removing his hand. “I was hoping to speak with you.”

“Can’t it wait? I’m on my way out.”
“I suppose it could easily wait; I only wanted to see how you are. You’ve been extremely elusive in the last few days.” Will opens his mouth to reply and Hannibal adds: “And please don’t tell me that you’re fine.”

“Then why even ask if you don’t want to hear the answer?”

Hannibal slowly runs his eyes over Will’s face for a few seconds and then instead of replying says: “Have you been avoiding me?”

“No,” snaps Will, privately marvelling at the level of self-confidence that could ask such a question without any sign of defensiveness or anxiety over the chance of an unflattering response. “I’ve just been busy is all.”

“Then I won’t delay you any more than necessary,” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. “Let me walk with you to your car; isn’t that a more economical use of your time? We can talk on the way.”

Only a few days ago Will would have been pleased at this suggestion; but a few days ago feels like a whole lifetime now, and he can feel himself blanch slightly at the thought of it. Partly this discomfort stems from the fact that spending time with Hannibal promises to dredge up a degree of sadness and regret that he’s really not in the right mood to deal with – but it’s also being driven by an even more pressing concern, which is the high risk of Andrew lying in wait in the parking lot: lurking in the back of his chauffeured car like a carnivorous bloated spider just as he’s been every single day since that first confrontation. As of yet he’s made no attempt to establish contact, although Will knows that making contact isn’t the point and that the sole purpose of the vigil is intimidation and control. More than once Will has had to resist the urge to flick two fingers up while walking past the tinted windows – and probably would as well, if not for the awareness of how such a pointless gesture would make Andrew smirk with derision before exchanging a few patronising remarks with his chauffeur at how incredibly temperamental and juvenile omegas in general, and Will in particular, have a tendency to be. Nevertheless it’s one thing for Will to face Andrew alone and quite another to stroll past the car with another alpha in tow. Possibly the reservation is unnecessary – it’s hardly as if Hannibal needs Will’s protection after all – and yet Andrew’s threat of the lawsuit and ownership claim against Jack is still fresh in his mind, and the idea of Hannibal being dragged into something similar is actually pretty unbearable.

“Will?” asks Hannibal patiently. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s the matter.”

“Then why are you still standing here? I thought you wanted to leave?”

“I do,” says Will a bit helplessly. “Just…look, just wait here a second would you?” Hannibal raises his eyebrows and Will ducks round the side in order to do a quick scan of the parking lot – and where, to his great relief, he can’t see any sign of Andrew’s enormous black Mercedes. “Okay,” he adds in a calmer voice. “Sorry about that. I’ll explain another time.”

Hannibal nods serenely, rather as if Will is being charmingly eccentric as opposed to wary and paranoid, then holds the door open and follows him outside. It’s bitterly cold and Will shivers slightly and tightens his scarf around his throat before trying to think of something to say that can deflect from Hannibal’s inevitable interrogation about what the hell’s the matter with him. Although the mere fact that he has to struggle is actually pretty crushing in itself, because Hannibal is one of the few people around who Will was rarely ever at a loss for words. In fact it’s rather like being with a stranger: only worse, because if Hannibal really were a stranger then at least the opportunity would still exist to get to know him, whereas now they’re basically destined to be permanently separated.
from one other.

“Will…” begins Hannibal.

“How’s Alana doing,” interrupts Will in desperation. In fact the enquiry is rather masochistic because he knows the response is going to hurt, but at least it’s still something to say. Besides, after everything they’ve shared up until this point he feels like he owes it to Hannibal to be supportive and interested in his fledgling relationship rather than bitter and resentful.

Hannibal briefly looks surprised, which confirms Will’s private suspicions that it wasn’t his intention for Will to find out about it quite yet. “As far as I’m aware she’s extremely well,” he replies. “Although I’m not the most reliable source of information – I only see her very occasionally.”

Will yearns to snap that there’s no need to lie to him about it, but bites back the impulse on the grounds that he knows he’d be filled with remorse and embarrassment later on for having acted in such a petty, mean-spirited way. “I hope she’s doing great,” he replies as brightly as possible.

“With all due respect to Alana Bloom,” says Hannibal with the faintest trace of impatience, “she’s not the reason I wanted to talk to you. At the moment I’m far more interested in your wellbeing than hers.”

“Oh,” says Will in surprise. “You are?”

“I am.”

“Well…,” replies Will cautiously. “I guess I’ve been better.”

“Yes indeed. I think that much is obvious.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t returned your calls,” adds Will, neatly deflecting the original question while struggling to quell the spike of envy at the idea of what Hannibal’s ‘occasional’ meetings with Alana are likely to entail. “I guess it was pretty rude of me.”

“It’s fine Will. I’m not here to lecture you on social etiquette; I want to know what’s happening.”

“Nothing,” says Will, abruptly tiring of the whole thing and uncomfortably aware of how his fragile patience is revving itself up to snap. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Clearly; that doesn’t change the fact I want to hear about it.”

“Oh God, just drop it can’t you? I said no. Don’t you have any boundaries at all?”

“Boundaries?” repeats Hannibal politely, in the sort of tone that’s tempting to interpret as ‘Boundaries, you say? How very quaint – of course not.’

“Yeah, boundaries,” snaps Will. “Remind me how many languages you speak again? How is it that you’ve never learnt how to say ‘I should mind my own business’ in any of them?”

Hannibal makes no response at all to this, which immediately makes Will suspect that he’s gone too far and Hannibal is finally about to lose patience – and therefore lose interest and walk away. In fact he’s so convinced it’s going to happen he’s already experiencing a pre-emptive wave of regret at having once again managed to repulse the person he secretly most longs to be close to; and as such isn’t remotely prepared for Hannibal to stop walking and take hold of his shoulders with both hands instead, gently but firmly holding him in place and seemingly oblivious to the way Will’s glaring at him. The suddenness of it is disorientating and Will can’t help going rigid for a few seconds as he
wrestles against a temptation to simply sink forward against Hannibal’s chest before reality reasserts itself and he makes an effort to pull himself free. Hannibal’s grip is unnervingly strong – almost frighteningly so – and it occurs to Will with a gloomy sense of inevitability that the day is just about to reach a new pinnacle of Epic Shitness courtesy of having a punch up with his psychiatrist in the middle of the FBI parking lot. “Get off me,” he says, and it comes out as a sort of snarl. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Hannibal loosens the pressure slightly but doesn’t let go, instead shifting his position so he can stoke Will’s back with his right hand while holding onto his shoulder with his left. Will, in turn, gives a hiss of annoyance and renews his efforts to push him off – overcome now with an increasingly determined urge to provoke Hannibal into losing his temper and therefore just hasten the inevitable by giving up on Will and walking away from him. Hannibal, however, shows no indication of doing either of these things and merely continues to stroke Will’s back in the same soothing rhythm until Will’s finally tired himself out with the effort of struggling and grown pliant and still. “Good boy,” says Hannibal softly, “you know I won’t let you go.” Will just shakes his head without even really understanding what he’s supposed to be agreeing with and Hannibal adds, in an unusually tender voice: “You’re not all right, are you?”

For a few seconds they stare at one another in silence until Will takes a deep breath as he feels his resolve finally starting to crumble. “No,” he says; and it feels incredibly ironic that after everything’s he’s been through, it’s this show of kindness that’s the final straw. Irritation or annoyance would have inspired an answering surge of defiance in Will, or possibly pride, or even anger; but whatever it would have created, it would still have served in strengthening his resolve to conceal how ruined he feels. But this…and Will, to his complete horror, can feel his shoulders beginning to tremble and his face crumple in a distinctly ominous way – and, oh shitting bastard bullshitting fuck.

Hannibal, with all his fastidiousness and reserve, is the type of person who Will always imagines would find displays of feeling to be vaguely distasteful. Vulgar even; as if only the most feeble-willed and emotionally incontinent would ever dare to brandish their messy, watery-eyed, slack-jawed sentiment outside the privacy of their own four walls. He’s therefore expecting Hannibal to respond to his obvious distress with something like aversion, or possibly the coolly clinical detachment of a scientist examining a cage full of rats…or pretty much anything, really, other than what actually happens: which is being gently pulled against the front of Hannibal’s coat (even though pulled isn’t exactly the right word for it; it’s more like being escorted in) while one hand cradles his head and the other stokes across his shoulder blades.

“Oh Will,” says Hannibal quietly.

“No, it’s okay, it’s all right,” mutters Will, straight into the front of Hannibal’s coat. “I’m…”

“Fine. Yes of course you are.”

Will laughs at this then goes quiet for a few seconds before becoming embarrassingly aware of how he’s clinging onto Hannibal’s coat like a needy five year old (Christ) so blushes slightly and rams his hands into his pockets instead. In this respect a cocktail of shock and self-consciousness are helping him to snap back into control again much quicker than expected; yet nevertheless he still doesn’t pull away immediately, instead lingering on for a few more seconds more as he breathes in the coat’s aroma of bergamot and cedar wood and tries not to bask too hard in the comfort of being held and contained.

“If you don’t tell me,” Hannibal is now saying, “then I can’t help you.”

“You don’t understand,” replies Will. “It’s not that sort of situation. It isn’t fixable.” The last part of this statement is accompanied by a mournful snuffling noise which makes him wonder if his nose is
running; and if so whether the bastard thing has run onto Hannibal’s coat…and if so whether this is a
level of embarrassment that might well prove fatal, considering that the coat probably cost more than
the entire contents of Will’s closet put together (plus the closet itself as well). Oh God. Taking
another deep breath he finally disentangles himself then scrubs his hands across his face as Hannibal
lets go too and takes a step back. A few strained seconds of silence then follow in which they simply
look at each other without speaking or moving at all; and in which Hannibal stares down with an
expression of unusual benevolence on his face, and Will stares up while privately deciding that if this
were a video game he’d have just unlocked a new achievement level for Public Mortification.

“Well…” says Will eventually. “This is awkward.”

Hannibal starts to smile and then deftly tucks a strand of Will’s hair behind his ear. “Not really.”

“Of course it is. Don’t be stupid.”

“Ah – there you are. Welcome back. As long as you’re being rude to me I remain in hope that your
case isn’t beyond all help. I find it rather reassuring.”

This makes Will laugh again, although it seems to go wrong halfway through and turn into a sort of
gasp. “Oh God,” he says unhappily. “Everything’s such a mess.”

“Well an FBI parking lot is hardly the best place to unravel it,” replies Hannibal. “I suppose we can
agree on that much at least?” Reaching out he takes hold of Will’s hands in both of his, rubbing his
thumbs over Will’s knuckles to try and work some warmth back into them. “Let me take you home.
Or come back home with me if you prefer?”

“I don’t…there’s no point. There’s nothing you can do.”

“I want you to talk to me Will,” adds Hannibal, clearly undeterred by this show of resistance. “You
always seem to think that asking for help is a sign of weakness and it’s not: it’s a sign of courage. Of
courage, and of a commitment to healing and helping oneself.”

At the sound of the words Will falls silent again then closes his eyes for a few seconds: absurdly
touched, in spite of himself, by this previously unconsidered concept of help-seeking as an act of
bravery and self-love rather than vulnerability. In fact it reminds him of that night in his car when he
thought he’d seen the intruder in the yard – the way he’d tried to reach out to the frightened part of
himself in an attempt to comfort and reassure it, and how empowering it had felt to acknowledge and
accept his own sense of frailty rather than constantly punish himself for it. Hannibal’s hands are still
rhythmically moving over his the entire time and when he glances down all he can really see is a
tangle of fingers to the extent it’s not immediately clear whose are whose: where he begins and
Hannibal ends. “You’re right,” he hears someone saying, and realises with a jolt of surprise that it’s
actually him. “I’m not okay. I need help.”

“I know. I see that.”

Will’s head begins to droop down as if there’s too much going on in his head for his slim neck to
bear the weight of it, and when he speaks again it’s so quiet that Hannibal has to lean in to hear him.
“T’m not okay. I need help.”

“You have me Will.”

Will nods again then allows himself to sink a little further forward before the softly mellow silence is
abruptly ripped apart by the angry scream of tires grinding on asphalt. Will jerks his head up sharply
at the sound of it – and then immediately wishes he hadn’t, because the sight is enough to make him
go completely rigid with horror as all the tentative calm of the past few minutes ruptures and withers away. Oh God it can’t be, he thinks with panic. It can’t be, it can’t be. Only of course it can, and it is: the spectacle of a large black Mercedes emerging into the parking lot with all the gloomy foreboding of a funeral hearse stacked with cadavers. It’s surely too late now and the damage has already been done, but Will still desperately pulls his hands free all the same and takes a few steps backwards in a frantic attempt to try and make the set-up appear more casual and less intimate than it actually is.

Hannibal looks at him curiously then follows his gaze towards the car and raises a questioning eyebrow. “A friend of yours?”

“No,” says Will faintly as the Mercedes grinds to a halt in a furious shriek of gears. “Oh shit. Shit. Look, Hannibal, I’m really sorry. Whatever’s about to happen, I…” Only the rest of the sentence is lost as the door flies open and a long lean figure comes exploding out the back seat: practically radiating outrage and as spindly and scuttling as some kind of monstrous insect in its shiny black coat.

“What the hell,” hisses Andrew, who’s actually gone pale with anger. “You little slut. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” In a few quick strides he devours the distance between them and roughly seizes Will’s arm, jerking him backwards then pivoting round and jabbing his finger at Hannibal like it’s a loaded gun. “And as for you, you bastard; you keep your hands to your fucking self. You talk to him again – you even look at him – and I swear to God I’ll kill you. And if you even think about touching him again, I’ll kill you slow.”

An electrified pause follows this scene during which the air crackles and sparks with tension and where Will is forced to admit that if there was ever a time in his life when he needed to pull himself together then this moment is probably the one. Yet for a few agonised seconds it seems to him as if everything just grinds helplessly to a halt. It’s an odd sensation, like a pause button being pressed on a video, and it means that all he’s really aware of is incidental things: the iciness of the air, the gathering gloominess as dusk sets in, and the pain of Andrew’s gaunt fingers digging into him as his arm gets twisted into a weird unnatural angle. But then even more than that – more than anything else – is the overwhelming sense of shame and misery at having forced Hannibal into such a humiliating situation. Because he’s clearly not going to stand for it; why on earth would he? He’s going to walk away now. Isn’t he, any second now…surely he will? Then suddenly everything speeds up again as the scene snaps back to life and Will is watching with numb disbelief at Hannibal reaching across with an eerily fast movement to seize hold of the hand that’s clutching Will and administering a sharply vicious twist. Then everything shifts for a second time and Andrew is screaming and letting go, while Hannibal is tucking Will against him so he can inspect his arm for any signs of damage before placing a steadying hand on his shoulder and holding him close. Then a few seconds of silence follow in which there’s nothing to hear at all except Andrew’s sharp staccato breathing until Hannibal brushes his hand against the back of Will’s neck and takes a measured step forward.

“You’ve been very fortunate in your choice of witnesses,” says Hannibal softly, flicking his eyes towards the large FBI sign by the entrance. “And because of that I’m going to extend you something I almost never do: a warning.” Andrew glances down at his hand in disbelief, biting his lip in an obvious attempt to not betray the pain he’s in, and Hannibal takes another step closer and adds in the same unnerving voice: “I strongly suggest you don’t attempt that a second time.”

By now Hannibal’s tone has taken on a level of such low-pitched menace that it manages to be even more sinister in contrast to the raucous volume of Andrew – and glancing over at his face, Will can’t suppress a shudder of foreboding because the expression on it is nothing short of chilling. Why did I ever believe you didn’t have real emotions? he thinks numbly. Right now Hannibal seems iridescent
with them: something inflammable about to ignite, as if his skin would be white-hot to the touch from burning up with a ferocious, flaring force of feeling. He doesn’t need to raise his voice or make elaborate gestures – the kind of demonstrative props that people like Andrew might use; the kind that Will himself might resort to – but it’s there all the same. It’s there in the intensity of his expression and the tension of the muscles around his jaw and shoulders, but more than anything else it’s in his eyes. Forceful even in his more casual moments they now look as if they’re glittering: as if there’s an inferno raging behind them that’s been stoked by dark longing and vengeful passions, like a fiery avenging angel from some Renaissance painting with sword in hand and baleful blazing eyes. In fact the anger seems so incredibly excessive relative to the situation that Will finds it hard to believe that Andrew, a total stranger, could be the sole cause of it and is miserably forced to conclude that he himself must be largely responsible; partly at having forced Hannibal into such an outrageous situation, but also in showing a sufficient lack of trust and openness that would have kept an enormous secret like this from him in the first place. Nevertheless Andrew has no way of knowing he’s not the sole focus of the anger – and for the rest of his life, Will decides he’s never going to forget the satisfaction of the moment that Andrew looks at Hannibal and then visibly dips his head in an unconscious display of submission. Unable to contain himself anymore, Will now draws back both arms and roughly shoves Andrew away from him: applying far more violence than necessary and oblivious to the way the aggressiveness of the gesture causes a small smile to flicker across Hannibal’s face. “For God’s sake,” says Will with something like a snarl. “Control yourself, can’t you? He’s a colleague. You know I work with alphas.”

Andrew beams a ferocious scowl in Will’s direction then takes a deep breath, visibly struggling not to lose his temper, before turning to Hannibal and holding up both hands palm-upwards in a gesture of appeasement. “Okay,” he says in a quieter voice. “Okay, I get it: colleagues.” Wincing from the pain in his wrist he gingerly lowers his arms again then darts a look at Will that manages, if possible, to be even more malicious than the last one. “There’s obviously been a misunderstanding,” adds Andrew spitefully, “and as usual it’s his fault. He’s a nightmare, he’s always causing trouble. Omegas are all the same: they love setting alphas against each other. They do it for the attention.” Turning back to Hannibal again he clears his throat and makes an effort to adopt a tone that’s fractionally more civil. “Come on though: you can hardly blame me. You know what it’s like when you see them with someone else. It’s instinctive. You’d do the same, you know you would. If he belonged to you and you saw me with my hands on him? I mean we pay so much money for them… You know how it is.”

Hannibal runs his eyes over Andrew’s face with a level of menace so carefully controlled and caustic that Andrew darts his tongue over his lips and takes a step backwards. “Money,” repeats Hannibal with an obvious dash of contempt. “Yes, our rituals have changed so much haven’t they: the conditions by which we determine who’s worthy enough to bond with an omega. Today status and dominance are determined by wealth; but it wasn’t always the case. They used to be determined…” He pauses and the dark eyes begin to narrow slightly “…by violence.” Andrew, visibly unsettled, shifts uncomfortably then actually has the nerve to glance over at Will as if hoping he might intervene. “It’s hardly the right arena for such a demonstration,” adds Hannibal after another loaded pause. “Not with a proportion of the FBI for an audience. But for our ancestors, at least, money would have had no place in it. You couldn’t purchase dominance, you had to compete for it – and the most dominant was simply the one left alive at the end. Survival of the fittest,” adds Hannibal with the faintest hint of a smile. “And then, just as now, there are some things which money cannot buy.”

Andrew clears his throat even louder and then, to Will’s infinite satisfaction, does something he’s never once seen Andrew do with another alpha in all the time he’s known him: visibly back down. It’s as if he isn’t even fully aware he’s doing it, and Will can’t help thinking that there’s something instinctual about the retreat, something primal; impossible to articulate, but simply signalling that the
victim knows it’s facing a threat that is too formidable to be managed successfully. In fact he feels that if a furious, snarling dog was present it too would sense the menace in the air and grow subdued and silent – and likewise it wouldn’t fully understand why.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Andrew is now saying stiffly to Hannibal. “I apologise.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately but just moves a few steps forward himself; at which point Andrew shifts even further back. “I would like to speak with you more about this,” says Hannibal, staring intently into Andrew’s face. “Tell me where I can find you.”

Andrew wavers for a few seconds as the impulse to appear assertive and fearless clearly battles against a wary sense that he’s just encountered something he doesn’t want to get involved with. The latter eventually wins out and he drops his eyes first. “I’m from out of town,” he says tersely. “I’m just visiting.” Pausing for a few more seconds he shoots a spiteful glance at Will. “This time next week we’ll be gone.”

“Go to hell,” snarls Will.

Andrew promptly swivels his eyes in Will’s direction; and a single glance at his expression is enough to fill Will with a sinking sensation that this show of defiance has badly backfired, achieving nothing beyond reminding Andrew that Will remains the main point of interest – and that while he can’t control the ominous presence of Hannibal, as far as Will is concerned Andrew is still the one with the legal advantage. Defiantly straightening the lapels on his jacket he now deliberately manoeuvres himself so he’s standing in front of Will and puts his hands on both shoulders. “Let’s just say today’s clarified a few things,” he says crisply. Making sure he catches Hannibal’s eye first, he reaches out and begins to smooth Will’s hair into place as if he’s a child before refastening the top button of Will’s coat. “Look at you,” he says impatiently. “Always getting yourself into trouble. Why are you like this? Huh? I can’t take my eye off you for a second can I? The sooner I’ve got you back where you belong the better.” Will knocks his hands out the way and Andrew gives a thin smile in response then abruptly grabs hold of both wrists and jerks him forward. Will gasps with the suddenness of it and Andrew grips onto him in what’s intended to look like an affectionate gesture for Hannibal’s benefit, but which in reality is so he can hiss into Will’s ear: “Looks like you’re nothing but a little omega whore after all. How dare you try and show me up like that?” Twining his fingers into Will’s hair, he clenches them into a vicious tug. “You’re going to pay for it.”

Will closes his eyes for a few seconds, struggling against a powerful wave of revulsion. His scalp hurts from where his hair’s being pulled, but he’s less concerned with the pain than he is with the hot, dry sensation of Andrew’s breath in his ear or the way the stench of his cologne is making his nostrils sting. In reality the latter comes wafting from the innards of expensive glass bottles that are delivered to Andrew from the reserve list of an exclusive department store, but the numerous negative associations means it’s as aversive to Will as if Andrew was doused in distilled sewage. Overcome with disgust he wrenches his head away. “Still ringing the same bell,” he snaps. “You could at least come up with something new.” Then he thrusts out his shoulder and neatly twists himself free from Andrew’s grasp, gravitating straight back to Hannibal again without even thinking about it while Andrew watches them both and narrows his eyes.

“I believe this conversation is over,” says Hannibal in a tone that, if possible, is even more ominous than before.

Andrew’s eyes narrow a little further then slither over Will’s face before swivelling back to Hannibal again. “Look,” he snaps. “I’ve already apologised to you; don’t force me to have to take it back. Once I’m prepared to overlook but make no mistake: you touch him again and I’ll have you in court.” Then he turns back to Will and casually ruffles his hair, oblivious to the way the gesture
makes Hannibal’s eyes begin to gleam. “I’ll be seeing you kiddo,” he says softly. “The deadline’s nearly up then I want you packed and ready to leave. Understand? I except to see you here on Friday with a suitcase. Although don’t bother bringing any of these hideous dollar-store clothes with you; first thing I’m doing is buying you a new wardrobe.” Smirking contemptuously he flicks his eyes over Will’s face before trailing downwards. “Not that you’ll be needing any clothes for the first week or so. Nothing’s changed Will – nothing. Remember what I told you.”

“And remember what I told you,” hisses Will.

This time Andrew doesn’t respond at all: merely glares at him with a faint sliver of teeth before spinning round and vanishing into the depths of the Mercedes. He moves so fast it makes the hem of his long black coat swirl out in a gloomy parabola that brushes against Will’s legs; and as the door slams closed and the car screeches away, Will still remains frozen in place with his hands clenched like claws and the wind blowing his hair back over his forehead. He knows he should say something; do something – try and repair some of the damage that’s just been done – yet he’s so overcome with shocked unhappiness at the whole scene that no words or gestures seem sufficient to address it and he’s unable to even consider turning round until he finally feels a hand on his shoulder.

For a few more seconds no one says anything and Will takes a deep breath then tries to focus on the soothing sensation of Hannibal’s thumb stroking against the back of his neck. “So,” he says in a low, strained voice. “I guess now you know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asks Hannibal gently.

At some point Will seems to have closed his eyes but it feels like too much effort now to open them. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I wanted to – several times. I just didn’t know how. And you see, there’s nothing you could have done. Not unless you can change the law.” He bites his lower lip, struggling once again with the crushing injustice of it all. “There’s no way to fix this.”

“There’s always a way,” replies Hannibal. Putting his hand on Will’s other shoulder he gently turns him round so they’re facing one another. “Look at me Will. Dearest; open your eyes. If you want it badly enough and are committed enough – there’s always a way.”

But Will just shakes his head, because while there might be options – the dark reflection, for example, with its crooning refrain of you could kill him could certainly suggest one or two – none of them seem remotely feasible. Yet on the other hand the ones that are feasible, such as those involving lawyers and courtrooms, or even appeals to Andrew’s better nature (which he doesn’t appear to have) share the common traits of being exhausting, demoralising and most likely destined to failure before they’ve even begun. Finally forcing himself to open his eyes, he catches sight of Hannibal’s expression and flinches. “You’re angry aren’t you?” he says quietly.

“I am – but not with you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I know I should’ve done.”

“I’m not angry with you Will. I can understand why you felt you needed to keep it to yourself. But you need to make up for lost time; you need to tell me now.” Will nods rather vaguely and Hannibal adds: “To begin with – where does he live?”

“He’s in a hotel. He wouldn’t tell me where. I don’t know.”

“Then we are going to have to find out,” replies Hannibal calmly. “Aren’t we?”

“Oh God, there’s no point. Don’t you understand? He won’t listen to me. He doesn’t care that I
don’t want to go back.”

“The point is that I intend to speak with him myself,” says Hannibal with a grim little smile. “I know it’s hard for you to believe right now, but I am very confident that he can be persuaded to listen to reason.”

“He won’t.”

Hannibal waves this objection away with a smooth flick of the hand. “I intend to move quickly,” he adds, “but I need to have the whole story first. Do you understand? I want you to tell me about your history with him: everything.”

“Yeah. I understand. I’ll tell you.”

“Good boy. Now, where do you want to go? The park? Your house? Mine?”

Will makes a small sighing noise then runs his hands through his hair, suddenly so tired and overwhelmed that even something as simple as choosing somewhere to talk seems like too much to ask. “I don’t mind,” he says. “Anywhere.”

“Your house then; you’ll probably feel better somewhere familiar.”

Will nods and shrugs, seeming to have abandoned any possibility of ever feeling better, before suddenly putting his hand on Hannibal’s arm with a look of such intense unhappiness that Hannibal’s coldly furious expression begins to softens a little at the sight of it. “Andrew,” says Will, and his voice catches slightly as if it’s about to break. “If he does manage to take me…”

“He won’t.”

“…but if he does, would – would you look after my dogs? He won’t let me keep them you see, and I can’t send them to a shelter. I can’t.”

“He’s not going to take you Will. I won’t let him.”

“Sometimes they send the police after you,” adds Will, half to himself. “I’ve heard about it being done to other omegas. It’s like being press-ganged. They make you go.”

“Even if that did happen – which it won’t – then you’d find a means of escaping. You obviously did it before and you’d do it again.”

“He says this time he’d have me tagged.”

Hannibal goes extremely still for a few seconds and Will, who’s now staring at the floor, misses the expression of unearthly anger that briefly flickers over his face. “That,” says Hannibal tersely, “I will absolutely not allow.”

“Try telling him that,” replies Will in the same flat voice. Attempting to straighten up he sways slightly then staggers to one side, and Hannibal catches him to hold him steady before frowning and reaching up to place a hand on his forehead. “Stop it,” says Will, trying to wriggle out of the way.

“You’re running a temperature.” Will shrugs irritably. “And your pupils are enlarged.”

“So what?”

“You know what,” says Hannibal, whose frown is starting to deepen at the unpleasant implication that things may be starting to move far quicker than they were supposed to. “Being in denial about it
is not going to help your situation. Now hold still a moment please, I want to take your pulse.”

“No. *No* – stop it. Stop fussing.”

“Will, listen to me: have you still been taking those tablets?”

“Of course I have. Don’t be stupid.”

“Are you sure? Because you weren’t like this when I last saw you; there’s been a clear physical change. Do you understand what I’m saying?” Will scowls again and Hannibal sighs then reaches up to cup his face with one hand, turning it one way to another to inspect for signs of flushing. “Think carefully. You’ve been under enormous strain in the past few days – it’s possible you might have forgotten a few doses.”

“I *haven’t*,” says Will, trying to pull his face free. “Don’t patronise me.”

“I can’t even smell you beneath all that spray,” adds Hannibal with unusual irritation. “Have you been *bathing* in it?”

“Oh God, just be quiet can’t you?” says Will. Closing his eyes, he allows himself to be pulled closer so he can bury his face against Hannibal’s shoulder. “You’re always talking. You never stop. You’re like a mouth on a stick.”

“Then you talk instead.” Cradling Will’s head with one hand, Hannibal begins to stroke a palm across his back with the other then briefly presses his face against Will’s hair. “Look at you, still raging away in spite of it all: the little war deity and warrior. Let me take you home Will. You’ve done extraordinarily well to cope with this on your own but you need some help.”

“Won’t Alana mind?”

“What on earth has she got to do with it?”

“Nothing,” mutters Will, his voice slightly muffled from where his face his pressed against Hannibal’s coat. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You appear to be labouring under some kind of misunderstanding about Alana Bloom,” replies Hannibal, “which I intend to address once I’ve got you somewhere private. Suffice to say that she doesn’t have the slightest investment in anything I do – a lack of interest that I reciprocate wholeheartedly. And I wish you’d been aware of that because I suspect if you had you would have come to me sooner.”

Will glances up, suddenly appearing hopeful and vulnerable, and Hannibal shifts his hand downwards so he can cup his face while caressing the edge of his jaw with his thumb. “For someone so intelligent,” adds Hannibal gently, “you have moments of stupidity that are positively endearing.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a nanny. Dr Nannibal. Personally I’d rather be stupid.”

“Very true,” says Hannibal. “I can’t fault your logic with that. Being a nanny is my cross to bear.”

Will’s mournful face briefly lifts into the semblance of a smile before ducking down and vanishing into the front of Hannibal’s coat again. “Why are you being so nice to me?” he says after a pause.

“I beg your pardon? You are very muffled. If you want a response you’ll have to talk to me rather than my coat.”
Will shifts his face slightly so his mouth is no longer pressed against Hannibal’s shoulder. “I asked why you’re being so nice to me? You’re never this nice.”

“No, I don’t suppose I am; although I do know how to be on occasion. I actually make all kinds of exceptions for you Will – you have no idea.”

Instead of replying Will tucks his head a bit closer against Hannibal once more then tentatively experiments with trying to put his arms round him before losing his nerve halfway through and returning his hands to his pockets again. Hannibal watches the progress of the hands with a faint smile and tightens his grip round Will’s shoulders in return; and Will is just contemplating making a second attempt when from across the carpark comes the shrill, urgent wail of the alarm system. In the midst of so much silence the sound is deeply jarring and it slices through the frosty air like an electric scream as an eerie automated voice begins to grate out in tandem: “Code 382. All personnel report immediately. Code 382. All personnel report immediately…” Even to someone ignorant of the meaning the noise would be unsettling, but to Will – who’s well aware that it’s the alert for The Sculptor Taskforce – the noise can only mean one thing: the wrecked and ruined remains of Number Seven. With a deep shudder of foreboding he attempts to pull himself free.

“Oh God,” he says wretchedly. “Hear that?”

“Of course.”

“There’s been another one. We need to leave.”

“It doesn’t matter,” replies Hannibal, continuing to stroke Will’s hair. “Let the others deal with it. Come back with me.”

“No, I can’t.” says Will. With a determined wrench he finally disentangles himself. “I have to go. I have to help.”

“Will,” says Hannibal gently. “I don’t want to agitate you, but a lot of time has already been lost. I realise something happened with Alana that made you reluctant to come to me, but it means this alpha of yours has already had several days head start for making his plans. Do you understand? We need to move fast.” Seeing Jack emerging from the entrance he replaces his hand on Will’s shoulder. “Leave this one Will. I don’t care about the lives you save; I care about your life.”

“Here you are,” calls Jack, who’s broken into a sort of gallop in order to close the distance between them as quickly as possible. “I’ve been looking for you two everywhere. Come on – quick as you can. There’s been another one: almost definitely The Sculptor.” Will stares back numbly and Jack’s face, half obscured beneath the shadowed brim of his hat, begins to crease into a frown. “Well come on then,” he says tersely. “What’s the matter with you? Don’t just stand there, I need you there now. In fact I needed you there half an hour ago.”

“Jack,” says Hannibal in a warning voice.

Jack, who never backs down, promptly backs down. “You don’t have to come,” he adds to Will in a kinder tone. “Not if you don’t feel up to it.”

“No it’s fine,” says Will hastily. “I want to.” Hannibal’s eyes promptly swivel in his direction and Will returns the look, silently urging him to try and understand without having to explain it in front of Jack. I need to do this, he thinks, staring at Hannibal with wide unhappy eyes. I need to go…because after next week I might not be able to ever again.

Jack, oblivious to the undertones or the fraught way that Will’s gazing at Hannibal, nods with
satisfaction at having got what he wanted then jerks his thumb in the direction of the main gate. “The squad cars should be here in five minutes,” says. “Ten at most: I’ll meet you both at the entrance. And I should warn you – it’s a bad one.”

“Is there any other kind?” replies Hannibal crisply.

Jack, who doesn’t appear to have a ready response to this, merely nods again then spins round on his heels and strides off towards the building in the manner of Moses parting the Red Sea, looking neither left nor right and scattering groups of trainees like bowling pins as he goes. Will watches his progress for a few seconds then gives a cautious glance at Hannibal, who’s staring straight back with the usual kinetic intensity. “Just don’t,” says Will defensively. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately and merely continues to watch Will with an indecipherable expression on his face before taking a quick step forward. Up until now he’s resisted showing any overt displays of dominance towards him, mostly because he’s so aware of the type of rebellion it would cause: yet given the gravity of the situation, he now feels it entirely acceptable to reach out and gently but firmly grip Will by the back of the neck. Will quivers then goes completely still. “I’ll allow this,” says Hannibal quietly, “because I can see how much it matters to you. But afterwards you’re coming straight home with me.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” snaps Will, although the resistance is clearly rather half-hearted.

“I can,” says Hannibal. “And on this occasion I’m going to – because you need it. You’ve been dealing with this alone for far too long. You’re exhausted and overwhelmed and, at least for a time, you need someone else to take responsibility.” Will scowls mutinously without actually pulling away and Hannibal smiles again then allows his thumb to skim beneath the edge of his collar where the skin is soft and vulnerable – rarely ever touched or seen. “Why do you always fight so hard Will?” says Hannibal tenderly. “Always: even when it’s contrary to your own interests.”

“Because I’ve had to fight; it’s what I do.”

“Y-e-s,” replies Hannibal with another faint smile. Releasing his hold on Will’s neck he trails his palm across it instead then moves himself round so they can directly look at one another. “That alpha of yours. Andrew. He had an injury on his face.”

“So?”

“So…” The faint smile grows slightly broader. “You’ve already attacked him haven’t you?”

Will shrugs without actually replying and Hannibal’s smile grows broader still before finally vanishing entirely; rather as if, having formed its conclusions, it now prefers to prowl away and examine them in private. “We appear to have something in common then,” says Hannibal softly. “Because I also like to fight Will: to the death, if necessary.” Will glances up warily and Hannibal slowly runs his eyes over his face. “You know I’ll help you however I can,” he adds. “I would imagine that goes without saying. The thing is though Will – I don’t believe you really require it. I think you could change his mind all by yourself. And I think it’s your fear of how you’d do it that’s been paralysing you all this time.”

Will stiffens at this then looks away, uncomfortably aware of how the Dark Mirror Image has begun to skitter though his head with its constant chilling refrain, almost like it’s been lingering and listening to the conversation and is now obediently answering its cue. You-could-kill-him-You-could-kill-him. Impossible, though, that Hannibal could possibly know about it? For a few surreal seconds he has an image of the reflection and Hannibal colluding together in silent confederacy while Will trails round obliviously in the foreground, and the idea of it is so unnerving he has to close his eyes in an attempt
to focus before snapping them open again. “You’re not making any sense,” he says sharply, even though Hannibal is making perfect sense and that in itself is the problem. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you?”

“No.”

Hannibal’s smile promptly reappears at this, serene and inscrutable as a Pharaoh mask, as he runs his eyes over Will’s face again even slower than before. “All I mean is that your previous claim is incorrect,” he says caressingly. “Because your situation is fixable. And whether I take a lead on resolving it – or whether you do – or whether we combine our input together, the fact remains that he is not going to take you anywhere. Not now, not next week; not at any time after.” Will blinks a few times, suddenly looking strained and uncertain, and Hannibal adds: “That much, at least, I hope you do understand?”

“Yes,” says Will faintly.

“And you are going to come back with me after this and explain the whole story?”

“Yes,” repeats Will, a little firmer this time.

“That’s very good Will,” says Hannibal with another slow smile. “I applaud your conviction. You’re a determined boy aren’t you? And remember, after all, what I told you before: that the opposite of certainty isn’t doubt but imagination. Curiosity, enquiry, and mental tractability: you should use this crisis as the opportunity that it is.”

“Oh come on. How is it an opportunity?”

“Because damaged people are the most dangerous Will,” replies Hannibal, whose smoky voice is now so low and resonant it almost sounds like he’s purring. “They know that they can survive. So let your anger scream through the fear, and…become.”

“Become what?”

“Yourself.”

“Are you even listening to what you’re saying?” demands Will impatiently. “Spare me the psychobabble, positive-reframe psychology crap. There’s no way you can try and spin this as something good.”

“Left alone then it’s not – but why ask its permission to be a source of insight? Force it to become so yourself.”

“Oh for God’s sake.”

“Didn’t I tell you that you were an alchemist?” continues Hannibal cutting straight through Will’s attempts to object. “Purifying and reifying the base elements into the noble ones. The artistic ones. The phoenix needs to burn before it can arise after all, and you’ve always had a need to rise up from your own ashes. Haven’t you Will? Razing the old to raise the new.” Hannibal pauses then smiles, suddenly casual again. “Besides, none of this changes the fact that you currently possess a clear advantage which you didn’t have before.”

“What?” asks Will, despite already suspecting the answer.
“Me, of course,” says Hannibal airily. “Whatever you’re required to face, you won’t have to face it alone.” Will glances up rather hopefully and Hannibal adds, more gently and sincerely than previously: “You’ll have me by your side as an extremely committed advocate.”

Over in the west the winter dusk is beginning in earnest now as the setting sun re-paints the horizon from pale blue to shades of buttery gold and pomegranate pink – and as Hannibal watches he can see how it alights and illuminates Will’s pale face as he’s finally able to smile. You’re so beautiful, thinks Hannibal with a surge of appreciation that’s unusual for its sense of pureness and simplicity; and Will, as if in silent reward for it, finally fulfils Hannibal’s long-term ambition by being the one who first initiates contact by tucking himself against Hannibal’s chest without having to be invited. Hannibal sighs contentedly to himself then rests his face against the top of Will’s head, turning slightly towards the horizon as he does so to watch where the moon is faintly visible behind a black lacing of clouds as it waits for its time to take central place in the gathering darkness. Slim and silver compared to the gaudier glow of the sun, it appears just as striking, solitary, self-contained and glacially steadfast as Will is: and, just like the shimmering silver moon, what a forceful aura shines around him.

Pulling away slightly, Hannibal now allows his lips to rush very faintly against Will’s forehead. “Strength through unity,” he says in the same quiet voice. “We can take this on together.”

Will makes a low noise of agreement then tugs Hannibal towards him again. “Okay,” he replies, and his voice has a trace of animation in it which wasn’t previously there. “Okay then: it’s a deal. Together.”

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to Nightroxy, who not only left a lovely comment on one of my other fics that included the lines “…no matter what goes on in the story with other characters it doesn’t quite matter because ‘me and you will always be more important. Above others. Us against the world’” – but then also kindly gave me permission to rip it off wholesale in this chapter :-)


Chapter 15

It’s almost completely dark now. Winter dusk: the kind which stifles and swirls while possessing a curiously choking quality to it that feels like being swathed in black fabric. Across the parking lot the flood lights are jerking into life one-by-one and creating a series of flickering silhouettes from the FBI agents who are trooping out of the building in a solemn line, each one subdued and grim-faced at the idea of what the night might have lying in wait for them. To save time the more senior taskforce members all pile into patrol cars to get to the scene as quickly as possible, the sole exception being Price who’s vaguely visible through the folds of darkness as he herds his crew of forensic analysts into the back of the CSI van like a teacher steering students on a school trip. Will, who’s increasingly drawn and pale-looking and doesn’t really care where he goes as long as he stays with Hannibal, drifts aimlessly towards the nearest car in a mindless sort of trance while battling the temptation to cling onto Hannibal’s coat to prevent losing sight of him. Hannibal, in turn, seems able to sense this need without having to be told, so puts his hand on Will’s shoulder and keeps it there the entire time; occasionally stoking the back of his neck with his thumb and only letting go in order to hold the car door open and gently usher Will inside before climbing in behind him – although not in time to prevent Skinner catching the handle in order to wedge himself in too.

“Room for one more?” demands Skinner, blinking owlishly into the darkness. Despite the fact that no one’s tried to stop him his tone is oddly accusatory, rather like he thinks he’s picking a fight as opposed to something as simple as proposing to share a ride.

“As you see,” replies Hannibal calmly. Skinner grunts in acknowledgement and Hannibal politely moves aside to provide more room. Then, because his legs are too long to properly fold themselves into the cramped confines of the footwell, he curves his spine further upright like a cat then rests his palm flat against the upholstery – close enough to Will’s so that the tip of their index fingers are touching. “Hello Jack,” he adds after noticing the latter hovering outside. “Are you joining us as well?”

Jack, who up until now has been striding round the parking lot like a drill sergeant so he can bark out orders at assorted trainees, squats down and pokes his head through the window. “Sure, why not,” he says. “I’ll jump in the front. Is that you over there Will?”

Will pulls himself upright then peers round the combined bulk of Hannibal and Skinner to indicate that it is. “Ah, sorry, I couldn’t see you properly,” says Jack. Will nods in response and Jack adds rather aimlessly: “That’s the problem of working in winter. It gets dark so damn early.”

“I guess.”

“You doing okay?”

“Fine,” replies Will, uncomfortably aware of how Skinner’s bony ears have virtually started to flap with curiosity at the indication that there might be something wrong with him. Jack huffs out his approval through the window and Will pointedly adds: “We’re ready whenever you are.”

“Right then,” says Jack. “Good! Let’s do this.” Moving round to the front of the car he clambers into the passenger seat, bringing in a vicious gust of icy air as he goes that causes the air freshener to jangle crazily like it’s suddenly come to life. The driver, a young and newly-appointed officer who’s clearly in agonies at having found himself responsible for chauffeuring the most prestigious members of the BSU, gives a rather tortured smile in response then immediately stalls the car. Jack sighs loudly and the driver flushes before restarting the engine and promptly cutting out again; at which point Jack summons up a rather magnificent noise of irritation that involves expelling air between his
“teeth and nostrils simultaneously like someone blowing out candles on a gigantic cake.

“I’m very sorry Mr Crawford,” says the driver, who looks ready to pass out with mortification.

“Well hurry up then,” replies Jack. “At this rate The Sculptor will have done Number Eight before we even get there. And ease off the break a bit would you? You’re going to send Mr Graham straight through the rear window.”

“I’m very sorry Mr Graham.”

“Put your seatbelt on Will,” adds Jack bossily.

Will ignores him then rests his forehead against the cooling glass of the windowpane, stretching out his hand and quivering slightly at the way it feels to have his skin brushing against Hannibal’s. Hannibal immediately moves his own hand a little closer and Will hesitates then does it again, consumed by an undeniable sense of *frisson* in touching each other like this – so soft and secret in a way that no one else can see – and wondering if it’s possible that Hannibal feels the fervour of it too? His profile in the darkness seems as calm as ever, inscrutable and impassive as a piece of marble with its chiselled angles and smooth planes; and yet surely he can’t be as unaware as he seems? It’s such a small piece of skin as well – just the tips of two fingers. So strange to think such intimacy is possible from such a tiny scrap of skin…

“Check your mirrors Agent Brennan,” says Jack loudly. “At this rate I’m sending you straight to the vehicular training unit.”

“Yes young man, you keep your eyes on the road,” adds Skinner with unnecessary malice.

“Sir,” says Agent Brennan miserably. Will meets his eye in the rear view mirror and gives him a reassuring smile, trying to imagine the sort of conversations he’ll be having with his friends in the mess hall afterwards. ‘*Oh man,*’ he’ll probably say, ‘*you wouldn’t believe the night I’ve had. That grumpy old bastard Jack Crawford wouldn’t stop chewing me out. And I had Will Graham looking half-dead in the back seat the entire time…*’” Impossible, though, to imagine what he might say about Hannibal. Unlike Jack and Will, who can easily be defined by their roughest edges, Hannibal is a human hall of mirrors who possesses an enviable ability to exist simultaneously as different versions of himself – all of which defeat the onlooker and defy any attempt at classification. So Jack is going to be grumpy and Will is going to be pale and ill-looking, and Hannibal is going to be…what? Casting another furtive glance at his profile, Will experiences an overpowering urge to rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder and has to deliberately turn back towards the window again before he can do anything so stupid and embarrassing.

“We need to get there as soon as possible,” continues Skinner, who seems to have forgotten that his role is of virtually no significance compared to the others in the car. “The local cops will be overwhelmed by now.” Jack gives a gloomy grunt of agreement and Skinner turns to Hannibal and adds “I hear this scene is a bad one Dr Lecter,” in a way that’s clearly intended to exclude any possible opinions that Will might have. “Apparently the body’s a total mess.”

“It is a mess,” says Jack before Hannibal can reply. “*Mirrors,* Agent Brennan. The man who found it is in shock; the mutilations were appalling. Far worse than the others. In that respect it looks like The Sculptor might be shaking up his MO – you’ll have to do a bit of digging Will.”

“Yes, you like to dig don’t you?” says Skinner, as if Will is some kind of super ferret. Will just shrugs and refuses to answer, and Skinner waits until Jack is busy berating Agent Brennan for nearly running a red light to add in an undertone: “I wonder if he’s left any more business cards for you?”
“I’m sure we’re all wondering that,” says Hannibal, shifting his finger a little more until the tips are firmly pressed against Will’s rather than occasionally brushing together. Will, still staring fixedly out the window, quivers again then after a small pause returns the pressure. “Particularly when it was never established that the card was intended as such. What makes you so sure?”

Skinner clears his throat self-consciously. “Well, obviously I don’t know for certain that it was…”

“No? Then why are you speculating?”

“Well… I mean it was reported that…”

“Oh I see,” says Hannibal. “Tell me, Mr Skinner; do you often consult the TattleCrime as your oracle?”

“My thoughts exactly,” snaps Jack, turning away from Agent Brennan who promptly slumps back into his seat like a man untied from the whipping post. “I don’t want to hear one more word about that card; we don’t even know it came from The Sculptor. And linking it with Will is downright irresponsible.”

“We should at least run tests on it,” says Skinner pompously.

“Tests have already been run,” replies Jack. “And came back with nothing. Do you have any idea how common that brand of card is? I’ve got a similar kind myself.”

“So does my doctor,” says Will, feeling like he ought to back Jack up. “She also dislikes alphas: maybe we should be interviewing her as well?”

“What’s disliking alphas got to do with it?” demands Skinner. “In case you haven’t noticed, he only targets omegas.”

“Because Richard Black…” Skinner raises his eyebrows. “Oh forget it,” snaps Will. “Just go and read the report.” Then he remembers that Andrew’s private detective also had an identical card – which in turn reminds him of Andrew – so sinks back into a brooding silence that’s punctuated only by the sound of Jack berating the hapless Agent Brennan at intervals (“Mirror…signal…manoeuvre: for heaven’s sake son, what’s the matter with you? Are you dense?”) until they’ve finally arrived at the destination and it’s time to pull up onto an embankment alongside all the other FBI vehicles.

Hannibal’s finger brushes over his as the car draws to a halt, this time covering it entirely, and Will hesitates for a few seconds then cautiously moves his own finger in a shy stroking motion before the door is flung open and they’re all required to spill out again into the darkness and frozen damp. By now the sky, previously inky and funereal, is splashed scarlet on the horizon with the last dying rays of the sun and looks as if it’s been gashed open as the light leaks away and darkness prepares to consume the little left that’s clinging onto life.

I don’t want to do this, thinks Will with a sudden plunge of foreboding. In fact his reluctance is so powerful it feels sharp-edged and spiky; painful almost – the type of thing you could slice your hands on if you touched it – even though it doesn’t make much sense considering how keen he was to come. But it’s there all the same and there’s no point denying it: that mournful, frightened part of himself that murmurs at the threshold of every single scene ‘I can’t bear it.’ But of course he has no choice but to bear it – and has never had a choice – and so he says nothing. Does nothing. It’s not like it really makes any difference anyway…not in the grand scheme of things. Just one more trial within a lifetime of forcing himself to do what can’t be done.
The body is lying on a deserted stretch of wasteland beyond the city limits, and even though it’s only been a few hours since it was found the scene is already submerged in a seething, foaming chaos of news vans, police officers, FBI vehicles, and assorted morbid spectators and connoisseurs of horror who flock to violent tableaux like moths to a flame. Will can hear someone shouting “Get back! Get back!” through a loudspeaker, their voice crackling and distorted by the static, and everyone’s faces are lit up like crooked Halloween lanterns from the flickering lights of the ambulance and patrol cars. The air is thick with fear and anticipation, whipping the crowd towards frenzy, and the fevered pressure of it is making Will start to panic himself. Suddenly he can’t see Hannibal anyway.

“For God’s sake, this is pandemonium,” growls Jack. “Why the hell didn’t the BPD secure it better? They should have called us in from the start.”

“City cops,” says Skinner contemptuously. “They can never admit when they’re out of their depth.”

Will ignores him and begins to scan around in an increasingly frantic attempt to find Hannibal before stiffening slightly as a lone figure on the fringe of onlookers manages to catch his eye. It’s been months since he last saw them, yet Will’s remarkably retentive memory gives a twinge of recognition and compels him to peer a bit closer before giving Jack a sudden tap on the arm. “There,” says Will sharply. “Look.”

“What?”

“There,” says Will. “That guy in the black coat: isn’t he the same one who was on the scene when we found Number Five?”

“Who?”


“Matthew Brown?” repeats Jack in surprise. “Where?” He strains his eyes into the darkness and Will, straining too, immediately experiences a surge of unease at the eerie way in which the space where the black-coated figure was stood is now unaccountably empty.

“That’s impossible,” he exclaims. “He was right there.”

“You sure?”

“Well…no,” admits Will after a few seconds pause. “Not 100%.”

“Well, I definitely can’t see him,” replies Jack. “You might have been mistaken Will – to be honest, I’m not really sure how someone could get out the way that fast.” Will nods unhappily and Jack, who’s clearly growing preoccupied with everything else that needs to be done, adds “I’ll tell Agent James to do a scan of the crowd, but I need to speak with the commissioner now. Meet me behind the cordon in five minutes okay?”

Okay,” says Will, still not entirely satisfied but unable to think of anything more practical to do beyond what Jack’s already proposing. Then he stares out into the blackness for a second time, trying to determine if the figure ever really was there or was just a trick of the light, before abruptly spinning round as he hears the sound of his name being called. “Hey, there’s Will Graham!” someone is shouting. “It’s Will Graham, right there!”

The voice is sufficiently clear of tone and piercing of pitch to rise above the throng of everyone else: and from the corner of his eye Will sees a familiar splash of scarlet hair that signals the presence of Freddie Lounds. Ducking his head he now turns back and quickly begins to follow Jack in the
direction of the police cordon – despite it being the last place he really wants to go – only to find himself stopped halfway by a district policeman who deliberately deposits his bulky frame between Will and the crime scene tape. Will sighs with irritation and the man scowls and folds his arms in a way that’s clearly meant to be threatening, despite the fact Will can easily tell that such sternness is much more performance than truly genuine. In reality he looks strained and tense – out of his depth – and Will supposes that he doesn’t really want to be here; that he’s used to muggings and traffic violations, and that this is far too much reality for him. In fact part of Will wants to take him aside and reassure him that they all feel that way: that you never stop feeling that way, no matter how many sites you tramp across or how many cordons you have to guard. And yet isn’t this location a particularly bleak and desolate one – more than enough to justify the officer’s obvious unease? Glancing round now at the blasted patches of mud and stacks of rubble, Will inadvertently shivers. It’s hardly like there’s ever an acceptable place to be viciously murdered; and yet there’s no denying that this is a truly terrible place to die.

“Dammit pal,” the officer is saying, and his voice sounds stretched and taut from anxiety as if it’s poised to snap. “What’s your problem? Get back.” Then he peers a bit closer before blanching and giving a self-conscious cough. “Ah, I’m very sorry Mr Graham. I didn’t recognize you.”

“It’s fine,” replies Will mechanically. “You’re just doing your job.”

“You don’t look anything like your photos,” persists the officer in a defensive way; and even though Will knows he’s just trying to justify himself, the sensation is still a distinctly odd one – as if Will’s masquerading as a counterfeit of himself that’s convincing enough from a distance yet not good enough to deceive an onlooker close up; rather like the uncanny valley effect of a bad computer animation. “Go on ahead then,” says the officer, who still looks uncomfortable from his mistake. He lifts up the tape so Will can duck underneath before adding, with obvious bleakness: “Rather you than me.”

Will sighs in silent agreement then reluctantly complies; aware as he does so of a surreal sensation that the air on this side of the tape somehow has a different quality to it which stings the throat and fills his mouth with a bitter metallic taste. It’s ridiculous of course; and yet there’s always a sense of crossing over when he does this – passing from the relative safety of the normal world into the menacingly twisted dangers of the dark side – and he can’t help feeling relieved when Jack materialises from out the shadows a few seconds later, his breath coming out in little frozen puffs and looking rather phantom-like in his long dark coat. A young officer promptly bustles up with an umbrella to hold over them both, and Jack waves her away with an impatient flick of his hand.

“Where’s Hannibal gone?” asks Will before he can stop himself.

“Have you been looking for him?” says Jack. Will’s shrugs non-committedly, suddenly self-conscious, and Jack waves his hand in the direction of the ambulances. “I asked him to take a look at the guy who found the body,” he adds. “He’s in shock – no good at all as a witness until he’s calmed down.” Will shrugs again for want of anything better to do and Jack hesitates then puts a kindly hand on his shoulder. “Do you need him? I could have someone bring him over?”

“No,” replies Will, who does need him but is reluctant to say anything that might come across as weak or incompetent. “Thanks. I’m good.”

“You sure?”

In fact ‘good’ is the last of what Will feels, either physically or mentally, but he just shakes his head to show that it’s fine – even though it’s really not – and Jack claps his shoulder again then steers him down a stretch of narrow footpath that’s littered with broken brick fragments and the skeletons of crumbled leaves. It’s started to rain in earnest now and the drops set up a grimly droning rhythm
which drums against the ground and ricochets from car hoods as the water draggles Will’s hair over his forehead and forces him to keep swiping strands out his eyes. In fact the wetness is something of a relief and helps to cool the clammy, sweltering sensation that’s been creeping over him ever since he left the FBI; yet for all it dismal discomforts, the weather does nothing to disperse the crowd. Of course it doesn’t, thinks Will gloomily – people want to see this. They want to be able to say they were there. ‘I was on the scene the night they found The Sculptor’s seventh,’ they want to say. ‘I saw it all; I saw everything.’

“Come on Will,” calls Jack. “It’s back here.” It being the dead omega…or whatever it is that’s left of them. All around the CSI team are hovering together in clusters, pale and spectral as ghosts in their white overalls, and it feels to Will as if they’re silently turning one-by-one to stare at him as he walks past. He catches the eye of a few of them and their numb muteness and frozen faces strike him as disorientating, rather like he’s passing through a museum for an exhibition or a preview show. Something called Agony or Existential Dread: something that would get enthusiastic reviews for being raw and uncompromising and which the critics would commend it for its hallowed, tender depiction of life and death...

By now Will has reached the end of the footpath and he hovers for few seconds, suddenly reluctant to see what’s waiting at the other end until he finally feels Jack gently but firmly pushing him forward. The scene has changed again by this point – no longer haunted and elegiac, but bristling with the forensically clinical efficiency of an FBI investigation that knows exactly what to do, and how to do it, and runs on gridlines with all the mechanical competence of a factory for manufacturing the dead and deceased: tarpaulins up; flaring lights on tripods; smell of blood; raindrops rattling off every surface like the sound of bullets. The forensic photographer is crouched to Will’s right and there’s a stark, whirring drone every time his camera fires. People’s face are illuminated by the raw glare of crane lights which makes the fog appear as if it’s smouldering; and yet despite the efficiency, it still seems to Will that every face in his line of vision is wearing the same look of blanched, fearful horror. The shrill wail of sirens is almost deafening now, punctuated by shouts and the occasional sobbing noise from beyond the police cordon, and he briefly scrubs his hand across his forehead in a desperate attempt to concentrate.

“Look at that!” says Jack. “I mean just look at it. Tell me that’s not him.”

Will takes a deep breath, aware of how Jack’s staring at him – and now everyone’s staring at him – and focussing on how he has to just forget about all of them and stare at this: The Sculptor’s latest installation. He kneels down to get a closer look, struggling against the wave of nausea at the smell and sight of it whilst trying to ignore the way the perspiration is coursing down his spine in a horrible, clammy stream. “Same as the others?” he asks tersely. “No sign of sexual assault?”

“We’ll know for sure at the autopsy, but initially – no.”

“The mutilations are far more extreme,” adds Will in the same toneless voice. “He’s escalating.”

“Why?”

Will frowns then bites his lip for a few seconds before responding. “Because what he was doing before isn’t giving him the same satisfaction. See how frenzied the incisions are?” He traces his finger over the gaping slashes on the abdomen then briefly screws his eyes closed before snapping them open again. “The earlier wounds were more methodical; more considered. Remember how I emphasised the performative aspects? It was like he was working to achieve a particular effect.”

“Whereas now?” prompts Jack.

“Now he’s developing his own signature. There’s a spontaneity to these ones which wasn’t there
“So what does that mean Mr Graham?” asks one of the CSI officers.

Will falls silent for a few more seconds and when he finally speaks again his voice is heavy with foreboding. “It means he’s realised that he likes it.”

A murmur of alarm ripples through the onlookers in response to this, but Will continues to ignore them and stares down at the victim instead: a young female omega with pale blonde hair and eyes with the same vivid blueness of columbines. Despite the carnage from the chest down, her face itself looks oddly peaceful. She could almost be resting – just lying on her back and gazing up at the stars – and he longs to reach down and push her eyes closed except for the knowledge that the CSI team would never allow him to touch her. “There’s no sign of a struggle,” he says out loud. “No defensive wounds; no obvious contusions. Get the tox screen to check for whether she’d been drugged.”

“She might have gone with him willingly?” adds Jack, who’s now leaning down too and getting into Will’s space. “They could’ve known each other?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps he’s charming, or harmless-looking – or at the very least a convincing actor. I can’t say for sure.”

“You’ve said a lot already Mr Graham,” says the CSI officer. His tone is admiring yet respectful, and although he gives Will a tentative clap on the shoulder it’s nothing that could be seen as intrusive or over-familiar. Nevertheless it’s still enough to compel Jack to bark out with something like a snarl: “Hey! Stop crowding him would you? Back off.”

With a twinge of unease, Will realises that Jack has suddenly begun to behave in an oddly protective manner towards him – far more than would be considered normal, or even appropriate. “Relax Jack,” he says sharply. “It’s fine.”

For a few seconds Jack looks confused, as if he’s not entirely certain what came over him, and the CSI team exchange nervous glances with one other in a way that suddenly makes Will feel horribly self-conscious and uncomfortable. Swallowing audibly, he forces himself to ignore the terrible suspicion that’s begun to creep into his mind and instead refocuses his attention on the far more important task: doing his best for this poor dead omega, who should have been lying on her back somewhere and gazing up at the stars and instead has had her life brutally stolen away in some godforsaken stretch of wasteland. “The right hand’s been placed oddly,” he says now. “There’s no way it landed like that by itself.” Then he peers a bit closer; and suddenly there’s no need to force himself to forget his private anxieties because they wither away all on their own the moment he spots something gleaming in the lamp light that makes him go rigid and still.

“What’s the matter?” asks Jack. The tone of his voice sounds ominous, clearly infected by Will’s own unease. “What is it?”

Instead of answering Will snaps his fingers impatiently at the CSI officer. “Get me some gloves,” he says sharply. Then he leans forward again and gently prises her fingers open so he can remove what he’d desperately hoped might be a trick of the light, but in reality turns out to be exactly what he thought it was: a single scrap of white card, blood stained and crumpled with the familiar scrawling writing across the front.

“Dammit,” says Jack softly.

Will holds the card up to the light to scan the contents then grimaces and wordlessly hands it to Jack so he can read it aloud for the benefit of the others. “Is it from him Mr Graham?” asks the CSI officer
in a frightened voice. “Is it…is it The Sculptor?”

“It’s The Sculptor all right,” says Jack tersely. He exchanges a look with Will, who stares back as they silently share the same grim acknowledgement: that this new discovery makes the chances of the first card being genuine increase exponentially – which in turn means the ‘WG’ initials have suddenly acquired a whole new level of sinister significance. Clearing his throat Jack now reads the card aloud in a voice who’s lack of emotion in no way dilutes the impact of the message; and Will can still feel every hair on the back of his neck slowly start to prickle at the sound of it: “Hello FBI. Do you like what I made for you?”

There’s a brief, shocked pause before another ripple of alarm breaks out in the assembled group; starting out softly, but gradually getting louder and louder until the voice of the first CSI officer breaks over the top of it and exclaims with obvious distress: “Jesus. He’s out of his mind.”

“Yes, thank you for that penetrating insight,” snaps Jack. “With you on hand I don’t know why we even bothered bringing Will and Dr Lecter down here; they could hardly have done better themselves.”

“I was only saying sir.”

“Well don’t,” snarls Jack. “Don’t say.” Turning back to Will again he adds in a noticeably softer voice: “Are you sure you’re all right?”

It’s not like it’s an unreasonable query to make, but the tone in which it’s said – in something approaching a kind of cooing noise, as if Jack is a large doe-eyed pigeon – is enough to convince Will that something very odd is going on; although even now, the enormity of it is so overwhelming that he can’t quite bring himself to acknowledge what it could be. The card’s grimly mocking message has sickened him, yet right now it’s also starting to jostle with a new source of fear: the awareness that the pheromone spray is practically burning a hole in his pocket, and the sense that he has to find somewhere private to douse himself with it as a matter of urgency. Abruptly getting to his feet he sways slightly at the resulting rush of blood to the head then flinches at the way that Jack and the crime scene photographer – also another alpha – practically crash into one another in their eagerness to try and prop him up again. “Look, I’ll be back in a minute,” says Will rather desperately. “I, um, I need some air.”

“I’ll come with you,” chorus Jack and the photographer in perfect unison.

“No!” replies Will; and which in spite of himself comes out in something like a shriek. Jack and the photographer immediately look mournful and Will applies a supreme level of effort into recovering himself in order to appear less distressed. “I’ll only be a minute,” he adds, trying to sound casual. “I’m fine, I promise. I’ll be right back.” Jack and the photographer immediately cheer up again and Will briefly struggles with the temptation to add ‘Stay!’ as he would to one of his dogs (fucking alphas) before ducking beneath the cordon and breaking into a kind of canter. His head is swimming now with a combination of fear and shock, and he feels crushed by the fact that his frantic need to find Hannibal and be comforted is rendered impossible by the even more pressing need to apply the spray. Briefly disorientated by the noise and glaring lights, he nearly falls straight into Skinner who makes a hissing noise of surprise; and for a few seconds Will stares numbly at him, far too panicked and overwhelmed to apologise, before managing to right himself and stumbling desperately across the patch of grass towards the relative privacy of one of the CSI vans. It’s only a short distance but it suddenly feels like miles, and he tries to ignore the throbbing sound of his pulse in his ears and the way his limbs are growing heavy and leaden as a horrified part of his mind chants over and over: Please God, oh please, not that, it can’t be…it CAN’T.

Just as Will feared each one of the vans’ doors is locked. Nevertheless its’ convenient position –
close to a wall for an extra layer of concealment – plus its large size and squat design mean it’s still enough to hide behind, and he quickly vanishes into the shadows to root through his pockets for the bottle of pheromone spray. His hands are shaking so much it takes him several attempts to get the lid off and he’s aware of putting on far too much – possibly enough to cause a chemical burn – but right now he doesn’t care because the alternative is infinitely worse. Even so, he still can’t bring himself to admit that if his darkest fear is true then it’s far too late for the spray to be of any use at all – and the internal recital now seems to have taken on a life of its own as someone in the background begins to murmur ‘It can’t be, it can’t be’ in a desperate sort of chant. It takes Will a few confused seconds to realise that it’s actually him; but really, it’s impossible not to repeat it aloud because it can’t be. How can it? How could the suppressants have failed so spectacularly without any warning? Then he suddenly remembers Hannibal’s earlier suggestion that the strain of the past few days could have caused him to forget a few doses and the awful reality of it hits him like a blow to the face – not only because of the disastrous consequences, but the shocked realisation that seeing Hannibal and Alana together had such a powerful impact that it could create such a devastating mistake.

Will slumps helplessly against the side of the van, dizzy with diesel fumes and the prickling scorched sensation that’s racing through his body, but most of all by the simple sickened disbelief that a nightmare of this proportion could possibly be happening to him. In fact he’s so preoccupied with the grief and fear of it that he completely fails to register the long thin silhouette that’s appeared by the side of the van; and it’s only when he reaches up to swipe his damp hair out his eyes that he finally sees it. The shafts of moonlight are deceptive and make it appear so bony and elongated that it’s hardly feasible it could be human – but then it takes a step forward and slithers into the light and Will realises, with a plunge of apprehension, that the shadow has solidified and turned itself into Skinner. When painted with so much dimness his face looks faintly spectral, with each plane and shaft of bone curiously emphasised like a Death’s Head or leering bit of sculpture. “Hey,” he says softly. “You okay?” There’s a trace of something like tenderness in his voice and Will hears it and promptly feels like vomiting, because he knows that Skinner is an alpha – and that this radical change in manner can only mean one thing.

“I’m fine,” snaps Will after a few seconds miserable pause. “I’m just…” Oh for fuck’s sake though, what could he possibly be doing behind a CSI van? Taking a clandestinely forensic piss? “I was just calling my dad,” he says eventually, cursing the lameness of the excuse but unable to think of anything better.

“Now?”

“Yes, obviously. There’s…there’s been an illness in the family.”

Skinner makes a crooning noise of sympathy, and Will reflects that the only likely death in the family is going to be his own via epic public humiliation. “I’m sorry to hear that,” adds Skinner in the same soft voice. “I thought you’d been looking sad recently. So sad Will – so pretty and sad. Do you need anything? Do you want me…to hold you?”

Will opens his mouth then helplessly lets it fall closed again, not least because the awfulness of the situation is now so colossal that it seems to have temporarily stolen his powers of speech. Then he can’t help wondering, rather hysterically, how incredibly mortified Skinner is going to be when the neurochemical fog has worn off and he realises he’s been trying to seduce his sworn enemy behind the back of a CSI van. As if to confirm this, Skinner leans in even closer and murmurs: “You’re an omega aren’t you Will? I did wonder.”

“For God’s sake” snaps Will, miserably aware that the point has long since passed where there’s any use in denying it. “What’s that got to do with anything?”
Skinner simply smiles at this before promptly ignoring it and holding up a hand instead so he can begin to count off the points he wants to make on his long gnarled fingers. “One: you’re too good-looking to be a beta, but two: you’re too small to be an alpha. But then again Will, there’s three: which is that shitty attitude of yours that’s nothing like an omega.” Skinner pauses and blinks a few times, obviously unaware of the contradiction in trying to ingratiate himself with Will while he’s actively insulting him. “You’re a stupid little thing aren’t you? Why didn’t you say? You should have said. We’d have all looked after you better. Omegas are precious Will. They’re valuable. Don’t you know that? We’re supposed to take care of them.”

Even though Will knows he’s using ‘we’ to refer to alphas generally, the effect of the plural still manages to be deeply sinister – rather as if Skinner believes his body is housing several different people. In fact the whole encounter is making him feel contaminated and he has a sudden desire to leap into a stingingly hot shower to sluice off the effect of Skinner’s gaze, which feels like it might well be leaving oily smears across his face and clothes. Having successfully suppressed his heats for most of his adult life it’s also undeniably shocking to witness first-hand the effect that omega hormones have on alphas – particularly when he himself is the cause of it. In fact it reminds him of one of the early training seminars at the Academy where all the alphas were rounded up and made to sit in one of the labs while a synthetic version of the pheromones omegas emit while in heat was blasted into the room. “We do it to try and desensitise them,” Jack had explained. “Most of them will never experience it in their personal lives so they need to be prepared in case they’re exposed to it in the field. Can you imagine the chaos otherwise?” At the time the spectacle of it had made Will enormously uncomfortable: the way the betas had milled around outside cackling and pointing when the alphas emerged a few minutes later with flushed faces and gleaming eyes and practically bow-legged from the beginning of burgeoning knots. A few of the younger ones had lost control shortly afterwards and begun attacking each other. “They always do that to begin with,” Jack had said. “A few months’ worth of these sessions and they can handle it much better.”

“Were you ever like that?” Will had asked, finding it rather hard to imagine.

Jack had laughed and rolled his eyes. “To be honest I was far worse but I eventually learnt to control it. You have to, you see. Don’t get me wrong; the reaction is instinctive and you can’t remove it entirely, but you can take responsibility for it. And you have to. It’s not up to omegas to manage rutting alphas; it’s up to alphas to deal with their own urges.”

Thinking of this now reminds Will that despite the undeniable irritation of it, the clumsy chivalry of someone like Jack is still infinitely preferable to something like this. Suddenly panicked he takes a step backwards and squares his shoulders. “Stay away from me,” he hisses, and it comes out as a kind of snarl. “Don’t come any closer.”

The tone of his voice is so intrinsically threatening that Skinner obediently draws to a halt – although equally doesn’t show any signs of walking away again either. “It’s okay Will,” he says soothingly. “I won’t touch you without your permission. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then fuck off.”

“No, no – you don’t understand ,” urges Skinner, holding out his hands in a supplicating gesture as if he thinks he’s holding a white flag. “I want to help you; I can give you what you need.” Pausing for a few seconds he trawls his eyes across Will’s face and down his body, the pupils in the moonlight as dark and shiny as black beetles’ shells. “And you need it so bad, don’t you little omega? I can smell it on you. In a few hours’ time you’re going to be desperate. You’re going to be screaming out for an alpha to come and take care of you.” He pauses again then darts his tongue over his thin lips in an unpleasantly reptilian way. “For one of us to…fill you up.”
“Are you out of your mind?” yells Will, temporarily forgetting that to all intents and purposes that’s exactly what Skinner currently is. “Get away from me.”

“Tell me how you like it Will?” persists Skinner, who’s eyes have taken on a deeply unsettling gleam. “I’d give you whatever you want, anything at all; you only have to ask. And I’m good – I’m really good. You’d enjoy it so much.”

The sheer obliviousness of the response – and from someone Will knows in the general scheme of things actively despises him – is a terrifying reminder that the situation is now far more serious than he was able to admit to himself. Desperately he thinks of the stolen prescription from Dr Reynolds and the emergency supply of suppressants before cursing the fact that they’re lying many useless miles away in his bedside cabinet. Why didn’t he carry them with him? Why didn’t he think to do that…oh God, he really should have done that. And yet having not experienced heats for so long he’d forgotten what it was like, and stupidly – blindly – had no way of orientating the physical sensations to anything more than stress and fatigue. Is this really it then? Is he truly condemned to have to go through the nightmare of it: the uncontrollable need, the urgency, the raw desperation? Yet while the physical and mental aspects of it feel unknown and terrifying, it’s the implications for the situation with Andrew that’s really flooding him with despair. Because if Will is having a normal heat cycle then there’d be no question of things even getting as far as a legal case: he’ll be picked up on a custody order and bundled into the back of Andrew’s Mercedes by the nearest court-appointed doctor or social worker – and there’s absolutely fuck all that he or anyone else can do about it.

At the idea of this Will makes an inadvertent groaning noise that’s borne from an agonised blend of fear and frustration; and Skinner, mistakenly assuming that it’s his presence which is the cause of it, reacts in a way that’s enough to briefly shake Will out of his introspection because it’s so unbelievably disturbing and odd. Taking a step forward Skinner inhales deeply before his breath catches at the back of throat; and when he speaks again his voice sounds like it’s pulsating from the force of the emotion behind it. “Oh God Will,” he murmurs, and his breath catches again. “Look at you: the fear, Will. You’re so beautiful when you’re frightened. You’re so fucking beautiful. Oh God, Will. Just let me...please. Please, just let me...just let me have you...”

For a few seconds Will goes rigid from the shock of it: repulsed and incredulous for his own sake, yet also powerfully consumed in some dark part of his mind by an image of The Sculptor most likely crooning something similar to his victims just before he killed them. Then he forces himself to push the fear aside and urgently casts his eyes around until he spots a discarded beer bottle glinting a few feet away in the darkness. Scooping down to retrieve it, he neatly smashes it against the side of the van then brandishes the jagged edge in Skinner’s direction. “Okay that’s enough,” he says, his voice frighteningly low and intense. “Get away from me. I’m not going to warn you again.”

Skinner slides his gaze down to the bottle before trawling back up and again and beginning to smile; and Will feels his own eyes beginning to widen in sheer disbelief at the grotesque obliviousness of it. “I don’t care,” murmurs Skinner, and he sounds ecstatic, like some kind of mystic being transported by visions and sublime revelations. “I’ll fight you if you want me to. It would be worth it. Little omega…it would prove how much it means to me. You’re special Will. Omegas are special…we’d do anything for an omega...”

He holds his hands out again towards Will in an attitude of pleading desperation, and Will takes a deep breath: processing with lightening speed the chance of terrible penalties for what he’s about to do, yet likewise powerfully aware that if those grasping fingers come anywhere near him then he won’t be responsible for his actions. Given that it’s incredibly difficult for omegas to successfully claim assault against alphas when they’re in heat it’s not like even a self-defence plea could help him that much; and yet it’s hardly as if prison would be any worse than a life with Andrew. In fact if anything it would probably be better. Skinner begins to wave his hands even faster, fists clutching at
empty air and face fixed in a grimace of eerie intensity, and Will forgets about the threat of punishment and bears his teeth instead before drawing back the hand holding the bottle in preparation of sinking it into all that pale, sinewy skin.

“I’ll take it off you,” chants Skinner, lunging forwards to try and grasp hold of Will’s wrist. “You can’t hurt me with that. You’re too small; I’ll take you down.” He’s prowling now, occasionally feinting and jabbing like a boxer or martial artist, and the eerie, jerky way he moves makes his long limbs seem disjointed in the manner of a horrifically over-sized spider. Will feels another plunge of fear at the sight of it, miserably aware of the disadvantage he’s facing courtesy of his heat pains and failing coordination, yet through sheer outrage still manages to summon enough agility to duck out of the way before shooting out the hand that’s clutching the bottle and catching Skinner’s leg with the edge of the glass. The blood looks hot and gushingly black in the moonlight, yet Skinner barely seems to register the injury and is still coming at him like some kind of grisly undead monster from a horror film before the clattering sound of footsteps finally causes him to falter in his pursuit and briefly turn away towards the front of the van.

“Hey Will,” calls Zeller; and Will gives an audible gasp of relief at such an unlikely form of intervention. “You back here? I heard breaking glass and…” As his head appears round the side he catches sight of Skinner then falls silent – in dramatic contrast to Skinner himself, who reacts almost immediately by leaping in front of Will and brandishing his fists at Zeller in a weird, grasping motion that makes his hands look like claws.

“Guys?” says Zeller nervously. “Is everything okay?”

“Get away from him!” roars Skinner, his long body practically vibrating with the force of the emotion. “Back off! You touch him and I’ll rip your throat out.”

He gnashes his teeth together as if in demonstration of how he plans to do it, and Zeller’s eyes widen in shock as he slowly turns his head from one of them to the other. “Will?” he says in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Are you deaf or stupid?” snarls Skinner. Flecks of spittle are splashing from his mouth now like spray and he swipes them away with the back of his hand. “Stay where you are!”

Zeller casts another shocked glance at Will then falls quiet again for a few seconds before making an odd, abrupt movement with his right hand that Will initially can’t make sense of before realising that he’s urgently signalling someone over. Skinner, mistaking the meaning of the gesture and assuming it’s directed at Will, snarls again then arches his back at Zeller like he’s preparing to pounce. “Stop looking at him!” he roars. “Why are you looking at him like that? If you look at him again then I’ll kill you, I swear to God. I’ll kill you.”

“Not tonight you won’t,” says a familiar voice. Skinner pivots round for a second time, arms swinging clumsily from side to side like pendula or some kind of ungainly primate, then growls even louder as Price joins Zeller by the side of the van: slightly comical looking in his forensic overalls, yet still red-faced with anger and defiantly brandishing a weapon that’s even more incongruous than Will’s beer bottle – a stainless steel bedpan that clearly been swiped from the nearby ambulance. Ignoring Skinner, who’s begun to bellow like a maddened bull, Price now raises it above his head with both hands then nimbly leaps forward and brings it crashing down on the back of Skinner’s skull with sufficient force to send him crumpling to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Wow,” announces Zeller into the resulting shocked silence. “Just…wow.”

“An excellent shot, if I do say so myself,” agrees Price, looking fondly at the bedpan. “I’ve been waiting ages for an excuse to do that.”
Will lets out a breath he scarcely realised he’d been holding then allows himself to slump against the side of the van before his legs give way entirely. His head feels so heavy now…surely it shouldn’t feel like this? It’s as if it’s packed with cement. “Someone needs to speak to Jack,” he says, and his voice in his own ears sounds extremely slurred and hazy, rather like his vocal chords have been submerged in syrup. “I think there’s something wrong with him. I mean really wrong with him.”

“You’re not kidding.” Zeller scrubs his hand across his forehead, clearly still struggling to make sense of what he’s just witnessed. “He honestly looked like he wanted to kill me.”

“Although to be fair you do tend to have that effect on people,” says Price.

Will opens his mouth to try and explain about the extent of Skinner’s disturbed behaviour, only to ultimately let it close it again once he realises that it’s going to require a clarity of thought and level of energy that he honestly doesn’t possess. His body feels molten now, like his blood has curdled through over-heating and become too clogged and curdled to move around his body and there’s a throbbing sense of pressure building up around his hips and spine that make him want to scream. Oh God, oh God, there’s no denying it now: in a few hours’ time it’s going to start properly. Maybe it’ll start even sooner? Maybe in a few minutes? Then he opens his mouth again to try and ask for Hannibal to put his arms round him before remembering there’s no point because he’s not here. Somewhere in the distance he’s aware of being asked if he’s okay and he shakes his head rather helplessly just as Price takes a step forward and places a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“All right Brian, listen to me,” says Price whose voice, despite its calm tone, is growing tinged with a clear note of concern. “Go and fetch me one of those HRPs from the van – the largest size. Quick as you can.”

“What?” asks Zeller in confusion. “You want a what?”

“A Human Remains Pouch you idiot.”

“I know what it is – but what the heck do you need one of those for?”

“Just do it please,” replies Price with unusual sharpness. He tosses the keys to Zeller then positions himself in such a way that he’s hiding Will from view to anyone who might be walking past the van, shuffling impatiently and darting the occasional anxious glance at his watch until Zeller returns a few minutes later clutching a large sheet of plastic. “Excellent!” says Price. “That’s just the thing. It’s sure to keep them from smelling you for a while.” Turning Will round he rips the seams open then proceeds to bundle it round him like a cloak before removing his own cap and pushing it over Will’s hair. “There you go young man,” he says briskly. “I always said you’d end up in one of my body bags.”

Will laughs slightly at this although it goes wrong halfway through as another wave of discomfort hits him. It’s not pain exactly – at least not yet – but more like a consuming sense of aching and restlessness, as if his skin is several sizes too small and the only likely source of relief is to clamber out of it.

“O-h-h-h,” says Zeller as the penny finally drops.

“Quite,” replies Price. “Thank you for that incredibly helpful input. Now put those great long legs of yours to good use and go and find Jack – do it now. It’s all right Will,” he adds in a kinder voice. “He can’t be far away. We’ll have him here any minute.”

“There’s no point,” replies Will through gritted teeth. “Jack can’t help.”
“I know he can’t entirely,” says Price with obvious tact. “But that bag will only work so well and if a group of them smell you I’m afraid I have only a finite number of bedpans. We need to get you out of here as soon as possible and find you somewhere safe.” Will groans again and Price sighs with sympathy and smooths Will’s hair out his eyes before beginning to gently massage the back of his neck. “Do you have…is there someone that can, um, take care of you at home?”

“I’ll be fine,” mutters Will in the usual automatic way.

“Are you sure Will?” replies Price seriously. “You know it can be dangerous otherwise.” Will flinches and Price hurriedly adds: “Well not dangerous exactly but, um…very stressful on the body. I have a few medical contacts who are alphas: very nice people indeed. Not like him.” Dismissively he reaches out and delivers a hefty kick to Skinner’s ribcage, who gives a groan in response. “Not like him,” repeats Price, doing it again. “And I’m sure in an emergency, one of them would be…”

“No!” says Will, all the old panic immediately welling up at the idea of being bitten without permission. “I don’t want to be with anyone I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t,” replies Price soothingly, resuming the stroking motion on Will’s neck. “It was a stupid suggestion. I’m afraid I’m just a silly old beta who’s watched a few too many soap operas; I’m sure you know what’s best. And do tell me if this massaging is annoying you? I saw someone doing it on a soap opera, you see, and have been desperate to try it out ever since.” Will smiles slightly and Price smiles back and then pats him again. “Doctor On Call,” he adds happily. “It’s a wonderful show. I recommend it whole-heartedly. Of course the doctor himself is a terrible idiot but the nurses seem to like him. He’s called Jackson Powers – admittedly with a name like that he’d be more suited to being a GI Joe, but he’s incredibly suave and always gets his diagnoses wrong. Not that they’re supposed to be wrong mind you, but the scriptwriters are clearly colossal idiots. I write them letters of complaint nearly every week.”

Will, who’s rather in need of such a harmless source of distraction, makes an attempt to reply before another wave hits him and he lets out an anguished gasp that’s partly discomfort but mostly a sickened sense of fear. “Here, sit down,” says Price gently. “We’ll have you out of here soon I promise. Look – here’s Brian now.” Zeller’s unmistakably lanky frame reappears round the side of the van and Price scowls with impatience at seeing him alone. “What on earth are doing back here by yourself?” he says crossly. “Where’s Jack?”

“I wanted to see if you needed anything,” replies Zeller, who’s rather out of breath from all the running. “And I couldn’t find Jack anywhere.”

“Well for heaven’s sake look again!” snaps Price. “And bring Hannibal as well while you’re at it. We could do with a few cooperative alphas about the place.”

“Please, yes please,” says Will.

“I couldn’t find him either.”

“Then look harder!” says Price. “Because if any of Mr Skinner’s friends turn up I’m going to have to make one bedpan stretch out between all of them. Come on Will; let’s get you somewhere more secure. We can wait in one of the squad cars.”

“Couldn’t he just get himself home in one of those?” asks Zeller anxiously.

“Oh I don’t know Brian, you tell me,” replies Price with heavy sarcasm. “Just look at the state of him; do you honestly think he’s safe to drive? Besides, this is the site of a major criminal investigation – they’re not just going to donate one of their personnel cars to us, no matter how good
the cause.” Turning back to Will again, Price pats his arm and then lowers his voice slightly to a tone that’s less abrasive. “We need to get you a cab with a beta driver,” he says. “And a chaperone as well, just to be on the safe side.”

“I don’t need a chaperone,” protests Will, doing his best not to limp or stumble too obviously as Price begins to steer him in the direction of an empty police car.

“I’m afraid you do,” replies Price. “If you…Well, I know ‘deteriorate’ isn’t exactly the right word; but if you lose track of yourself on the journey back, then what’s to stop the driver meeting up with some local alpha and handing you over to them in exchange for a big stack of cash?” Will promptly winces and Price makes a sympathetic noise. “I’m sorry, I know it’s a horrible thought. But it’s not going to happen because we won’t send you off by yourself.” Settling Will into the back seat he jumps in behind him then quickly slams down the locks on all four doors.

“Thank you,” says Will quietly. “It’s kind of you to help me.” Struggling free from the plastic he curls himself up into a ball against the seat – aware of how he’s trying to make himself as small as possible and feeling slightly humiliated by it, yet at the same time finding it impossible to even consider doing anything more dignified.

“Don’t mention it,” replies Price. “And rest assured you’re paying me back in kind. It’s years since I’ve seen a real live omega; I fully intend to use you as a case study.” Will gives a small, mournful smile in response and Price smiles too then pats his arm again. “Honestly though,” he says fretfully, “where have Jack and Hannibal got to? It sounds like a song title doesn’t it: Where Have All The Good Alphas Gone? Mind you, I suspect I can have a reasonable guess: Jack’s probably making the trainees march round the field chanting ‘We are not worthy,’ and no doubt Hannibal has gone to the Doctor On Call set to teach Dr Powers a thing or two about being suave.”

“You don’t think they’ve left do you?” asks Will, embarrassed by how childish he suspects he sounds. “Hannibal was taking care of one of the eyewitnesses…he might have taken them to hospital. He might have gone.”

“Maybe,” replies Price, “although Jack will definitely still be here.” Will bites his lip with distress, trying to resist the urge to wail ‘But I don’t want Jack’; and Price glances down at him then sighs and pats his arm for the third time. “You poor thing,” he says. “You look terribly uncomfortable. I’m sorry by the way; I always talk complete rubbish when I’m nervous.”

“It’s fine,” mutters Will, despite barely listening anymore because he’s getting so preoccupied with a desperate, craving need to be touched. In fact the intensity of it is almost painful, yet he can’t possibly bear to ask Price to do it so closes his eyes and imagines having Hannibal in the car instead: the way would feel to have those deft strong hands running over his body, exploring and caressing it, accompanied by Hannibal’s uniquely soothing words of praise and encouragement each time Will responded to the touch. Perhaps he’d use his mouth as well? He might brush his lips against Will’s forehead while stroking his face, just as he did in the parking lot. And Hannibal wouldn’t be frightened at the thought of Andrew, not like Will is. He’d make the fear go away; he’d make everything all right again, just through soft smoky words and the feel of his hands on Will’s body. His hands would be unexpectedly warm too, because Will always expects him to be cold to the touch and he’s not. Will now makes a small, helpless whining noise at the thought of it then quickly buries his face into his arm to try and stifle the sound.

“It isn’t really fine though is it?” Price is now saying matter-of-factly. “I’m even starting to annoy myself to be honest.” Then he stiffens slightly before leaning over Will to wipe the condensation off the window so he can peer out into the gloom at where a series of flickering silhouettes are slowly becoming visible: dipping and weaving in and out of the shadows as they circle the car in a pack.
“Alphas,” says Price, clearly struggling to keep the unease out of his voice. “How do they always know?”

“They can smell it,” says Will miserably.

“Yes, but…” Price trails off then begins patting Will’s shoulder in a sort of frenzy. “It’s all right,” he says, by this point seeming to be talking more to himself than to Will. “I know being dependent on Brian’s initiative isn’t the most comfortable position in the world but he’ll be back any minute now with Jack, and Hannibal too if he’s still here. They’ll see them off for us – no need to worry.”

“They won’t hurt you,” mutters Will, before remembering how ready Skinner was to attack Zeller and briefly falling quiet again. Although surely Skinner can’t be considered typical – after all, it’s hard to imagine most alphas caring about betas in a situation like this. “They’d be more likely to be violent with each other,” he adds, hoping he sounds convincing. “Anyway the doors are locked.”

“I still should have brought my bedpan,” says Price. “Ah – listen to me: I’m rambling again. I’m sorry Will, I can’t even imagine how you must be feeling.” Will shrugs, aware of a guilty sense of anger towards Price for being himself rather than Hannibal, and Price adds rather anxiously: “How are you feeling?”

“Bad,” says Will, although makes no attempt to elaborate any further. What’s there to say after all? He doesn’t have the words for it. If it was written down it would have to be expressed in ellipses, obscured behind a sequence of dots because the enormity of it defies both awareness and articulation: ‘The things Will Graham feels are ….’ How to even begin contemplating such a thing: a problem so huge and horrifying that it’s like a living thing; like a third person in the car? Because while the speed with which he’s becoming physically overwhelmed is terrifying enough in itself, even that is nothing compared to the implications of his current situation – a situation so unbearable that it truly typifies the definition of ‘unspeakable.’ So he presses his forehead against the cooling leather of the upholstery and imagines the barren stretch of blackness that lies beyond the car as he tries to come to terms with that surge of speechless horror: the fact that his worst possible nightmare is about to come true, in that he’s stranded in the middle of nowhere surrounded by alphas with no sign of Hannibal as the only person Will wants or needs to take care of him, and – unless he can find a way to get to the tablets – condemned to go into heat at absolutely any time.

After which Andrew will find out about it. Because after such a public spectacle as this, how can he not?

And then, after that… game over.
On the inside of an ambulance on the far side of the scene, Hannibal arranges his features into an expression of scrupulously polite interest and pretends to pay attention to the extravagant bleating of Stuart Anderson: retired school teacher, enthusiastic dog walker, and currently rendered slightly more interesting than he would be otherwise (although only very slightly) by virtue of being the unfortunate individual who discovered the body. The fact that Mr Anderson might also have observed The Sculptor leaving the scene means that as far as Jack’s concerned restoring him to a state of sufficient mental calmness to be interviewed is a matter of urgency. Yet being obliged to follow such requests during investigations doesn’t change the fact that Hannibal’s own criteria for urgency are considerably different from Jack’s: and which is why he’s paying minimal possible attention to Mr Anderson’s noisy distress in favour of watching Will instead.

As part of this aim Hannibal has positioned himself in a corner seat so he can observe what’s going on outside without anyone being aware that he’s doing it, and he now subtly shifts his gaze in order to admire how stunning his boy is looking this evening despite the obvious exhaustion and irritability. At least the rain hasn’t done him any harm, bringing a bit of colour to his pale cheeks and obliging him to slick his wet hair off his face in a way that displays the exquisite bone structure to full advantage. He and Jack now appear to be preparing to vanish beyond the police cordon, and Hannibal sighs with disappointment at the missed opportunity of being able to watch Will tearing his beautiful dark mind into tatters in an attempt to make sense of whatever it is that’s lying beyond it. In this respect it’s hugely frustrating to see Will trapped in such a sordid setting surrounded by these drab and uninspired individuals – like some exotic bird of prey confined in a cage with a gaggle of pigeons – although it’s admittedly annoying Hannibal less than it normally would, given that he’s far more preoccupied with the fact that this evening’s physical signs suggest Will is almost certainly destined to go into heat in a couple of days’ time. In fact it might even be in as little as 24 hours, and the idea of it is making Hannibal extremely protective, and therefore deeply restless, at leaving Will alone for even a second longer than necessary. Glancing at his watch he decides that Jack can have another ten minutes of his time on this tedious task before Mr Stuart Anderson gets abandoned to his own devices (or smothered into silence; either one would do) so that Hannibal can cross the cordon himself to watch over Will.

“I suppose you think I’m a terrible idiot doctor,” Mr Anderson is now saying.

“Oh course not,” replies Hannibal, radiating sincerity. Stuart: a suitably dull and uninspiring name, no doubt in this case shorted to the even more obnoxious ‘Stewie’ or ‘Stu’. Stu…stew. Bouillabaisse perhaps, although something less refined would admittedly be far more suitable. Garbure is one example that comes to mind; the type that peasants used to subsist on, and which would be served several days past its best with dollops of cabbage and stale bread. “It must have been very distressing for you,” adds Hannibal with a degree of fake sympathy that’s positively sumptuous.

Mr Anderson (Stew) has a squashed, snub nose which tilts at the end and whose nostrils flare just a little more than would be considered ideal. Rather like a snout in fact, meaning he can claim closer kinship with a pig than a sheep despite his undeniable talent for bleating. “It was just so appalling,” says Mr Anderson, blinking beseechingly at Hannibal with large watery eyes as he begins to twitch his shock blanket into a nervous little concertina shape. “You never saw anything like it in your life.”

Hannibal, who most certainly has seen something like it, yawns internally then gifts Mr Anderson with one of his more inscrutable Mona Lisa smiles before garnishing it with a sympathetic nod and following the whole thing up with a sprinkling of solidarity for good measure. Mr Anderson, satisfied with this lavish display of concern, smiles appreciatively before starting to recount his
rambling account of the discovery for the fifth time (walking the dog; dog went wild; dog normally well-behaved; Shock! Horror!; phoned police immediately) and which, if possible, manages to be even more tedious and meandering than it was on the previous four occasions that Hannibal was forced to listen to it. At the sound of its master’s voice Mr Anderson’s dog now begins to poke its hairy face round the door of the ambulance as if it’s commiserating; and Hannibal, who’s been attempting to overcome his instinctive dislike of all things canine on behalf of Will, automatically stares at it with annoyance before attempting to be more charitable and wondering instead how appreciative it might be if presented with a bowl of Anderson Stew. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to recover,” concludes Mr Anderson mournfully, retrieving a large handkerchief from his pocket to attend to the pig-nose, which has started to run. “This is the sort of thing that stays with you. I’ll probably never be the same again.”

Hannibal’s internal yawn becomes so pronounced he nearly dislocates his jaw. “That is entirely possible,” he says serenely. Mr Anderson promptly looks horrified and Hannibal, who’s already deduced the obvious taste for melodrama and sensationalism, adds: “You should utilise it as the opportunity it is. The discovery will be extremely newsworthy; I would advise you to sell your story.”

“Well now, that is a good idea,” says Mr Anderson, beginning to twitch the pig-nose with excitement at the thought of it. “I might end up in Newsweek!”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think they’d photograph my wife? She’s always wanted to be in the papers.”

“I’m sure they would be delighted.” Mr Anderson’s nose twitches again and Hannibal adds, with his most impressive poker-face: “And no doubt the dog as well.”

“Well now, wouldn’t that be something!” says Mr Anderson, who’s growing vaguely starry-eyed. “Wonderful is not the word.”

“Yes, what would the word be?”

“I can’t even imagine,” replies Hannibal in the same deadpan voice.

“It would be neat,” exclaims Mr Anderson. “It sure would be neat. Perhaps the newspaper guys would want to interview me with that FBI boss? And the other one – the young fellow.”

“Mr Graham,” says Hannibal, ultra-casual.

“They’ve gone to look at the body now haven’t they?” adds Mr Anderson. “I expect they’ll want to interview me themselves. They’ll read me my rights first won’t they? They always do that. I’ve seen it on TV shows…”

Hannibal smiles politely, then promptly tunes Mr Anderson out again as a result of this convenient reminder that it’s been a full five minutes since he last gave Will his full attention. Unfortunately there’s no sign of Will at all by this time, although Jack has reappeared and seems to be trying to haul himself into one of the TV news vans under the flurrying attentions of a young woman in a scarlet suit and extravagantly bouffant hair. Giving a media interview then no doubt (tedious). A few minutes later Zeller appears and begins to sprint across the stretch of wasteland, stopping at intervals to question passing police officers and agents before heading towards the news van himself in presumed pursuit of Jack. Hannibal observes all this with interest then checks his watch again: one more minute and he’ll leave to go and find Will. Giving another small sigh of satisfaction at the
thought of it he neatly transfers his attention back to the conversation.

“The Oprah Winfrey show,” Mr Anderson is saying, who’s oblivious to Hannibal’s disinterest and is busy counting off possible sources for his story on pink, pudgy fingers whose clear resemblance to trotters succeed very admirably in matching the pig-like face. Hannibal narrows his eyes with dislike at the sight of them then amuses himself with silently counting how many items in the ambulance could be used for assisting Mr Anderson from off the mortal coil (seven, in his line of sight alone).

“Perhaps I could get a book deal,” says Mr Anderson happily. “And then they’ll want to speak to me again when the case goes to trial.”

“Of course one can have too much of a good thing,” replies Hannibal (eleven: the straps on the gurney would make an ideal garrotte). “I would suggest you apply a degree of caution in exposing yourself too excessively. After all, The Sculptor may not look kindly on an eyewitness as…eminent as yourself.”

Mr Anderson gives an oink of horror and Hannibal ponders over whether it’s cheating to include the straps twice – once as a garrotte and once as noose – before deciding that it’s not (twelve). “You mean he might come after me?”

“It’s not particularly likely,” says Hannibal, pretending to be reassuring while mentally adding himself to the list as number 13 on the grounds that he knows numerous interesting ways to dispose of Mr Anderson using nothing but a level of exertion and his bare hands. “Although who knows what these individuals might do? At any rate, one can never be too careful.”

“They might put me on the witness protection programme,” says Mr Anderson with a fresh burst of excitement; and Hannibal is just preparing to extend his count to include every possible object that could be used for bludgeoning him to death when there’s a noisy clatter of footsteps outside the ambulance and one of the CSI officers appears and begins to gesture frantically in their direction.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, intrigued in spite of himself, and even Mr Anderson briefly halts his endless prattling at the promise at some fresh bit of drama. “Sir!” exclaims the officer. “Sir!”

“Yes?” says Hannibal coolly. “What is it?”

“Agent Crawford sent me to come and get you sir,” pants the officer, who possesses the type of bulky body that’s not at all designed for running and is now battling to catch his breath. “He wants you to come straight away. There’s something the matter with Mr Gra…”

Hannibal abruptly jumps to his feet, fast enough to knock his stool over, then leaves Mr Anderson mouthing in surprise behind him and vanishes out the ambulance in a swirl of long dark coat. “Tell me where?” he says with such deep menace that the officer shrinks back slightly at the sound of it.

“Over there.”

“Where?”

“Back by the cordon.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know,” gasps the CSI officer, struggling mightily to keep up with Hannibal on the basis of having much shorter legs. “Mr Crawford just said you needed to come.”

Hannibal nods curtly in acknowledgement then refuses to waste any more time on pointless questions and strides off towards the cordon at high speed instead, ignoring the shouts of the police
officer attempting to guard it and only finally stopping – and even then reluctanty – when Jack appears from out of the gloom and waves him over. Hannibal, who can curse fearfully, fluently and extravagantly in several different languages, now internally proceeds to do in Jack’s direction for having the lack of foresight in persuading him to counsel the preposterous Mr Anderson in favour of being at Will’s side where he ought to have been from the beginning. “There you are,” says Jack. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I was exactly where you asked me to be,” shoots back Hannibal, in a tone of such foreboding that Jack briefly looks unsettled and goes quiet. “In fact I might say the same for you – surely liaising with the media has a better time and place?”

“Okay, look,” says Jack, who’s attempting to sound calm without entirely succeeding. “There’s no easy way to say this: we’ve got a bit of a situation with Will.”

“Where is he?” snaps Hannibal.

He makes no attempt to remove the aggressive undertone from his voice and Jack waves his hands again in a placating gesture and says: “He’s fine.” Hannibal’s eyes narrow in a distinctly ominous way and Jack hastily adds: “He absolutely is: I give you my word. He’s safe. We’ve got him locked in one of the squad cars. I’ll show you in a minute – he’s been asking for you.”

“Then show me now,” says Hannibal, attempting not to hiss.

“I’m going to. I just want to explain what’s happening before you see him.”

Hannibal makes a sighing noise so low and smouldering it’s practically enough to set the air on fire. “I think I can guess,” he says tersely. “He’s on the verge of going into heat?” Jack’s mouth falls open in surprise and Hannibal takes a menacing step forward. “I’m not going to ask you again Jack.”

“I’m going to take you. I’ll do it now. I – I just didn’t realise you knew he was an omega.”

“Of course I know,” snaps Hannibal. “I’m his doctor.” Jack nods confidingly, and in spite of himself Hannibal experiences an extremely rare twinge of self-reproach for not acting more firmly on his earlier suspicion that stress had caused Will to forget to take several doses of the medication. Even so, the speed at which things have moved is almost unfeasible – clearly suppressing his heats for so long has created a series of medical complications that are going to require further investigation. Hannibal’s normally impassive features now flicker with concern at the idea of Will being in such a risky situation and he briefly leans away from Jack so that his face is more in the shadows, given that this is a rare example of the concern being genuine – as opposed to skilfully feigned in the service of manipulating someone – and his one condition of permitting himself to indulge in such feelings is that no one is allowed to see him do it. Then he begins to urgently scan his gaze around the stretch of wasteland, overcome with a craving need to locate where Will might be and simultaneously feeling relieved that he’s safe inside the car while cursing the fact it makes him impossible to smell.

“Okay,” Jack is now saying. “Well, I guess that makes it a little easier – if you already know.”

Instead of replying Hannibal narrows his eyes even further until they’re darkly glinting slits and takes an ominous step forward. “I want to see him Jack – now.”

“Come on then,” says Jack, gesturing at Hannibal to follow him as begins to stride towards the perimeter fence. “He’s right back here; I just needed to make sure you knew what you were dealing with first. I mean I didn’t just want to spring it on you.” He pauses and when he speaks again he sounds distinctly awkward. “Unlike me. I’ve got to admit, I made a bit of a fool of myself with him.”
“How?” asks Hannibal in a warning voice.

“Oh, you know…patronising him, treating him like he wasn’t capable. All that chauvinistic nonsense it sometimes bring out. I feel terrible actually. I just…I wasn’t thinking.”

“Then try,” says Hannibal witheringly. “All it requires is a bit of self-control.”

“I know: you’re right. I’m going to apologise to him later. Honestly though, it was coming off him in waves.” Jack shakes his head unhappily. “One dead omega and one in heat; I’m surprised it didn’t start a riot.”

“That’s hardly to the purpose,” says Hannibal impatiently. “Because it didn’t.”

“Well it might have done,” persists Jack. “You know it could. I just don’t understand why he didn’t say anything?”

“Probably to avoid a foolish overreaction like this,” snaps Hannibal. “What he’s experiencing is a perfectly normal process after all; this sort of hysteria is quite unnecessary.”

“Maybe it is,” replies Jack irritably. “But it’s not just about him, is it? Look Hannibal, I trust my guys to control themselves; just like I know you and I can control ourselves. That lot out there,” he pauses and jerks him thumb towards the crowd behind the cordon, “not so much. I can’t have this entire scene swamped by alphas. I need him out of here now.”

“Naturally he needs to leave,” says Hannibal with equal irritation. “And as soon as possible.”

“It must be pretty unbearable for him,” agrees Jack with obvious sympathy. “Getting stuck in this godforsaken place.”

“Quite.”

“They like to be somewhere sheltered don’t they?” adds Jack, who’s unconsciously adopting the fond, protective tone that alphas inevitably tend to use for omegas. “Secure and warm: that sort of thing. Somewhere they can start nesting in.”

“I have no idea what ‘they’ might prefer in general,” snaps Hannibal. “I’m more concerned with what Will needs – which might be entirely different to the rest of ‘them.’”

Jack, to his credit, has the grace to look embarrassed. “You’re right,” he says. “I’m sorry – although I honestly didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that omegas are so rare. If you’re not careful you wind up thinking about them more as a concept than as actual individuals.” Hannibal makes another impatient noise and Jack adds: “At least I do; and I agree that I really shouldn’t.” He hesitates again then finally stops walking and puts a hand on Hannibal’s arm to indicate he stay still. “Look,” says Jack, ignoring the gimlet-eyed glare that’s now being beamed in his direction. “I’m going to level with you here. Will told Price that he has some meds at home that can delay things, but there’s no way I’m putting him in a cab without a chaperone. He keeps asking for you and I know he’d be happy if you’re the one who goes with him. But…”

“…But you want to establish if he’s in safe hands and whether I intend to exploit him in any way?”

“Yes,” says Jack firmly. “Exactly that.”

“Then I can reassure you that I have no intentions of exploiting him,” replies Hannibal, removing Jack’s hand from his arm. “And that while I appreciate your concern for his wellbeing, you should also remember that Will is an adult and therefore capable of giving consent and making an informed
choice. You don’t need to protect him from his own decisions Jack. Or perhaps you feel that you do – but it still doesn’t give you the right.”

“You understand why I asked though?”

“I do,” says Hannibal calmly. “And am not remotely offended on my own behalf – only perhaps a little indignant on Will’s.” Jack makes a huffing noise and Hannibal catches his eyes and finally smiles. “The indomitable Uncle Jack,” he says. “So protective and parental yet I can’t bring myself to resent you for it. I know you’re acting from good intentions.”

“I am.”

“Of course you are. And there’s no doubt Will could do with a few allies from time to time.”

“I care about Will,” replies Jack gruffly. “He needs a bit of help. Underneath all that intelligence and attitude there’s just something so vulnerable about him.”

“Indeed there is,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “Yet how he thrives regardless.” Then they turn the corner and he immediately falls silent as his excellent eyesight detects something flickering in the distance that causes him to stiffen slightly before abruptly abandoning Jack and darting off into the shadows with a silence and speed that’s vaguely unnerving.

“Hey – hey! Where are you going?” yells Jack.

This time Hannibal doesn’t bother to reply, because he’s just spotted a car that he can immediately sense has Will inside without having to be told – and around which a few members of the pack of alphas who originally followed Price and Will towards it are beginning to slink back again, despite having been initially driven off by Jack. Catching sight of Hannibal – or, more to the point, Hannibal’s inflammable anger – three of them falter then begin to retreat; with the exception of one who’s a little braver than the rest and is clearly reluctant to give up without a fight. Hannibal, who isn’t even out of breath after his sprint, now draws to a dead halt in front of him and looks him up and down with a level of contempt that’s practically blistering before taking a menacing step forward. The younger alpha, now that the competition is close enough to get a proper look at, promptly loses his nerve as well and holds up both hands in an appeasing gesture before shuffling back a few paces and then turning round and bolting away into the blackness himself.

“Bastards!” puffs Jack, who’s finally appeared behind Hannibal and is looking a little worse for wear after his run.

Hannibal narrows his eyes and watches the younger alpha depart – briefly tempted to go after him simply for an opportunity to vent his feelings by assassinating something, but ultimately abandoning it in favour of the far more pressing concern. Spinning round he now raps briskly on the window of the car; aware of the need to avoid doing anything that could sound overly aggressive or frightening and risk unsettling Will, but likewise unable to suppress the urgent need to see for himself that his boy is safe and unharmed. The window promptly unwinds by an inch and a pair of eyes come peering over the top.

“What’s the password?” says Price. “If you want to enter you must answer my Riddles Three. Oh, Hannibal – I thought you were Jack. Where on earth have you been? Well, better late than never I suppose; I know someone who’s going to be very pleased to see you.”

There’s the sound of the door being unlocked and Hannibal abandons any pretence at self-control and practically wrenches it off its hinges in his haste to fling it open so he can bundle Will into his arms. He looks extremely drawn and fragile by now, almost as if he’s shrunk in the past few hours,
but the sight and scent of him is incendiary and Hannibal breathes him in then rapturously runs his fingers through his hair and kisses his forehead and eyelids, oblivious of the way that Jack and Price are beginning to stare.

“Where were you?” mutters Will, who’s clinging onto the edge of Hannibal’s coat. “I wanted you.”

“I know dearest,” says Hannibal, very quietly so the others can’t hear. “I’m sorry. I’m here now.”

Jack exchanges a glance with Price then clears his throat, obviously unsure of the best way to proceed. “How you doing Will?” he finally asks. Will pulls away slightly from where he’s burrowing against Hannibal’s chest and stares unhappily at Jack, who smiles encouragingly and prompts: “You okay?”

“I’m okay,” says Will, despite looking alarmingly pale and glassy-eyed from the shock and humiliation of it. “I’m fine.”

“Good!” says Jack heartily. “That’s good isn’t it?”

“Look I’m really sorry,” adds Will, beginning to twist his hands together. “I honestly don’t…I mean I can’t understand how…”

“Don’t start that again Will,” says Jack, although in a kindly rather than impatient way. “None of this is your fault. I was just explaining to Hannibal that it would be better if we could get you somewhere quiet.”

Will nods then glances from Jack to Hannibal and back again before seeming to wilt slightly as he begins to mutter something under his breath about a stolen prescription, repeating the details to himself in a fervent, urgent way as if it’s an article of faith.

“What are you saying?” asks Hannibal gently, taking hold of Will’s hands in his own.

“I can stop it,” replies Will, more clearly this time. “I have some meds at home…I can stop it before it happens.”

Jack tuts with sympathy then turns towards Hannibal. “What we discussed before: are you still able to take him?”

Instead of replying to Jack, Hannibal puts his hand on Will’s shoulder and moves him round so they’re facing one another directly. “Will,” he says, “is that all right with you?” Will nods rather aimlessly and Hannibal puts a hand on his other shoulder. “Are you happy for me to take you home?”

Will nods again then grips hold of Hannibal’s arm just as Price re-emerges from the front seat of the car. “Thank goodness for police radios,” he says when he notices everyone staring at him. “There’s no cell phone reception at all out here. I’ve just called in for a cab for you; it’ll arrive here anytime.”

“Ah, thanks Jim,” says Jack. “In fact excellent job over all – very quick-thinking.”

“Oh I didn’t do all that much,” says Price with a modest little flourish. “Just brained Mr Skinner with a bedpan then put Will in a body bag.” Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “It’s you two who did the hard work fending off all those alphas,” adds Price cheerfully. “How terribly macho you both are. I suppose I should’ve really given you a hand myself, although rest assured that Will and I were peering through the window and cheering you on the entire time. Who were they anyway?”

“Not any of ours,” says Jack firmly. “Mostly they were local policemen. Plus a few members of the
“Really?” says Price in surprise. “They must have been very keen. Quite a back-handed compliment to you Will – a bit like a bachelor party.”

Hannibal briefly glares at Price as if he wants to kills him and Price, oblivious to the look, yawns and stretches his arms over his head. “Well come on then Jack,” he says. “There’s still a lot to be done here. Let’s leave them to it.”

Jack nods in agreement but doesn’t make any immediate move to follow, instead gesturing at Will and asking in the same kindly tone as before: “You sure there’s nothing else you need?”

“Don’t crowd him Jack,” says Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair. The tone of his voice, while controlled, is still sufficiently stern that Jack promptly stops walking and neglects to come any closer. “Well if you do need anything…” he begins before catching sight of how Hannibal’s frowning at him and briefly trailing off again. “Then you just…y’know. Give me a call. And don’t worry about tonight. Honestly – it’s not a problem at all.”

“Thank you,” says Will quietly, whose expression clearly indicates that as far as he’s concerned it’s an enormous problem.

“And don’t hurry back to work. Just take as long as you need,” Jack hesitates again then casts an uncertain look at Hannibal. “Both of you. If you’re…um…staying together over the next few days.”

“You should go back to the scene Jack,” says Hannibal firmly, who’s now reached the limits of his patience and is no longer prepared for another alpha to be anywhere near Will at the moment, no matter how benign their intentions might be.

“Yes, come on Jack,” calls Price, who’s beginning to pick his way back across the field, delicately lifting his feet like a pony over the worst of the rubble. “The last thing poor old Will needs is any more alphas fussing over him. Give him some space.”

Jack immediately looks bashful again then nods kindly at Will before beating a hasty retreat himself. Hannibal watches him go then curls his hand round the back of Will’s neck. “Come here,” he says softly.

Will, who’s normally allergic to being told what to do, slowly turns round and then wavers for a few seconds as the need to be close to Hannibal obviously battles against an ingrained sense of stubbornness for obeying orders. Hannibal smiles very faintly as the former eventually wins out; and as Will moves forward he unfastens his coat then holds it open so Will can nestle against his chest and be wrapped up in it.

“Oh God, this is terrible,” says Will dolefully, his voice rather muffled from where his face is pressed against the front of Hannibal’s shirt. In fact he sounds incredibly strained and unhappy, even though there’s no denying that things are far less terrible than they were was a few minutes ago. In this respect Hannibal’s presence is having an unexpectedly positive impact, in that it’s helping to clear Will’s head and make him feel more alert and aware while simultaneously releasing a languorous, sensuous impulse which makes Will want to arch against him adoringly like a cat. It’s odd in a way – how it’s making him both more grounded and more unhinged at the same time. Will supposes it must be all the alpha pheromones that are doing it…which as realisations go is actually pretty mortifying.

“You seem much calmer now,” says Hannibal smugly, as if to confirm this.

Will makes a humming noise of agreement then closes his eyes while battling a powerful surge of
self-consciousness at the way he’s burrowing deeper inside the coat. In fact if he’s honest with himself it’s coming perilously close to **snuggling**. Jesus. Hannibal gently strokes his neck with one hand while rubbing his back with the other and Will buries a bit further before muttering: “What took you so long?” Aware that he’s blushing slightly, he ducks his head even further so Hannibal won’t be able to see. “I thought you of all people would have been able to smell me.”

“I can smell you now,” murmurs Hannibal, smoothing his palm along Will’s neck a little harder than before.

“Yes, but why not earlier?” demands Will, clearly aggrieved. “When it would have done some **good**?”

“Because I was on the other side of the field, dearest – in an ambulance, of all places – whereas you seem to have spent most of your time in this car. We’ve been like ships that pass in the night.”

“Plus shits that pass in the night,” mumbles Will, thinking of Skinner.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing,” replies Will, who can’t be bothered to explain it. “You were right by the way. What you said before: I did forget to take a few doses of my med’s.” Then he sighs loudly with frustration at the idea of this disaster being self-inflicted – although still can’t quite bring himself to add that it was the shock of seeing Hannibal and Alana together which caused such a terrible mistake in the first place.

“I know you did,” says Hannibal. “Although I’m still struggling to understand how it could have happened so fast.”

“Yeah; tell me about it.”

“So many years on suppressants must have affected your metabolism.”

“I guess.”

“I blame myself,” adds Hannibal, tightening his grip around Will’s shoulders. “I should have stopped you coming tonight and made you go straight home.”

“It’s okay. If you’d tried I wouldn’t have listened to you.”

“And do I even dare to ask about the bedpan – or why you ended up in a body bag?”

“No,” says Will, who doesn’t want to think about it even if he had the energy to explain it (which he definitely doesn’t). “It was just something that happened. Price helped me out.”

“You can tell me another time,” says Hannibal, deciding to forgive Price for the bachelor party remarks before resting his face against the side of Will’s hair. “Suffice to say that once again you’ve exceeded yourself. I could tell you were close but I **never** imagined it would happen this soon – I expected several days at least.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t expect it at all.”

“You are to be congratulated: even when inconveniencing yourself you still manage to be prodigious.” Hannibal pauses then smiles slightly. “What an over-achiever you are.”

“Oh God, shut up,” says Will. “And let me out of here. I look ridiculous.”

“Yes, I’m afraid you do. Like you’re in a papoose.”
“No, I look like one of those monkeys that get carried around on their parents’ chests. Technically that makes you the big monkey. You look almost as stupid as I do.”

“That’s rather unlucky for me,” says Hannibal. “But I’m still not letting you out until the cab comes. And if anyone comes near you before that,” Hannibal pauses and smiles again, before adding with obvious relish: “then I will kill them.”

“How are going to manage that with me wrapped round your torso?”

“Admittedly it would be rather inconvenient. Although they do say that where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“Ugh,” says Will. “You’re so annoying. I’m not even talking to you anymore.”

“That’s good,” says Hannibal, brushing his lips against Will’s forehead. “It means I don’t have to listen to you anymore.”

Will makes an amused noise and then finally abandons self-restraint and tucks himself a bit closer against Hannibal until only the top of his head is visible above the coat. “So much for dynamic crime solving,” he says wryly. “Look at us both. We look absurd. I bet this sort of thing never happened to Starsky and Hutch.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.” Will closes his eyes then makes a little rumbling, purr-like noise as Hannibal begins to stroke the back of his neck. Hannibal, unbearably charmed, increases the pressure to make him do it again. “I’m glad you’re here,” says Will sleepily.

“Not as glad as I am dearest. When I think what might have happened…”

“It’s okay. It didn’t.”

“Yes, but it might,” says Hannibal severely. “I’m afraid I badly misjudged the situation.”

Will nudges Hannibal’s leg with his foot. “Excuse me? Did you just admit to being wrong about something?”

“I did. I should never have let Jack persuade me to speak with that eyewitness. I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“Oh stop being such a martyr about it,” says Will. “Actually don’t – carry on. I don’t think I’ve ever heard you admit to being wrong before.” Hannibal kisses his forehead and Will adds, suddenly serious again: “Oh God though, it’s all been so public. It’s humiliating. Happening like this…now everyone knows.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Although at least it grants you a measure of freedom – consider, after all, that you’re no longer under any pressure to hide it.”

“Yeah, but going into heat. You realise it means that Andrew will find out?”

“Forget about him,” replies Hannibal. “Focus on yourself. There’s still plenty of time to deal with the situation and he’s certainly not going to be able to take you anywhere while I’m here. Speaking of which – look. Here’s our cab.”

Will makes a relieved noise and Hannibal unwraps him from the coat then leads him towards the cab
by the hand. “Evening guys,” calls the driver, whose head has come poking out the window. “Is it true then?”

“Is what true?” says Hannibal wapsishly.

“That this is where they found The Sculptor’s latest? It’s all over the news.”

“Then you have your answer don’t you?” snaps Hannibal. The driver grunts in response and Hannibal curtly gives directions before ignoring him entirely in favour of tenderly helping Will to settle into the back seat. Then he climbs in behind him and takes hold of his hand again, noting with interest how dry and hot the skin feels and the way his pulse is fluttering in his wrist. In this respect Will is clearly still in the prodromal phase, but it won’t be more than an hour or two before he tips into full-blown heat…Or at least he would if nature was allowed to take its course. “Those tablets you mentioned,” adds Hannibal casually. “The ones you stole? I assume you know they’re only a very temporary solution?”

“Of course I know.”

“A few days reprieve at most.”

“I know,” says Will bitterly.

“So – then what?”

“So – then I’ll think of something else.”

Hannibal, who’d already anticipated something like this and isn’t particularly discouraged by it, nods serenely in response then on an impulse takes hold of Will’s waist and eases him downwards so he can lie with his head on Hannibal’s knee. Will groans then arches his back. “I’m sorry,” says Hannibal, gently carding his fingers through Will’s hair. “It’s getting very uncomfortable now, isn’t it?”

Will groans again then jerks his hips down before starting to gnaw on his bottom lip. The movement looks fraught and rather desperate and Hannibal watches his progress with something like fascination because Will’s lips are unexpectedly luscious when bitten and it’s hard not to imagine what they would look like when flushed and swollen from an excessive application of teeth. Rather reluctantly he presses his finger on Will’s mouth to make him stop then gently rubs the side of his jaw to relax the muscles until it makes Will give a small moan and start to quiver with pleasure at the touch. Hannibal smiles again at the sight of it then subtly shifts away from the window so the moonlight can stream in and illuminate Will’s face without his own shadow blocking it and he can enjoy the way the flickering silver accentuates Will’s cheekbones: as gracefully moulded as a piece of porcelain with a faint dusting of freckles on the edge like the speckled centre of a tiger lily. Will is so artistic, thinks Hannibal reverently. A very refined type of beauty, like the favourite model of some Renaissance Master with his haunted elegant pallor and tangled coils of hair – an El Greco martyr perhaps, or de Ribera’s Saint Sebastian – although the luminously lively eyes and passionate mouth are not from any painting in particular but are entirely Will’s own. Hannibal silently promises himself that at some point he’ll have to produce his own drawing of Will, preferably straight after being made love to, and he now takes a few contented seconds to mentally compose the scene: the way the sheet should drape across his hips, the plane of each collar bone, the curve of every rib, and the sensuous sylph-like way Will would curl his body across the bed. Nymph, in thy orisons, Be all my sins remember’d quotes Hannibal admiringly to himself. Charcoal would probably be most suitable to capture the softer contours; gently smudged around the edges with the thumb to imply latent movement, with the stark contrast of black and white suitably blended to signal vulnerability combined with a nuance of dark ferociousness.
Down on Hannibal’s knee, Will is clearly growing increasingly uncomfortable as he starts to thrash his head from side to side. “I can’t…” he’s muttering desperately to himself. “It’s so…oh God.”

Hannibal makes a soothing noise and strokes Will’s damp hair out of his eyes while privately admiring the way he’s begun to grind his hips against the seat of the cab. It’s clearly unintentionally done – a source of discomfort and embarrassment if anything, judging from the way Will is blushing over it and trying to force himself to stay still – and yet to an observer it’s almost unbearably voluptuous and beautiful. “Look at you,” says Hannibal, very quiet and tender; and Will moans again and screws his eyes closed as Hannibal mulls over how very easy it would be to take hold of his waist and make him lie face down so Hannibal could pull him further over his knee and slide a hand down the back of his jeans. It wouldn’t even be necessary to unfasten his belt: he’s fretted away so much weight in the past few weeks that his clothes are loose and would make access extremely easy indeed – practically an open invitation. There’s also no doubt that Will would allow it: would encourage it even, thrusting his hips up towards the touch and biting his lip to try and stop himself making too much noise. He must be so receptive by now that he’d easily be able to take two fingers, possibly three, and it would be beyond pleasurable to explore that exquisite body in all its hot, wet tightness while making Will suck the fingers on Hannibal’s other hand. Feeling something inside him would excite him so much that he’d come almost immediately, and would be so sweetly and stunningly humiliated afterwards that it would be a new source of pleasure simply to comfort and reassure him. In fact the entire image is so heady that Hannibal is strongly tempted to do it; ultimately only resisting – and then reluctantly – because of an even stronger sense that his beautiful boy deserves to be taken properly rather than being fingered on the back seat of a filthy common taxi cab. Besides, there’s also the fact that it would give him the relief he needs and there’s something about seeing Will so divinely desperate and discomposed that’s undeniably its own sort of satisfaction. Instead he strokes Will’s forehead again then reaches down with his other hand and gently but firmly pushes Will’s legs apart to encourage him to renew the rocking motion. “Don’t be ashamed,” says Hannibal softly, lowering his voice so the driver can’t hear. “Listen to your body. Just do what you need to.”

Will shakes his head, obviously embarrassed, and Hannibal smiles to himself then slowly slides his palm down Will’s chest until it’s pressed against his abdomen; at which point Will makes a small wailing noise and begins moving again. “Do it harder,” murmurs Hannibal and Will hesitates a few seconds then complies. “Harder,” says Hannibal silkily. “Now spread your legs. That’s it, good boy. Doesn’t that feel better?” Will makes another whining noise, although still isn’t sufficiently deep into a heat state to have lost his sense of self-consciousness and after a few more seconds he bites his lip and goes still again. “It’s all right Will,” murmurs Hannibal. “Just breathe. Only a little longer now and we’ll be home.”

“Getting to his time is it?” blurts out the driver, who’s watching the whole thing with interest through his mirror. “Lovely looking little thing. He shouldn’t be out in that state.”

“Oh my God,” says Will, struggling to sit upright until Hannibal gently but firmly pushes him back down again. “Just shut up and drive the goddamn cab.”

“You should have kept a closer eye on him,” persists the driver to Hannibal. “They’re not supposed to leave the house when they’re like that. Don’t you know you’re supposed to lock them up? He’ll be giving you no end of trouble if you don’t look after him better.”

“My wife’s sister is one,” adds the driver confidingly, who still seems determined to address all his remarks to Hannibal. “They sold her to a property developer from New York State and made a small fortune. How much did you pay for yours?” He glances uncertainly at Will who’s now struggling to sit up again and looking on the verge of attempting to leap over the plastic screen dividing the
backseat from the driver’s cab. “Bit of a handful is he?”

“What do you think Will?” says Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s shoulders. “Are you a handful?”

Will makes a sort of growling sound, which strikes Hannibal as rather adorable because of the way tiredness and disorientation render it completely ineffective – and how the ineffectiveness doesn’t stop him from doing it anyway. Smiling to himself he tugs Will back down again then idly slips the tip of two fingers beneath the collar of his shirt; Will repeats a variation of the growling noise and tries to pull away. “You’re burning up,” says Hannibal placidly.

“I know;” snaps Will.

Hannibal smiles again then place his hand over Will’s forehead to keep his head still and finally turns to the driver. “Would you possibly have a card?” he says with excessive politeness. “I’ll be needing a cab for the return journey.”

“Oh stop asking for people’s business cards,” says Will fretfully. “You’re always doing it. Have you got some sort of fetish? You sound like The Sculptor.”

“Who, me?” asks Hannibal with another tiny smile.

“Yes – you. You got one off that PI as well…” Hannibal’s smile broadens slightly and Will frowns then suddenly goes very still as the rest of his sentence trails off.

“Oh yes,” replies Hannibal. Slowly he trails his finger along Will’s cheekbone. “I did, didn’t I?”

Will meets Hannibal’s eye for a few seconds before promptly ducking his chin again and looking restless. You suspect don’t you beloved, thinks Hannibal languorously. You just don’t want to admit it. Then because strained silences don’t bother him, he proceeds to ignore it and instead makes the most of the opportunity to appreciate how finely drawn Will’s features are when thrown into flattering relief by the pale glint of the moonlight. Really, it’s as if everything curves upwards: the tip of his nose and the tilt of his cheekbones, his eyelashes, his full upper lip, his mouth itself, when smiling – which admittedly isn’t often. In fact Will is still frowning, clearly trying to battle through the mire of his physical discomfort in order to process this new apprehension about the PI, and Hannibal idly resumes the stroking movement up and down his cheek. “Look, we’re here now,” he adds as the cab prepares to draw to a halt. “Do you still want me to come in with you?”

Will hesitates then catches Hannibal’s eye again, this time holding the gaze for a little longer before finally looking away. “Yes,” he says in a low voice.

So Hannibal smiles to himself and strokes Will’s face more tenderly than ever as a reward for being so courageous before paying the driver – and taking a business card – then helping Will stagger the short distance towards the house. In fact he’d rather like to carry him in, cradling him in his arms like a lover would, only he knows that Will would never allow it so has to settle for acting like a kind of human crutch instead. Will, in turn, clearly resents the need for assistance and pulls away as soon as he’s inside so he can cling onto the bannister, struggling for breath now and startlingly pale beyond a flush of colour across both cheekbones. “I need…” he starts to say, then takes another shuddering breath and goes quiet, seemingly unable to describe what it is that he needs – if he even really knows anymore; or ever knew at all.

Hannibal runs his eyes over him then turns to close the door before something in the hallway catches his attention and causes him to pause. Will, still slumped against the bannister, follows the gaze then flinches slightly – just as Hannibal takes a few steps forward so he can inspect the hallway then
“Don’t,” snaps Will as Hannibal opens his mouth to speak. “Just for once, can’t you? Just…just don’t.”

Hannibal darts a look at him then runs his eyes over the scene before turning round again, clearly undeterred. “Will,” he says gently. “Why have you smashed all the mirrors?”

Will flinches once more but ultimately just shakes his head and refuses to reply – in that moment, completely unable to describe how he’d grown delirious one night through stress and exhaustion and become consumed with a maddened sense of the Dark Reflection literally living behind the glass. Briefly he now remembers it: the way he’d stared into the fragments at his sad Picasso face, distorted by the shards and so haunted and harried that he’d barely even recognised the remains of himself. How to even begin explaining something like that? He can’t: he doesn’t have the words for it. It’s impossible to describe it to Hannibal, just as it’s impossible to tell him about the endless nightmares of blood and bone, or the relentless obsession with the idea of killing Andrew. He can’t tell him about the dark mirror image; can’t tell him anything. Because while he’s known for some time that Hannibal himself is dangerous – possibly even extremely so – it’s one thing to contemplate someone else’s darkness and another thing entirely to begin acknowledging his own. Shaking his head again he gestures towards the stairs and mutters “I have to get the pills.”

“What do you need any help?”

“I’ll be fine,” snaps Will. With a level of effort that’s clearly agonising he begins to drag himself along the banister like a bird with a broken wing; reappearing around ten minutes later looking marginally calmer and having obviously taken the emergency suppressants. He’s pushed his hair back off his face and changed into a pale grey sweater and a fresh pair of jeans, both of which are slightly too large for him and make him appear young and waifish.

Hannibal’s normally deadpan expression begins to soften. “Feeling better?” he asks gently.

“Not really,” says Will, and for a few seconds Hannibal can see a glimmer of moisture on his eyelashes. “It doesn’t matter what I do, I can’t seem to stop it. It’s going to happen anyway.”

“I know – I’m sorry. It’s frightening for you isn’t it?”

Will makes a subdued sniffing sound and for a second it looks as if he really is on the verge of crying before he just runs his hands through his hair and nods instead.

“I think it’s for the best,” adds Hannibal in the same gentle voice. “Those tablets were doing you enormous damage.”

Will’s head promptly jerks up. “What do you mean?” he says sharply, and Hannibal raises his eyebrows in a politely questioning way. “You said were,” persists Will. “Not are. Past tense. Why did you do that?”

Clever boy, thinks Hannibal approvingly. “Why do you think?” he replies softly, staring Will straight in the eye.

Will hesitates for a few seconds before the fight visibly seeps out of him and he suddenly looks lost again: obviously aware that something’s being hinted at, yet feeling much too tired and ill to properly work out what it could be. The fact is he’d increasingly wondered whether the new supply of pills could possibly have been the expensive, experimental ones described by Dr Reynolds – the ones only intended for short-term suppression and with no physical side effects but a host of psychological
ones: side effects like aggression, loss of inhibition and emotional reactivity. But how could Hannibal know anything about it as opposed to it simply being an error on the part of the drug dealer? Briefly he now remembers Dr Reynolds’ account of the difficulties in obtaining the new pills: You’d need an extraordinarily skilled prescriber to be able to gauge the dose. I’d struggle to calculate it myself, I don’t mind admitting it – you’d need a very precise grasp of the chemistry to get it right. How could Hannibal – who doesn’t even specialise in physical medicine, let alone omega health – possibly be expected to be capable of working it out? And why would he even bother; why go to so much trouble? Besides, the safety caps were still on.

“You don’t understand,” Will eventually replies, and the fretfulness in his tone makes him sound much younger than he normally does. “I don’t want to go into heat.” He shakes his head again, seemingly confused by the injustice of it all as if his body itself is conspiring against him. “I don’t want it.”

“I know you don’t Will,” says Hannibal. “I see that. It’s just one of many things you don’t want.” He pauses delicately, allowing his eyes to run over Will’s face until Will begins to squirm with the force of the scrutiny. “You work so hard to control every aspect of your nature don’t you? To inhibit all your…impulses. Perhaps it’s time to let go of the fear of indulging them.” Hannibal idly inspects his hands then suddenly snaps his head upright and looks Will straight in the eye in a way Will can’t help but find sinister. “To cultivate them as the inspirations they are.”

As if the Dark Reflection is answering its cue, Will is immediately aware of that eternal chilling refrain of you-could-kill-him-you-could-kill-him and suddenly the horror of it – the horror of everything – strikes him in that moment as unbearable. Then he hears himself hissing “Get away from me,” even though he’s no longer sure whether he’s really talking to Hannibal or to that dark part of himself…isn’t sure any more where one starts and the other ends; so tightly merged as they seem in that moment to be. The front door is still slightly ajar, and without even thinking about it Will darts through and begins to run, despite having no idea why or where, or even what for – nothing beyond an urgent sense of a need to try and escape from himself.

Outside the house it’s bitterly cold, eerily silent, and bleached spectrally pale and colourless as above Will’s head a misty sliver of moon is just about visible behind a ragged lacing of black clouds. It gleams like a piece of bright bone in the sky – rimey, raw-looking and slightly vapid from all the fog – and it seems to be watching over him as he runs and runs and runs: consumed now with a strange sense of freedom that temporarily eclipse the fear as the skeletal outline of branches flash past and somewhere beyond the fields the same night creature from before renews its chilling screaming sound. Will’s heart is pounding like a piston in his ears and it strikes him almost as bizarre that he can still be breathing so reliably in the midst of such a crisis, that his heart can still be beating – that all those vessels and cells and fine blue veins are endeavouring away, just as they always have, as if they think this is survivable and that life is just going to continue in the same mechanical way as before. In fact his chest is really hurting now, with a thrashing heart and lungs that feel ready to burst. Bursting lungs, thinks Will wildly, is that even possible? What if they actually did; how would it look and feel? Would they slowly sigh and sink in on themselves, deflating like tired balloons, or rupture apart splashily and showily like scarlet glass?

He’s very close now to the tree where he first saw the murder of crows, and as the screaming sound renews from beyond the field Will doesn’t even need to look over his shoulder to know that Hannibal is running after him. But, oh God, he must be really close now because Will can hear his breathing and it suddenly feels like being hunted. Like something inescapable is in pursuit: something that’s momentous and unavoidable and a lifetime in the making. Something like destiny… something like that. The urgency of it fills Will with a sharp surge of fear that causes him to rally his bursting lungs and scream “Leave me alone,” even though he doesn’t know what he’d really do if it happened; and when an arm shoots out of the darkness with lethal precision and wraps itself round
his waist, he doesn’t do anything to resist beyond a helpless, frightened wail at the sense that whatever it is can’t be outpaced entirely. Then for a few seconds he struggles with a sort of fateful franticness before eventually collapsing in Hannibal’s arms with a choked off sob. Hannibal doesn’t say anything immediately, just runs a hand up and down his back while cradling his head with the other, and for the first time in forever Will’s finally aware of a sense of feeling safe.

“You can’t outrun yourself Will,” says Hannibal gently. “You’ve been trying your entire life.”

“I know,” mutters Will, even though he doesn’t. “I know, I know.”

Hannibal tightens his grip and Will clings onto him in return as the words from one of his diary entries fleetingly run through his head: Don’t you think there’s something ironic about that – the way ‘know’ has a ‘no’ hidden away inside it? It’s like knowledge is built upon not knowing at all once you look into the center... And look, here we are. I’ve come full circle again: from what I think I do know right back to what I know I don’t. A full circle with you in the middle of it – like the ‘no’ in ‘know’.

“Don’t leave me,” he hears himself gasping out, and his voice in his ears sounds very far away. “Please. Don’t let me go.”

Hannibal presses his lips against Will’s forehead. “Never,” he says.

Will nods wordlessly, even as the implications of it crowd into his mind in a way that’s frightening and overwhelming because they’re too much to face. The sense of want and dependency, the sense of need; the aspect of himself that rejects intimacy and fears whatever it is that Hannibal truly represents: and yet an aspect that likewise leans towards Hannibal with wild eyes and its lips slightly parted as it pledges itself to the other half of its equation. That other half of that aspect of Will, who’s standing there now in the moonlight with his chiselled face and smoky voice and the carefully controlled hint of menace that’s still not fully understood yet undeniably there regardless, like something dark and unknown that darts around beneath the surface of water which otherwise remains smooth. And yet that part of Will doesn’t care, because all it wants is to find the other half of itself. I want you and I’m not afraid of you, that part says, looking Hannibal straight in the eye. I want all your beauty, all your art and horror; the best of you, the worst of you; the wonderful and the terrible – all of you, all the time.

Hannibal tightens his grip again as if he feels it too, and Will screws his eyes shut and clings on like someone drowning until Hannibal finally pulls away and removes his coat so he can wrap it round Will’s shivering shoulders. Will lets him do it and stares down at the floor instead while feeling oddly numb and enthralled; although when Hannibal speaks again he immediately looks up – and this time looks him straight in the eye. Hannibal’s eyes are so dark that they’re practically all pupil, and Will holds his gaze while understanding that these are the same eyes which can really see him, despite there being so much that Will can never possibly show. In fact in that moment he can even believe that there’s no greater way to demonstrate regard than those three small words, surpassing even love itself. I see you. As if love is just a pale and unconvincing counterfeit of perception: of the acceptance and awareness that comes from knowing that you’re really being seen by those dark, fathomless eyes in the angular face that’s so beautifully fine-boned and fierce. An all-seeing I, thinks Will hazily. Something pure and elemental.

“Come with me now Will,” says Hannibal in the same quiet voice. “Come back to the house. We can talk some more. I want you to tell me everything; and then we can decide what we’re going to do.”

His eyes are gleaming very faintly in the moonlight and Will feels like he can see the hint of darkness in them, enough darkness to drown in, but still can’t bring himself to pull away. So Hannibal stares
straight back, exchanging silent pledges and wordless recognition; and this time, when he holds out his hand, Will reaches out after barely any hesitation and takes it.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

After lying dormant since This Dangerous Game…it’s THE RETURN OF THE LONG RAMBLING AUTHOR NOTES

Firstly, huge thanks and hugs to the fabulously talented Nightroxy, who helped bring me out of hibernation last week by doing some gorgeous art for chapter 16 that you should definitely do yourselves a favour and check out :-D

Secondly, please accept this monster length chapter as an apology for not updating last weekend! To be honest my energy is starting to flag with some of the complaints/criticism this fic’s been getting, although I’m still going to churn it out anyway (because – Hannigram; AMIRITE?) and the people who are being so mean should try chilling out a bit and remember that fanfic is supposed to be a fun distraction, not the freaking Pulitzer Prize. In this respect, HUGE thanks to everyone who’s got in touch to offer support and encouragement: hearing that you’ve been enjoying it has been a major source of motivation and continually inspires me to get back on my keyboard again.

On a more important note, the first part of this chapter contains references to domestic abuse so please look after yourselves and proceed with caution if that’s something that could be distressing for you. Oh, and I also know there are a few people who are reading this for the mystery plot and not explicit Hannigram, so just to warn you that from now on the fic will be fully earning its’ E-Rating and get extremely NSFW. If this is something you’re not comfortable with, then please skip ahead to the end of this chapter (which is rated F for Fluff; S for Sassy Will; and B for Hannigram bickering at each other like an old married couple :-D)

The journey back to the house is made without further conversation and the completeness of the silence is striking to Will – not only that they’re making no noise themselves but that the scenery wrapped round them has such an unearthly quietness about it, rather like it’s holding its breath. In fact after the frenetic activity of the crime scene the silence is particularly noticeable. Jarring, almost; as if the whole world has been sedated and he and Hannibal are now its only living inhabitants, pacing through soundless fields together in glacial moonlight and frozen fog while everyone else lies numb and insensate behind closed doors. If he was on his own, or even with a different companion, then it might feel desolate or unnerving, but in this respect what’s equally striking is how calm and comfortable the silence feels. Hannibal walks – or, more appropriately, strides – in a quick decisive manner, very similar to how he does so much else (head up, shoulders back); and Will unconsciously finds himself mirroring the posture as a substitution for his more usual anxious hunch before deciding that he definitely prefers the former. He keeps tight hold of Hannibal’s hand the entire time, only letting go when they’re finally back at the house and Hannibal has settled him onto the sofa and arranged a blanket over his shoulders. Will, in turn, knows that the urge to pull it over his head is a result of lingering heat hormones that are creating an urge to feel sheltered; and the awareness of this is embarrassing but still not enough to stop him doing it, despite an unpleasant suspicion that it makes him look like ET in the basket. It’s possible that Hannibal thinks the same, because he turns round
then begins to smile when he sees Will peering out at him from beneath the folds.

Will clears his throat self-consciously then gestures to where Hannibal has been busy arranging logs into the fireplace in a neat little stack. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“What, build a fire? Of course I can. I learnt when I was very young.”

“Right,” says Will. He wants to add something about Hannibal seeming far too privileged and rarefied to have ever needed to learn a plebeian activity like fire-building, only can’t think of a way of doing it that won’t sound rude. Honestly though…where did he learn? It’s not impossible to imagine him having had actual servants to take care of those sorts of things.

Hannibal returns the stare then smiles again as if reading Will’s thoughts. “I had occasion to acquire all kinds of unexpected skills,” he says. “Some have declined in their usefulness; others not so much. How to light a fire happens to be one of the more serviceable ones.” He pauses and looks thoughtful, his angular face bathed in the crimson-glowing light in a way that’s slightly eerie. “My life was very different when I was a child.”

“Would you tell me about it?” asks Will, who’s intrigued by the idea of this.

“Some other time,” replies Hannibal. He sits down on the sofa, delicately wiping a few stray specks of soot from his face with his forearm like a cat washing its ears. “Tonight I want to talk about you.”

“Yeah, I figured you would.”

“You did promise,” adds Hannibal, with another small smile. This one is rather more suggestive than the others; a slight flickering around the mouth like the way flames would lick across a sheet of paper. “Are you still prepared to?”

“I guess,” says Will cautiously. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.” Will rolls his eyes but doesn’t reply, instead stretching out a foot and prodding Hannibal’s leg in silent indication that as a conversational topic this is far too ambitious. Hannibal smiles again then catches hold of the foot and begins to stroke along the arch, enjoying the way Will’s toes flex in response to the pressure. “Very well,” he says. “I’m prepared to be more modest with my expectations. In that case I want you to tell me about your current difficulty.”

“Which one?” says Will gloomily, mentally scrolling through his internal database of problems (the bastard thing). “How to stop the heat? The whole world finding out I’m an omega? The Sculptor’s business card…?”

“The situation with Andrew.”

“Oh God, I don’t know,” says Will with obvious fretfulness. “It’s such a long story. I’m not even sure where to start.”

“Start at the beginning,” replies Hannibal. “It’s as good a place as any.” Reaching out he gently tugs the blanket down so he can see Will’s face – who promptly scowls then pulls it back up again. “In fact start at the very beginning. Tell me what your parents said when you presented as an omega?”

Will sighs then stretches out his legs and stares fixedly into the fireplace at the way the flames flicker and writhe, obviously trying to summon sufficient inspiration to begin describing a painful and intricate subject. “Parent – singular,” he finally replies. “Only my dad was around by then. And he didn’t really say anything. I suppose he would probably rather have had an alpha for a son but it wasn’t like he was angry about it or anything. More like…quietly disappointed.” Hannibal frowns
with disapproval at anyone being stupid enough not to appreciate such a unique and stunningly precious possession on its own terms, and Will sighs again then adds rather aimlessly: “Although he cheered up a hell of a lot when he realised how much money he could get for me.”

“I understand,” prompts Hannibal when it looks like Will’s going to grind to a halt without continuing. “So Andrew approached your father before you?”

“Of course,” replies Will in surprise. “That’s nearly always the way it’s done. He’d struck a deal with my dad before I even met him.” Hannibal frowns again, severely displeased by the idea of this, and Will stretches and sighs even louder than before. “It was when I still lived down south,” he adds unhappily. “I was already working for the police by then, but I’d sometimes help my dad fix boats over the summer and Andrew was down in New Orleans for some business conference. He must have spotted me by the dock because he’d turn up every afternoon and watch me. A few of them did – alphas I mean. There was a group of them.” His eyes narrow mutinously at the memory. “Just sat there staring. Then one evening I went home and there he was: sat in the kitchen with my dad and a custody contract.” Briefly he runs his hand through his hair, bitterly remembering the scene: the way they’d both fallen silent when he walked in, his father’s aura of smug celebration, Andrew’s of acquisition, and the way possessiveness and superiority had lingered in the air like stale cigarette smoke. “It was a done deal before I’d even laid eyes on him.”

“Why didn’t you refuse?” asks Hannibal gently.

This time it’s Will turn to frown, despite knowing that the question comes from a place of curiosity rather than judgement. “I guess because I was younger then. And far more naïve; I didn’t know any better. Plus my dad wanted me to.” He pauses and frowns again. “What you have to understand is that if you’re an omega then you spend your entire life being brainwashed with the idea that your sole purpose is to end up bonded with some wealthy alpha – and how lucky it makes you and how grateful you ought to be. I mean I knew it was bullshit; even back then I knew it was. But the main thing is you feel like you don’t have any other choice.”

Hannibal, unable to resist the temptation any longer, reaches out and takes hold of Will’s hand; rubbing his thumb over the knuckles and letting their fingers twine together. “I understand,” he says. “And of course in many ways you don’t have a choice.”

“Right,” replies Will, unconsciously returning the pressure on Hannibal’s hand. “Bonding isn’t actually compulsory – but it may as well be, because the entire system is set up to make it as hard as possible for omegas to live independently. You know that we’re taken out of regular school as soon as we present and sent to special academies?”

“I did know that, yes.”

“Well the official line is that it’s to protect us, but that’s bullshit; it’s so we have less access to education. Which means right from the start it’s harder to get a job – even if most employers were prepared to hire omegas, which they’re not. So if you want to live on your own then you’re seriously going to struggle to provide for yourself, not to mention the fact you need alphas to get through your heats because it’s so difficult to get suppressants. But of course all this is presented to you as if it’s for your own good – because you’re so incredibly special and lucky to be an omega – and it’s not. It’s an enormous injustice. All of it is about alphas; nothing to do with omegas’ wellbeing, but because of how we make alphas feel. And rather than bother to control themselves, they decided to control omegas instead.”

Hannibal begins to run a hand through Will’s hair, which reminds Will that at some point he and the ET blanket have migrated along the sofa and managed to curl themselves onto Hannibal’s knee. He’s not even entirely sure how it happened; only that now he’s here he doesn’t want to leave again, so
rolls onto his side to face the fireplace as Hannibal begins to rub his shoulders with his other hand. “They regulate us as if we’re property,” Will adds, leaning a little forward so that Hannibal has access to stroking his neck as well. “Which in effect, we are. But then once they’ve got you, you’re even worse off because there’s no way they’re going to let you go again. I mean technically, every single thing in this house belongs to Andrew.” Hannibal makes a disdainful noise and Will sighs with irritation. “Yeah apart from you, obviously.”

“Obviously,” replies Hannibal. “Although I wasn’t referring to myself – I meant you.”

“Oh God, why can’t you get it?” snaps Will in frustration. “As far as the law goes I absolutely belong to him: signed, sealed, delivered. I belong to him, my dogs belong to him. If we’d had children – God forbid – then he’d be the one with automatic custody, not me. They finally changed the law a few years ago, but before that I would’ve remained his property even if he died. He could have left ownership rights to someone in his will; his next of kin would have inherited me. It’s completely horrific: and that’s where the indoctrination comes in, because you have people telling you from childhood onwards that this is what you’re destined for and you don’t have a choice. Usually it’s your mother who does it, only mine wasn’t around by that point so it was a teacher who did it instead. You learn things off other omegas too: birth control, managing heats…how to fight off alphas. Things you’d never get told officially because the alphas wouldn’t allow it.”

“You must have felt very powerless,” says Hannibal gently. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well,” replies Will in the same toneless voice. “It is what it is. I did my best though – to try and put him off I mean. So I was really clear with him that I didn’t want a family, but he just kept saying he didn’t mind. Then I told him I wanted to keep my job and my own house, and he made out like he was fine with that too. Those kinds of demands were way out of line for an omega; I was hoping he’d think I was too stubborn and opinionated and change his mind. But he didn’t; he seemed to like it. He liked that I was rebellious.”

“I can imagine,” says Hannibal fondly, briefly letting his fingers stray from Will’s hair to stroke his cheek instead.

“So he signed the contract anyway then paid my dad and that was it: control of me literally got passed from one of them to the other.” As he’s speaking Hannibal resumes the rhythmic stroking movement across his scalp and the sensation causes Will to fall quiet for a few seconds, suddenly aware of how strange it is to be talking this critically about alphas to an actual alpha without any indication of offence or resentment. Although the thought is actually a comforting one: a reminder of how in many ways the connection between them transcends something as categorical as gender. In the resulting silence Hannibal moves his other hand back to Will’s shoulder again and begins to massage it in silent encouragement to continue, and Will clears his throat and tries to remember where he left off. “The first thing he did was take me round to his place to show it off,” he eventually adds. “He was expecting me to see how luxurious it was and change my mind, but of course I didn’t. There was no way I was going to live together.”

“And I don’t suppose he was satisfied with that?” says Hannibal in a low, chilling tone. Without even thinking about it he possessively tightens his grip on Will’s shoulder, only realising he’s done it when Will gives a wince of pain. “Forgive me,” says Hannibal in a gentler voice, giving the shoulder an apologetic stroke. “Only I find the concept…aggravating.”

“Tell me about it,” replies Will bitterly. “I mean I’m not completely naïve – obviously I knew I was going to have to sleep with him. He’d send his driver round to my house when he wanted to see me and I’d end up getting chauffeured across town every other night.”

Hannibal briefly grips Will’s shoulder again, then with effort forces himself to let go. “You didn’t
feel able to refuse?"

“I couldn’t refuse; how could I? He’d have had me institutionalised. They make out like it’s a form of mental illness – alphas pay off doctors to sign committal papers all the time. Although the weird thing is that I wasn’t particularly unhappy about it. That’s the brainwashing part – at that point I was living the type of life I’d been told was unavoidable, so I just got on with it. And I still had my job, which was a huge bonus; in many ways I was actually pretty contented. Plus Andrew was still putting a lot of effort into being charming, so he wasn’t all that bad to be around.”

“A gilded cage is still a cage,” says Hannibal. He places a possessive hand round the back of Will’s neck, alternating between stroking it with his thumb and gently massaging the top of the spine. “So when did it go wrong?”

“It’s not like it was ever right,” says Will. “But yeah – things came to a head. Basically the fact I was single-minded stopped being a novelty and because a massive irritation instead. He got sick of me saying no to him; although the real crisis didn’t happen until he started talking about wanting to bite me. Obviously we hadn’t bonded because I was still taking the suppressants and bonding is so unreliable if the omega isn’t in heat. I’d been expecting it of course – to be honest the only surprise was that he’d waited as long as he did to push for it.”

“So what did you do?”

“I told him I’d consider it,” says Will wearily. “Again, it’s the brainwashing: I didn’t feel like I had a choice, and in many ways it was easier than saying no outright. I mean he owned me by then – I was stuck with him anyway, and it didn’t seem realistic to try and spend my whole life avoiding it. I wouldn’t shift on the children part though, and that’s when he really lost his shit. He kept ranting about carrying on his family line and all that kind of crap. Then he started making out like I’d misled him for the money, even though I couldn’t have been clearer from the beginning about what I wanted.” He pauses then gives a bitter, humourless laugh. “Besides, I never even saw any of the money – my father got the lot. But I stood my ground and I honestly thought he’d give up; he’d always backed down before with the other things so I assumed he would this time too. Only he didn’t.” For a few seconds Will goes quiet again and when he speaks his voice has taken on the odd, mechanical quality of someone trying to distance themselves from what they’re saying. “It happened a few weeks later. His chauffeur picked me up one night as usual then when I got out the car the bastard knocked me unconscious; he had a rag with some kind of chemical on it and he held it over my face. I mean I tried to stop him, but he was bigger than me – this huge alpha. And I was so tired that day; I didn’t have any energy…”

“None of it was your fault,” says Hannibal gently. “None of it.”

“Yeah, well, he took me out in a matter of minutes. When I woke up I was in this storage room off of Andrew’s basement. There was nothing in there except a mattress, a bucket, and a crate of bottled water…And that’s when I knew.” He stops speaking and Hannibal waits patiently, gently running his palm up and down his back without attempting to make him continue. “He was going to force me to go through a heat on my own as punishment,” Will finally says. “The suppressants weren’t as refined back then as they are now, so if you missed more than one dose it was enough to set it off. And of course it did – it took less than 24 hours.”

“Oh Will,” says Hannibal softly.

“I hadn’t had one for so long I was completely unprepared for it,” replies Will in the same flat, toneless voice. “It would have been tough enough anyway, but if you don’t have an alpha with you it’s like…Jesus. It’s like your body’s trying to devour itself.” For a few seconds he falls silent again, unable to describe how in the midst of the overarching horror of it, it’s the smaller degradations and
humiliations that really stick in his mind: how he’d leaked slick everywhere and had no way of cleaning it up, the misery of being forced to use a bucket as a toilet, or the way he’d broken down completely on the second day and screamed helplessly into the mattress at the unbearable pain and despair of it all. “It was one of the worse things that’s ever happened to me.”

“It was torture,” says Hannibal, whose voice has now taken on the same toneless, mechanical sound. In fact his private level of anger is so extreme that it’s difficult not to express, but he doesn’t want to do anything aggressive that could unsettle Will so forces himself to subdue the worst of it and resumes calmly stroking Will’s back instead. “My love. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“I never called out for him though,” adds Will with pride. “That was the whole point of it – for me to beg him. But I never did.”

“Of course you didn’t.”

“The plan was to frighten me into submission,” says Will with obvious contempt. “He didn’t want to hurt me in a way that would leave marks, so he did that shit with the basement instead. He would’ve used it as a threat to force me to bond with him and God knows what else. Only it went wrong. I mean greatly wrong, because he hadn’t counted on what would happen by putting my body under that much stress. Long story short, there was a massive build-up of toxins in my bloodstream and my liver failed.”

“Acute liver failure,” repeats Hannibal in horror. “You could have died.”

“I know; I nearly did. Then my kidneys failed too. I was in hospital for months. God, you should have seen him – he was frantic. Obviously he wanted to make me suffer but he didn’t want to literally kill me. He told the doctors he’d been away on a business trip and his dumb little omega had forgotten to take its suppressants. Of course they were all alphas so they immediately believed him; or at least they pretended to. The nurses didn’t though. One of them came into my room at night and slipped a card for an omega crisis shelter under my pillow. I’d heard about those places – they’re not really much use because the alpha usually turns up and makes a scene and most of the time the omegas end up getting handed over to them again. But just the fact that someone had seen through Andrew’s bullshit was really comforting.”

“So then what?” asks Hannibal. With both hands he gently cradles Will’s head, deftly exploring it with his fingers then pressing harder until he’s touching the skull like someone attempting to chart it out: occipital bone, parietal bone, up along the jaw then straight across the forehead. “What did you do?”

“I escaped,” says Will with simple pride. “I told Andrew I was sorry for being so stubborn and that I’d finally realised what was best for me – and how much I looking forward to coming home and being bonded. The stupid bastard was so arrogant he fell for it immediately. But it meant he let his guard down, so when he left the hospital that evening I just got my stuff and walked straight out. I still had my car and a bit of money, and a friend from the police force agreed to sell my house for me and forward the money on. Then I headed up north. I’d already got a bit of a reputation for my work on the Richard Black case, then I eventually met Jack and ended up here. And honestly, I really started to think I might have got away with it. When he didn’t show up I began to hope he’d just lost interest and bought another omega to replace me. Only he didn’t: and now here he is again.”

“Indeed: here he is.”

“And I don’t know how to get rid of him,” adds Will with a flash of despair.

Hannibal, who knows exactly how – but likewise knows that Will isn’t ready to acknowledge it –
gathers Will a little tighter into his arms and presses a kiss against his temple. “Thank you for being so open with me,” he says. “I understand how difficult it must be to talk about.”

“For all the good it’s done,” replies Will unhappily. “I told you before: there’s nothing you can do.”

“On the contrary,” says Hannibal with impressive self-restraint. “There are one or two things.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me,” says Hannibal, neatly dodging the issue, “why do you think The Sculptor case has attracted such enormous publicity?”

“You know why,” replies Will with barely concealed impatience. “It’s because he’s killing omegas.”

“Precisely: the choice of victims. Harming omegas is viewed extremely badly by other alphas.”

“Doesn’t stop them though, does it?”

“It does not; but it does stop them wanting it to be discovered. Believe me Will, the last thing this alpha of yours is going to want is the publicity of a court case. No matter how much he denies it, the mere implication that he’d hurt you would be disastrous for his reputation: and he knows it. It’s why he’s trying to scare you away from pursuing one.”

“Do you really think so?” says Will with a small glimmer of hope.

“I’m certain of it,” replies Hannibal firmly. “If he was confident about taking you to court he would have done it by now. This is like a game of poker and we must call his bluff. In the interim you need a letter from a good attorney that communicates in no uncertain terms the intention they have to,” Hannibal pauses very fractionally, “to dismantle him if he makes it as far as a court room. Elizabeth Lewis is one of the very best in these matters – I suggest contacting her as soon as possible.”

“The DC firm? I can’t possibly afford that.”

“No; which is why I propose to pay for it on your behalf. It’s only a loan,” adds Hannibal when Will opens his mouth to object. “If you insist on paying me back, although I really don’t expect you to, then you can organise it at your convenience at a later time. The main thing is sending him back where he came from as soon as possible. Then at some point in the future we can visit him together” – Hannibal smiles happily to himself at the thought of what such a visit would involve and kisses Will’s forehead again – “to guarantee that he won’t make a similar claim on a second occasion.”

“I don’t know,” says Will doubtfully. “I don’t think he’ll want to give up that easily.”

“That does not matter,” replies Hannibal in a distinctly chilling voice, “because I am not remotely interested in what he wants. It is a case of him doing what he’s told.”

“Well…” says Will, who still doesn’t sound very certain. “I guess it’s at least worth a try.”

“It’s a shame we don’t know exactly where he is,” sighs Hannibal. “We shall have to wait for him to come to you. When did you say you’re expecting him?”

“No Friday. He said he’d come to the office.”

“Then I will speak to him as well.”

“Yeah, that would be good. He was obviously scared of you.”
“Yes, but it seemed to me that he was wary of you as well. Not surprising given that injury on his face. An omega attacking an alpha…” Hannibal’s smile widens fractionally. “What a warrior you are.”

Will makes a non-committal noise in response then burrows a little further into Hannibal’s arms as sleep begins to irresistibly overtake him. “You’re tired aren’t you?” says Hannibal tenderly. “Get some rest. Nothing’s going to happen to you while I’m here.” Will makes another small noise and Hannibal runs his fingers over the soft wool of the sweater, trying to trace the curves of Will’s ribs and collar bones through the material. Will reacts almost voluptuously to the touch, stretching and arching like a cat, and Hannibal increases the pressure slightly until Will gives the faintest hint of a moan and lets his head tip back. “My love,” murmurs Hannibal, very low and gentle, then takes hold of Will’s hand in one of his own and leans over to kiss his forehead. In fact there’s now only a thin layer of grey fabric between Hannibal and complete gratification, but he prefers to wait. He could almost certainly take Will now if he wanted to – could have him in front of the fireplace without even taking the trouble of getting to the bedroom – but the balance is still too delicate, and he’s aware of the risks of moving too soon and ultimately frightening Will off for the long-term. And the long-term, undoubtedly, is very much what Hannibal has in mind. Neither does he have the slightest inclination for pressuring Will into anything, because not only is coercion ugly and vulgar, it has none of the charms of seducing Will into actively wanting it…and wanting a lot of other things as well.

Will, who’s now half asleep, makes a mournful sound when Hannibal gently lifts him up and lays him down again on the sofa. “What are you doing?” he says, his voice furry and indistinct from tiredness. “Don’t leave.”

“I’m not going to leave,” replies Hannibal, covering him up with the blanket. “I just want you to be comfortable. I’ll still be here when you wake up. I’ll wait for you.” Will sighs contentedly and Hannibal watches him for a while before reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind his ear while his earlier words from the parking lot weave through his mind: Not that waiting is any particular virtue in itself – because anything truly worth having is worth waiting for.

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Will falls into a deep, dreamless sleep that feels like it ought to have gone on for several days and which, upon waking, he’s surprised to realise lasted a little less than an hour. Having virtually fallen asleep in Hannibal’s arms his sudden absence feels striking, and Will has a surge of bleakness at the idea that he’s gone home before rolling onto his side and realising that he’s sat on the chair opposite: poised and watchful and staring straight at Will with eyes that are gleaming faintly crimson in the firelight.

“Ugh, you startled me,” says Will. He rubs his hand across his face then pauses and peers at Hannibal from over the top of his fingers. “Seriously, don’t do that: it’s so creepy.”

“I apologise,” replies Hannibal, despite not sounding remotely sorry at all. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Will makes a grunting noise in acknowledgement then rolls onto his back again, yawning and stretching before getting uncertainly to his feet and staggering off to the kitchen to hunt for coffee. To his surprise Hannibal immediately gets up and follows him; then proceeds to not only insist on preparing it himself (in addition to the most elaborate possible sandwiches that the paltry contents of Will’s cupboards can be persuaded to provide), but then carries everything back to the living room on a tray (which makes Will want to cackle because it makes him look like a butler) before sitting next to him on the sofa and tenderly stroking Will’s back and shoulders or even, on occasion, attempting to ruffle his hair. And when he’s not doing that then he’s gazing straight at Will with an
expression of intense fondness that seems only a few steps away from fluttering his eyelashes. In fact his behaviour, affectionate enough before Will went to sleep, seems to have temporarily shifted in that moment to become downright devoted.

“Why are you so loved-up all of sudden?” says Will grumpily, despite secretly liking it. “Have you been at the wine?”

“Not at all,” replies Hannibal with a faint smirk. “Something infinitely better.”

“Are you hormonal?”

“I am not. I’m merely engaged in thinking about the future – and how much more pleasant everything’s going to be once this alpha of yours is out of the way.”

“Okay then,” says Will, who can’t quite summon up the same level of optimism. “Whatever.” Then he chews absent-mindedly on the sandwich and smiles at the sight of the dogs dozing by the fire in a contended furry heap before allowing his eyes to vaguely drift around the room – only to promptly slow them down and back them up when they reach the desk.

“Oh,” says Will before he can stop himself. “I didn’t realise I’d left that out.”

“What?”

“That’s my journal.” Hannibal’s eyes politely swivel in its direction and Will swallows audibly. “You – you didn’t…did you?”

Hannibal’s eyes swivel back to Will again. “You mean did I read it?” he says, and Will can feel himself starting to blush at the bluntness of the accusation, despite the fact that this is exactly what he was trying to ask. “Of course not,” adds Hannibal calmly, as his features compose themselves into their most serenely innocent expression. Look at my FACE, the expression clearly says; would this face LIE to you? Hannibal catches Will’s eyes and smiles again before rearranging his long limbs around the sofa like a large jungle cat basking in the bough of a tree. “Reading your private journal would be incredibly inappropriate.”

“Right. Yeah.” Will shuffles uncomfortably then darts another look at Hannibal, who promptly repeats another variation of the ‘Would this face lie to you?’ expression. “Are you sure you didn’t…?”

“Will,” says Hannibal, with extreme sincerity. “Do you really think I would do something so invasive?”

“N-o-o-o,” says Will cautiously. “It’s just that…”

“What?”

“Well…you’re in such a good mood.”

“Why would my mood have any bearing on the contents of your journal?”

Checkmate, thinks Will gloomily. “No reason.”

“Have you written something flattering about me inside?” asks Hannibal, radiating innocence.

“No. Of course not.”

“Then why…”
“Oh look, forget it,” snaps Will. “It doesn’t matter.” Getting to his feet he goes to the desk, stashing the journal in the bottom drawer and determinedly locking it in, before heading over to the window and gazing out into the darkness in a rather aimless sort of way.

“What’s wrong Will?” asks Hannibal in the same calm voice.

“Nothing.”

“Something clearly is; several things in fact. Although at least you didn’t insist on telling me how fine you are so I’m prepared to be more forgiving on this occasion.”

Will smiles slightly then shifts his weight from one foot to the other and back again without turning round from the window. “No,” he eventually replies. “I’m not fine, but I’m still a lot better than I was so – yeah. I can settle for that.”

“Your ambitions for your own wellbeing are somewhat modest,” says Hannibal serenely. “We’re going to have to do something about that.”

“Hmm.”

“How are you physically? Still…uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, a bit. Those tablets helped.”

“Can I do anything for you?” Will shrugs and repeats the shuffling movement of his feet. “Would you like me to gentle you again?”

“No,” says Will warily. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not? Are you cautious about being touched?”

“Oh for God’s sake,” snaps Will with obvious impatience. “Why do you always say things like that? Why can’t you just take no for an answer?”

“Because I know how hard you find it to ask for what you need,” replies Hannibal, not sounding remotely perturbed. Will scowls with impatience then renews the restless shuffling movement of his feet before resting his forehead against the windowpane. “Will,” says Hannibal gently. “Come here.”

Will performs the shuffling movement for a fourth time – by which point he feels it’s virtually developed into a kind of tap routine – then waives for a few more seconds until Hannibal purrs “Come here to me, Will,” in a tone that’s so incredibly amatory and suggestive it should come with an age-restriction warning. In fact the sound is almost irresistibly enticing, and Will shoots Hannibal a rather helpless look that’s intended to convey his resentment of it (You crafty bastard – that’s such an underhand move) which Hannibal returns with a few slow blinks (Indeed it is – sue me) before he finally gives in and launches himself across the room towards the sofa so he can cautiously perch on the side of it. “Very good,” says Hannibal approvingly, “although I still think the arrangement can be improved upon.” He moves himself round until he’s positioned lengthways with his legs stretched out then pulls Will down so he’s lying face-up on top him with his back against Hannibal’s chest. “There,” says Hannibal. “Much better.”
“Maybe for you. Your hipbones are digging into me. And your ribs. It’s like lying on coat-hangers.”

“Although I don’t suppose you want me to lie on you instead?”

“No,” says Will, adjusting himself so his head is tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin. “I bet you weigh a ton.”

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal. “It’s lucky for me that you’re so physically…insubstantial.”

“I am not insubstantial.”

“Flimsy?”

“Oh shut up,” says Will. He readjusts himself again to get more comfortable then lets Hannibal take hold of his hands so their fingers can tangle together. “Even by omega standards I’m not small.”

“No, dearest; you are just not entirely large.”

“Hilarious aren’t you?” says Will, whose voice is now rather muffled from where he’s buried his face against Hannibal’s neck. “I suppose that means you think you are? You don’t need to sound so smug about it by the way: technically that means I’m the brains of the operation and you’re just the muscle.”

“I can live with that,” says Hannibal, repositioning himself too so that Will can have more room.

“There, how does that feel?”

“S’okay,” replies Will. “I guess.”

“It’s a shame your sofa isn’t a little wider. It’s nearly enough for two people, but not entirely.”

Will opens his mouth to say ‘We should go to bed instead’ then immediately closes it again, because even sharing a bed platonically feels like a step too far and the idea excites yet unnerves him. Instead he closes his eyes as Hannibal levers his hands up so he can rub Will’s shoulders. The position is such that it must be uncomfortable, but it feels so soothing that Will allows self-interest to override consideration and ignores his instinct to tell Hannibal to stop if he wants. “You like that don’t you,” says Hannibal fondly. “You’ve gone so soft and pliant. No resistance at all.”

“Hmmm. It’s nice.”

“And you were so opposed; you would have chosen the window as your companion if I’d let you.” Will sighs without bothering to reply and Hannibal continues the rhythmic stroking motion for a little longer, occasionally letting his fingers dip beneath the collar of Will’s sweater. “So are you going to tell me why?”

“Why what?”

“Why the reluctance? Was I correct when I said you were wary of being touched?”

“I guess.”

“You guess, do you? I suspect you know – although I won’t force you to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“You couldn’t force me, genius – not if I didn’t want to. Anyway you partly guessed at it before.”

“Your dislike of intimacy?”
“Yeah...at least partly.”

“Because of how empathetic you are,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “Although I suspect it’s more than just that: it’s your fear of losing control. Am I right?”

“Yes,” says Will unhappily.

“I understand,” replies Hannibal in the same soft voice. “Just like the way I want to know you better myself, despite the fact it hurts us both. And how it hurts. Doesn’t it Will? Closeness to another person can do that; it requires a level of discomfort, even of pain. All the different heights and depths of intimacy – the intellectual, the emotional, the physical. The unwelcome insights it can bring, the way the Other reflects back oneself. And how uncontrollable and overwhelming it can feel: surrendering control and suffering the loss of self-deception.” Hannibal leans forward again – slow, measured and very slightly menacing – and begins to trace his lips against Will’s face, interspersing the hint of feather-light kisses with the continguously crooning words. “One day we might do that Will – relinquish our control together, like a leap of faith from the same precipice. The same plunge into the same abyss at exactly the same time. Would you like that?”

“I’m not sure,” says Will slowly, aware in spite of himself that a darkly double meaning is weaving and darting through the words. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, it’s too soon to say isn’t it? You’re so protective of yourself Will, even though you have no idea of your true value. Not that it matters: didn’t I tell you I was prepared to wait for you? Just as you’re waiting for yourself.” Will sighs again and Hannibal raises a hand to stroke the side of his face before resuming the massage along his shoulders. “Forget about the future,” says Hannibal, “the present is more than enough.”

“Hmm.”

“So how are you feeling now?”

Will thinks for a few seconds before answering, once again picking over the bones of the evening and how exposed he feels. “Humiliated,” he finally says.

“Still? And yet you know you didn’t do anything wrong. Do you think those alphas are feeling ashamed of what they did?”

“No,” admits Will, who hadn’t really considered this.

“No, of course they won’t be.” Will shrugs without replying and Hannibal slowly begins to increase the pressure on his shoulders. “So much self-reproach,” he adds softly. “Do you know how I sometimes work with patients who experience large amounts of shame? I encourage them to experiment in taking pride in what they are ashamed of. You’re ashamed of being an omega, so I want you to try and feel pride in your body. Your mind. Your…impulses.”

“Later,” says Will irritably. “Turn it off for once, can’t you? Stop trying to analyse me.”

“Why? Are you still tired?”

“Yeah, exhausted,” replies Will, who’s suddenly feeling sorry for himself. “I’m wrecked. And everything hurts: my head, my stomach, my shoulders.” He pauses, trying to decide what else deserves including in this catalogue of woes. “My skin is prickling; even my clothes hurt.”

“Do they?” says Hannibal calmly. He lets his fingers dip beneath Will’s collar again then leans forward to brush his lips against his temple. “Then why not take them off?”
Will goes extremely still for a few seconds as his breath catches into a sharp little oh sound. “I can’t do that,” he finally says in a tight, flat voice. “You know I can’t.”

“Why not beloved?...Have you lost the use of your hands?”

“Don’t be so stupid,” says Will, his voice rising slightly with agitation. “I can’t do that with you here. It would be weird.”

“It would,” purrs Hannibal sliding his own hands down so he can take hold of Will’s and manoeuvre them towards the edge of his sweater. “It would be a very strange thing to do.” Will shifts nervously and Hannibal, who’s well aware of how striking his voice can seem to native English speakers (and has always exploited this to full effect) does it now by deliberately rolling the vowels and adding a smoky inflection to the timbre that’s not usually there. Will flushes rather beautifully in response but still makes no attempt to move away, instead closing his eyes and allowing Hannibal to puppeteer his hands into pulling the sweater up and then over his head in a way that, despite his overwrought state, is still surprisingly graceful. Hannibal sighs with admiration and reverently strokes his palms over Will’s shoulders and along his ribs. “Just stay like this for a few moments,” he adds. “I want to look at you.” Will makes a breathy gasping noise and Hannibal trails his hands downward and strokes along the way it makes him tremble. “Perfect,” he says softly, brushing his lips against Will’s forehead a little harder than before. “Doesn’t that feel better?” Will nods, arching up into the touch, and Hannibal leans even closer and murmurs: “Now...take off everything else.”

Will lets his breath out from where he’s been holding it then gives a rather crooked smile and pulls himself upright. “Take off everything else,” he repeats, in a good approximation of Hannibal’s accent. “Have you even heard yourself? You’re so authoritative.”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal with a slow smile. “I dare say.”

“I was right anyway,” adds Will. “This is weird.”

“Indeed it is: positively bizarre.”

“Inappropriate.”

“Outrageous, in fact,” says Hannibal, kissing the side of Will’s throat before taking hold of his hands again and guiding them down towards his belt. “A shame and a scandal.”

Will quivers again and makes a small sighing sound, although still remains defiant enough to knock Hannibal’s hands away so he can finish undressing himself without any help before flopping backwards so he’s lying down and Hannibal can lean over him. The clothing disparity is obviously making him uncomfortable, and while he doesn’t seem to want to go so far as to demand Hannibal undress as well, he still fidgets warily and tries to position his arms to cover himself. “Don’t,” says Hannibal firmly. Taking hold of Will’s hands he moves them up so his arms are stretched behind his head then grips onto his wrists to keep them there. “So beautiful Will: let me look at you.”

Will briefly catches Hannibal’s eye before blushing and abruptly turning away again: by now far too numb and enthralled to react and finding it impossible to process how he’s able to feel so vulnerable and desperate, and so dazzled and so overpowered, flushed yet shivering, trembling with strain while kinetic with need…and so very unwilling to stop even though he knows he possibly should. In fact it’s hardly feasible that this can be happening at all, and he has a brief, surreal image of himself from only a few hours ago: talking with Jack, traipsing across the wasteland in the glare of the ambulance lights...or even alone at home, pouring out his innermost thoughts to the Dear You of the journal. It’s like a different lifetime ago now, and he wonders what that version of himself would say if they could see him like this, and whether they’d be impressed at his daring, or horrified at his
recklessness…or whether that person even really exists anymore, because surely they can’t survive a situation like this one. And isn’t that another impossibility; that he can ever be the same after what’s about to happen? That he would even want to be? Everything’s shifted: everything.

In fact Will is visibly nervous now, clearly starting to panic at being in such an unexpected and vulnerable position; and while his hasty attempt to collect himself and appear casual and unconcerned would be convincing enough to persuade a lot of people – perhaps even most people – Hannibal is not remotely deceived and can immediately tell that Will is feeling wary and self-conscious (and trying desperately not to show it) so leans over him again and gently strokes his face to try and settle and soothe him into calmness. The strategy is instantly effective and Will sighs happily, obviously unused to being the subject of such tender and highly focussed regard, as Hannibal presses their foreheads together then cradles Will in his arms so he can inspect his prize in loving detail. In fact even in his most detailed imaginings the reality is far more perfect than he’d hoped it could be, with Will’s delicate bones and willowy limbs having something of the medieval frescos about them – grimly haunted glamour, exquisite pain and heavenly suffering – while his coils of hair and large luminous eyes are pure pre-Raphaelite and belong to the more enticing, sensuous spheres of bliss and decadence. *Art for art’s sake*, thinks Hannibal reverently, tracing a finger along Will’s throat so he can feel the way his pulse is fluttering. If *The Gods* were real – although not the Abrahamic Gods of stolid severity and morality, but rather the Hellenic Gods of Ancient Greece and Rome with their divine passion and dazzling violence – then Will would undoubtedly be their masterpiece.

In fact Will is totally motionless now, eyes closed and long feathery eyelashes sweeping down his cheeks, although whether it’s tranquillity or overwhelm that’s causing it is hard to say. But he’s so pale and still he might almost be asleep. The sleep from which one never wakes…he might almost be dead. A serenely lifeless object of devotion: like a statue that’s been chiselled by an expert hand with infinite love and patience then displayed in a courtyard so the marble feels warm and sun-kissed beneath the fingertips and gives it the illusion of life. Hannibal frowns at the thought of it then leans forward and tenderly kisses Will to wake him up – to gently breathe the life back into him – and Will makes a soft gasping noise then reaches out a hand which Hannibal takes hold of so he can entwine their fingers together; pressing light kisses against Will’s forehead and eyelids, calling him “*Dearest*” and “*My darling*,” telling him how beautiful he is, how wanted, and how good it’s going to feel. It’s rather like trying to win the confidence of something wild and wary – at which point Will suspects he’s being patronised and grows irritable and offended; so Hannibal just smiles and kisses him again, even more gently than before, while mentally surveying and appraising the various options for how best to proceed. In this respect actual sex seems ill-advised, partly because Will doesn’t look physically able to cope with it after all the medication, but also – which is almost more important – isn’t emotionally prepared to deal with the implications. Considering his heat is going to happen before too long anyway, waiting is obviously preferable…and yet it’s impossible not to touch him at all. Hannibal sighs to himself and begins to trace a finger along the hollow at the base of Will’s throat, overcome with an unfamiliar sense of ownership, but also of obligation: that Will is his possession to influence, control and manoeuvre; but also his responsibility to cultivate, protect and take care of. Just…*his*. Then he gathers Will closer against him, pressing his lips against his forehead with a powerful surge of protective tenderness, and Will gives another contented sigh and leans appreciatively into the touch.

There’s also the unavoidable problem that the sofa isn’t big enough for what he has in mind, so on an impulse Hannibal scoops Will into his arms and pushes the dogs out the way so he can lay him down in front of the fireplace instead where he’ll be warm and comfortable. Will makes a surprised noise at the abruptness of it but doesn’t make any attempt to pull free, and the fact he’s being so docile makes Hannibal aware of the undeniable charge of being able to demonstrate dominance and physical strength through being able to pick Will up and position him how he wants him. Even though he
knows it’s only because Will’s so tired and overwhelmed the pliancy is still rather addictive and he places a possessive hand on the back of Will’s neck, imagining what he’s going to be like when in the ecstasies of a full-blown heat: on his knees with his legs spread, slim thighs glistening with slick, and utterly desperate to take whatever it is his alpha is going to give him. And yet he’ll be so fiery and agile too...ferociously and passionately aggressive, attacking Hannibal simply because he can and, at least initially, almost impossible to control. In fact the image is so intoxicating that Hannibal falls quiet for a few seconds to give it his full and rapt attention, only stowing it away again when Will demands, with obvious impatience: “Why won’t you kiss me properly?”

Hannibal smiles at this then cups Will’s face with his palm. “Because I want to look at you,” he replies truthfully. “And to watch your expression when you’re being touched. You’re so responsive; it’s rather beautiful. I can’t even imagine what you must be like when you’re in heat.” Will closes his eyes, obviously uncomfortable at the implications of this, then wraps his arms round Hannibal’s neck and knots his fingers in his hair; tugging it at intervals rather than replying. “It’s all right,” says Hannibal softly. “I know you don’t like the idea of losing control. I need to go slowly with you don’t I?”

“What about you?” says Will, twisting Hannibal’s hair even harder. “You’re holding yourself back too, I can tell.”

“Perhaps I am.” Hannibal leans in closer, curling his palm round Will’s neck again so he can hold his head still. “Would you like to see me lose control Will – leave you afterwards trembling and empty and aching because I’ve taken you so hard?”

Will’s breath hitches and Hannibal leans in even closer, blatantly smelling his skin from jaw to collarbone in what’s an unmistakable gesture of ownership. “You might have bruises on you afterwards,” he says softly. “Little mementos all over your neck and thighs as a testimony to my lack of control; you’re so pale they’d stand out like amethysts in the snow. I’d make you press your fingers over them the next day, just enough to hurt – remembering all the pleasure and passion which placed them there.”

“Don’t patronise me,” murmurs Will. He lifts up his hips, whining slightly at way he can feel his cock starting to twitch against his stomach and how hot and heavy it feels. Hannibal, seeing it too, catches his breath. “You think you’re lowering yourself to give up your control, don’t you Dr Lecter? Well you’re not giving up anything – I’m taking it.”

“I know you are beloved,” says Hannibal, struck by both the undeniable truth of the statement as well as the astuteness within Will that’s able to notice and articulate it. “You overpower me completely when you’re like this. All my sense and reason abandons me and instinct takes over. All I can think is: look at this beautiful little omega. He’s so excited. He needs me to take care of him.”

“No I don’t,” snaps Will, defiant even when delirious.

“Yes you do,” replies Hannibal calmly, tangling his fingers in Will’s hair and tugging very gently while beginning to run the other hand across his torso. The touch is exploratory yet worshipful, paying careful attention to each plane of bone and curve of muscle, and the way his hand dips lower each time makes Will quiver and arch his back while unwittingly letting his legs fall further apart. “You want me to touch you and start exploring your body,” adds Hannibal caressingly. “Here for example.” Reaching down, he trails a finger along the outer edge of Will’s thigh. “Look how strong your legs are: evolved for running fast away from predators – although in your case you’re more likely to be running towards them. Or here; the definition of the muscles.” Will’s breath hitches as he feels Hannibal’s hands begin to move once more, briefly trailing along his ribs before skimming across his chest and then finally trailing down again so Hannibal can dip his thumbs into the hollow
of Will’s hipbones. “How perfectly constructed you are Will,” says Hannibal, almost thoughtfully. “Your anatomy is exquisite. The length of bone and slenderness of limb; the firmness of muscle tone balanced by all these smoother contours. The softness of your skin…the sheer aesthetics of you. You have such a frail façade but look how strong and wiry you are. You are a true canon of artistic proportions. Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo Vitruvio: Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man. Imagine my private rapture if you’d first come to me in a personal capacity rather than a professional one. How should I have been able to control myself?”

Will gasps out loud, helplessly aware of how he’s arching his entire body against Hannibal’s while feverishly trying to cling onto him so he can writhe in his arms: and when Hannibal finally bends down to kiss him Will can hear himself gasping “Oh yes…yes,” in a frantic, urgent voice that he doesn’t entirely recognise before their mouths crash together and Will tastes a faint coppery tang from where his lip has caught against Hannibal’s teeth. His head is being pulled back now, roughly tugged by the hair to expose his throat, and he wants to care about that but can’t because, oh God, he’s dying for it – desperate and derailed by desire – even though it’s unnerving because it’s so intense. Too primal; too primitive: the kind of mindless longing that he associates with being in heat whereby sense and reason are disregarded then distilled into an insatiable survivalist urgency to be claimed, consumed and owned. Enslaved to physical instinct…And the realisation of this is so unsettling that it makes him struggle against it, starting to panic again and pulling away.

“It’s all right, little wild thing,” murmurs Hannibal in a languid, sensuous tone that goes straight to Will’s groin. “Don’t be afraid.” He wraps one arm around Will’s back, just beneath his shoulders then strokes his hair with the other hand. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know you’re not; I won’t let you.”

Hannibal smiles faintly at this then leans even further forward so his face is directly above Will’s. “There’s no rush,” he says softly. “We have all the time we need. Just – slowly.”

“Y-e-s,” replies Will, whose eyes are still closed.

“Naturally yes. You’re not simply going to accept me into your bed are you? You expect me to prove myself first; to do something to earn your trust. And why shouldn’t you? You’re right to make us all compete for you – to demonstrate that we’re good enough.”

Will snaps his eyes open but still refuses to reply, and for a few seconds there’s nothing to hear at all except the crackling of the fire and the slight panting sound of his breathing. “Your heart’s beating so fast,” says Hannibal, pressing his fingers against Will’s chest before skimming his lips against the same spot. “You’re a courageous boy aren’t you? See how wary and unsure you are – yet here you stay. It’s impressive Will. Fearlessness might be a gift of nature and temperament but true courage is not the absence of fear, but feeling afraid and persisting regardless.” Wrapping both arms round Will he pulls him close before adding in a softer voice: “Fear is not a reason to cease and desist; it is the inspiration to strike out. And you have the most exquisite grace under pressure.”

Will closes his eyes again. “Have I though?” he says sardonically.

“Of course you have: native, natural grace. And beauty. And darkness. You conceal it so well don’t you, Will Graham…but you know that I can still see you.”

Will makes a small whining noise at this, aware once more of the irresistible double meaning, and Hannibal kisses his throat then hauls them both upright until he’s sat with his back resting against the side of the chair and he can tug Will into his lap. “I’m not going to touch you at all…yet,” says Hannibal softly. “But you can touch yourself can’t you? Run your hands over your body – show me what you like. You’re so aroused, I know you want to; and I want to see it. I would like to watch
Will’s breath hitches again, although he makes no move to obey and instead goes still and winds his
arms back so he can resume tugging on Hannibal’s hair. “You don’t want to, do you?” says
Hannibal tenderly after a few seconds of silence. “You’re feeling too self-conscious. Or perhaps
that’s not it at all – perhaps you just want to deny me the satisfaction? Is that it Will; do you expect
me to put more effort into persuading you?”

“Yes,” says Will. His tone sounds defiant – rebellious even – despite the fact his breath has sped up
and he’s started to quiver from a heady combination of longing and overwhelm. “That’s exactly what
I expect.”

“What an exquisite challenge,” sighs Hannibal, straight into Will’s ear. “So that’s my task? To bring
you to the point you’re so full of desire you’ll find it impossible not to do what I asked for. Very
well. Where should I begin do you think?” He trails his hand up Will’s chest and along his throat and
jaw then begins to stroke his lower lip until Will makes a small whining noise and opens his mouth
so he can suck Hannibal’s fingers. “Is that what you’d like my love?” says Hannibal caressingly.
“Would you like to feel my fingers inside you?” With his other hand he skims along Will’s ribs and
along his waist, finally coming to a halt against his hipbone. “Tell me how many do you prefer –
what gives you most pleasure?”

Will screws his eyes closed and lets his head fall further back against Hannibal’s shoulder. “I don’t
know,” he says breathlessly. “Two, I think…I don’t know.”

“Two, you think; but you don’t know? Then I suppose we should try and find out.” Hannibal
brushes his mouth against Will’s jaw – soft press of lips; the barest hint of teeth – then runs his palms
back up along Will’s chest so he can rub slow circles over his nipples until Will starts to gasp and
arch his spine. “Do you like the idea of that Will?” says Hannibal softly. “Does it excite you?”
Sliding his hands down he begins to dig his thumbs into the hollow of Will’s hipbones before
moving back to his nipples once more, sighing with pleasure at the way they stiffen beneath his
fingertips. Will gives a long low moan and Hannibal murmurs appreciatively at the sound of it then
runs his tongue along Will’s lower lip. “What do you think would happen if I did it,” he says softly.
“If I put my hand between your legs right now? Would you be wet for me? It would be simpler if
you were – I could explore you so easily that way, my fingers would just slide straight in. But it
doesn’t matter if you’re not, my darling; it just means that I’d need to take my time. I’d have to
persuade your body to relax and let me in.” Moving forward he rubs his face against Will’s gently
nuzzling him combined with the occasional light scrape of teeth. “Do you think you’d enjoy that
Will? Would you like me to try?”

“Oh God,” gasps Will. “Yes – yes. I want that. I want you to.” Even though Hannibal is fully
clothed he can still feel the hot, thick line of his cock pressing against his spine and it’s making him
so aroused he could nearly scream with it: a heady sense of strained trembling anticipation, despite
not wanting actual sex so soon after taking the suppressants. And yet, oh God, the idea…

“Move up a little then,” says Hannibal softly. “Up here; rest your head on my shoulder again. Good
boy. Now spread your legs.”

Will makes another whining noise and Hannibal returns his hands to his hips, noting with pleasure
how sweetly and snugly the small curves of bone slot into his palm as he curls his fingers round
them. Bending his head again he kisses Will, much slower and gentler this time as Will gives a low,
breathy sigh and pushes up against him. “Look at you,” says Hannibal tenderly. “So needy and
beautiful. How long do you think you could last like this?”

“I don’t…God,” says Will, rather desperately. Hannibal’s hands are playing him like an instrument
now – just the lightest, most delicate touch across his ribs and chest.

“No, don’t close your eyes,” adds Hannibal, soft but firm. “Keep them open. I want to watch you while I’m doing this.” With one hand he cradles Will’s head, staring intently into his face as his other hand finally, *finally* trails downward; although still determinedly ignoring Will’s cock, which is almost painful from lack of attention and lying hard and wet against his abdomen from where he’s started leaking all over himself. In fact the awareness of it makes Will feel self-conscious, almost like urinating in public, because it’s so rare for omegas to do it unless extremely aroused and is the type of thing alphas tend to mock and patronise on the basis that omegas aren’t designed to do the penetration so pre-come is of no practical use. *It’s so cute the way they do that,* he’s heard alphas say, as if it’s something adorable yet ridiculous. Hannibal, on the other hand, gives no sign of finding it ridiculous; instead letting out a low sigh of satisfaction before running a finger through the glistening trail on Will’s stomach and gently pushing it against Will’s lips as an invitation to open his mouth. In fact he’s half expecting Will to refuse, so is surprised yet delighted at the ecstatic way he sucks on Hannibal’s fingers, swirling his tongue across them as if they’re something delectable and moaning slightly when he realises he can taste himself.

“That’s it,” murmurs Hannibal. “Good boy. You look beautiful doing that – I wish you could see yourself.” Will moans louder in response, and Hannibal strokes his jaw with his thumb while reflecting on what a stunningly sensuous nature he clearly has. And how *incredibly* satisfying it is that Hannibal’s going to be the one to cultivate it; not least because the idea of *his* Will being in hands that are any less adoring or competent than his own (or indeed, any other hands at all) is completely intolerable. In fact Will’s now arching his back to the point of discomfort, rolling his hips and giving little quivers of anticipation and Hannibal kisses his forehead then glides his hands back down his chest. “I’m sorry my love,” he says. “I’m neglecting you aren’t I? And yet you’re being so wonderfully stubborn – *still* refusing to do what I asked you.” Resting his palms on Will’s thighs he begins to trace small circles against the skin. “You expect me to work harder to persuade you; yet at the same time you want me to touch you myself. Are you going to beg Will? I’d like to see you beg. You’d do it so beautifully it would be impossible to resist you.”

Will groans again and unconsciously spreads his legs, desperately trying to give Hannibal access to where he needs attention the most. Hannibal makes an approving noise at the sight of it then knocks them even further apart: rather more roughly than intended, and not for any real purpose beyond wanting to see Will look as vulnerable and as debauched as possible. “Let me hear you Will?” he says softly. “Show me you want it.”

“God yes, yes… I want it.”

“That’s good my love. Now tell me how much.”

“So much. Oh God, just… just *do it*.”

“Spread yourself open for me first – use both your hands.” Will groans then complies, pushing his cheeks apart with hands that had started to tremble slightly. He’s now so wet with slick that his thighs look as if they’ve been rubbed with oil and Hannibal’s breath hitches again at the sight of. “That’s right,” he says softly. “That’s *perfect.* Look at you. How long has it been since you wanted it like this?”

“Never,” gasps Will, finally letting his guard down and abandoning any attempt at restraint. “Never… only with you.”

Hannibal gives a sigh so low it’s almost a hiss then roughly searches out Will’s mouth again while dipping his hand further down, briefly pausing to caress Will’s thighs and taut flat stomach, before finally moving between his legs so he can begin to massage his hole with the pad of one finger. The
effect is immediate, and Will cries out into Hannibal’s mouth over and over again before going
totally rigid as a visible ripple of pleasure runs through his entire body. Hannibal makes a soothing
noise to try and calm him down, although as a task it’s increasingly difficult because of how his own
sense of control is rapidly beginning to slip. His boy feels so luscious now, so ready: sweet and slick,
unfeasibly responsive, and sufficiently flushed and fervid that if a mirror were held above his body it
would surely mist over as if touched by warm breath. He can’t see him properly from this angle,
although it’s easy to imagine the incredible sight of Will’s lovely, needy hole being breached. It’ll be
so little and beautiful: tight, wet, the perfect pale pink shade of an unbound omega, and – most
importantly of all – soon destined to be filled up with his knot. Hannibal makes a low growling noise
at the thought of it then drags his teeth against the side of Will’s throat. The pressure is hard enough
to graze the delicate skin there; and Will whines as Hannibal gives the marks a tender lick of apology
before promptly resuming the relentless scrape of teeth all over again.

“Oh God, it feels so good,” says Will. He sounds slightly shocked, almost panicked. “Oh, I like that,
I like it.”

“I know you do,” purrs Hannibal. “My beautiful boy.” Pressing rapturous kisses against any part of
Will’s face he can reach, he waits until Will’s breath has quickened even further before adding a
second finger to the first and increasing the pressure. “No, don’t hold back,” he adds, seeing the way
Will is biting his lip to try and stifle the sounds he’s making. “I like seeing you lose control. I adore
it. You have no idea.”

“Oh God. Hannibal…”

“Is this what you’ve wanted all this time, beloved; my fingers exploring you in such a private place?
You only had to ask. You know I’d give you whatever you wanted.”

“I want more,” gasps Will, who’s no longer even fully aware of what he’s saying. “I want them
inside me...please.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal, beginning to rub the side of his face against Will’s. “Patience. You’re
going to take it so beautifully aren’t you? I can already tell.”

Will makes a helpless keening noise: arching his back as his voice goes high and young and the
realisation of how much he needs this hits him with the same force as a stinging slap to the face. The
way he’s being caressed is almost unfeasibly good – the warm tips of Hannibal’s fingers moving
back and forwards in delicate strokes – and he can feel the way the initial tightness of the muscle is
eagerly yielding to such gentle yet firmly persistent pressure as the fingers hover just shy of pressing
in. His hair is damp with sweat now as his entire focus shrinks and constricts to the intensity of the
sensation, and when Hannibal slowly pushes the tip of a finger inside him he loses control
completely: crying out and then shuddering so hard Hannibal has to wrap his free arm around his
chest to keep him upright.

“You’re so ready beloved,” murmurs Hannibal, almost breathless with admiration. Withdrawing the
fingertip entirely, he begins to stroke around the rim again in a devastatingly teasing move that’s
enough to make Will shatter into bright-edged fragments of raw desire. “So ready. I think you could
take a full knot when you’re like this. You wouldn’t need any preparation at all.” Will whines in
response and Hannibal lowers his head again, pushing his tongue deep into Will’s mouth at the exact
same moment he slides his entire finger into Will’s slippery slick-smooth hole. Will’s head
immediately snaps back, spine curving and hips jolting as Hannibal kisses his throat and begins to
work in a second finger. “That’s it,” he says softly, using his free hand to smooth Will’s damp hair
out his eyes. “Take it Will. You want it don’t you? Take it deeper.”

“Oh God, oh fuck,” gasps Will, sounding almost panicked. “I’m...oh God. Oh God, I’m going to
come. I’m coming, I’m…oh God, Hannibal…”

“Beautiful,” says Hannibal, shifting backwards so he can give Will even more room to arch against his chest. “You like that don’t you my darling? You like it so much. Show me if you like this too?” Sighing reverently at the way his boy is so responsive and perfect, he presses down with his thumb just above where his fingers are thrusting into Will’s body – then watches with breathless delight when Will gives a long low moan as his cock twitches against his stomach and he comes all over himself in a series of hot wet pulses.

“Beloved,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to press ecstatic kisses against Will’s face. “Look at you… if you had any idea.” Will gasps out something unintelligible and Hannibal roughly tugs his head back by the hair so he can press his teeth against the side of his throat. “You’re perfect,” says Hannibal, his voice soft and intense. “You didn’t even know, did you? Didn’t know your body could feel like this. I told you you should be proud of it.” Lightly gripping Will by the neck he lets his other hand start to slowly trail downwards again. “It’s never felt like this before has it? Not with anyone else; no one except me.”

Will makes another helpless gasping noise and shakes his head as Hannibal tightens his grip on the back of his neck: his face, pressing against the side of Will’s, looks vaguely infernal by the flickering light of the fire. “No one except me,” he repeats, and this time his voice sounds as if it’s smouldering as darkly as the flames are. “Say it.”

“No one except you. Oh God. God…it’s so…”

“…So good,” says Hannibal, beginning to circle Will’s nipples again with the edge of his thumb. “I want you to do that again for me beloved. My beautiful boy: do you think you could? Are you going to try?” Will gives a series of breathy moans, seemingly past the point of coherent speech, and Hannibal begins to dip his hand even lower still. “That’s very good Will,” he says softly. “I don’t want you to think anymore; I want you to let all the noise in your head go quiet and allow your instincts to take over. Now spread your legs again. No – wider. Just like that; that’s perfect.”

Will screws his eyes closed and obeys; groaning loudly as he feels a broad thumb slide deep inside him before being replaced by a finger, and then two, which rub in exquisitely deliberate circles. He feels as if he’s slipping away from himself now and the main thing he’s really aware of is whiteness: spectral white noise filling his head, white hot heat in his body, white light sparking in front of his eyes. It’s like being wrapped in a cloud – the kind that’s heavy with heat and electricity before lightning sparks from the edges and sets the sky on fire. Gasping again he reaches up so he can wrap his arm round the back of Hannibal’s neck, strongly aware of an enclosing sense of safety that means no matter how hard he pushes back, he won’t be allowed to fall.

“Yes?” murmurs Hannibal, kissing Will’s temple.

“Yes. Yes.”

“Look at that,” adds Hannibal, beginning to move his hand a little faster. “You’re soaking wet. You’re loving this aren’t you? Displaying yourself to me; flaunting your beauty. Showing how desirable and unique you are.”

“No,” says Will, whose breath is coming out in a series of desperate pants. The pressure from Hannibal’s teeth seems to be all over his skin at intervals now, even though he’s not actually being bitten. “It’s not…I…oh God.”

“I don’t blame you,” replies Hannibal caressingly. He begins to thrust his fingers even harder, sighing with pleasure at how easily they glide in, and Will clenches round him rather beautifully just
as Hannibal murmurs “Good boy” at the way he’s whining and rocking his hips, desperate to get the pressure as deep as possible. “No, I don’t blame you at all,” adds Hannibal. “Why shouldn’t you revel in it? You know how much power my desire for you gives you over me.” He withdraws his hand nearly all the way and lingers a few seconds before pushing back in – pushing in deep – and Will moans even louder and thrusts his hips against the long slide of Hannibal’s fingers. “You’re powerful in numerous ways of course, but they all require such effort – don’t they Will? This requires nothing more than simply lying back and looking beautiful, then watching while I fall at your feet.”

Will gives another long, low moan then abruptly moves his right hand from where he’s clinging onto Hannibal’s hair and begins to trail it downwards across his chest. He’s feverishly hot and his palm slides easily over smooth sweat-slick skin before pausing for a few seconds as Hannibal tugs his head back so he can lick into his mouth. Will whines out loud at the raw sensation of it – all need and hunger and hot warm breath – then without breaking the kiss wraps his fingers round his achingly hard cock: rubbing his thumb around the head a few times before beginning to thrust up and down in a sort of frenzy. Being on the edge for so long is making him sweat with effort and he gives a desperate cry as the first sharp waves of pleasure begin to hit. Hannibal’s hand moves downwards at the same time to tightly grip his hip, pulling him harder onto his fingers as he fucks into Will with them and making a sound almost like growling as he presses his mouth against every part of Will he can reach: biting and lapping at his jaw, throat and shoulders before stabbing his tongue into Will’s mouth for another searing kiss. Will gives a fraught sigh and bucks his hips; frantic now to make himself come again and helplessly fisting his cock while resuming the desperate tugging at Hannibal’s hair with his other hand.

“That’s it,” says Hannibal, breaking the kiss and letting go of Will’s hip so he can cover his hand with his own. “Finally – just what I asked you to do. Thank you my darling; I thought you were never going to agree. Now show me how you like to be touched. Show off this beautiful body.” He rubs the wet tip of Will’s cock with his thumb – which elicits a frantic wail – then works in a third finger with his other hand, rocking it between Will’s legs for few more moments before gradually slowing the movement then stopping entirely, instead allowing Will to set his own pace and move how he wants to. He looks achingly beautiful this way: sublime in the intensity of it with his head thrown back and throat exposed like a young martyr, all muscles swaying and flexing, and the way the sheen of perspiration makes his skin glow in the firelight. In fact Hannibal is endlessly fascinated by Will’s skin, which is pale without being wan or pallid and instead possesses a creamy, luminous quality that’s warm and smooth to the touch like ivory, or even bone. Ducking his head slightly he runs his tongue along Will’s throat in a hot wet swipe, relishing the lingering brine-like taste of sweat and humidity. His neck is so slim. In the past it was the habit of alphas to put their omegas in collars, and he now finds the idea of having Will in one for special occasions to be almost unbearably appealing. Black leather would be best: something profane and beautiful to stand out against all that pale skin.


Will groans rather wantonly then gasps out “Oh fuck…God, oh my God” – only once he’s started seems unable to stop himself, and keeps repeating it in an increasingly helpless chant. He’s already extremely close again – Hannibal can tell from the way his body is quivering and tightening, preparing itself for orgasm – and with his fingers buried so deep inside he can feel every single tremor and clench. It’s as if Will’s trying to grip onto him; and in turn the feeling of that leads to the inevitable awareness of how those muscles would feel tightening onto his knot if it were sunk deep inside Will’s trembling body and Will was about to come round it; and the idea is so intoxicating it requires every shred of Hannibal’s iron self-control not to simply take hold of this beautiful nervy being by the hips then fuck him right into the floorboards then and there. In fact despite being dulled
and drugged by countless heat-suppressing chemicals, the way Will’s still primed to respond so rapturously to his touch is nothing short of miraculous: a flawless arrangement of artless naïveté tempered by utter dissolution and shamelessness, and all the more perfect because it’s so obviously unconsciously done. It’s not the result of omega training but pure unadulterated instinct – and shows that while Will’s mercurial moods and acerbic temperament make him undeniably hard work in the capacity of friend or colleague, in the role of a lover he promises to be completely perfect.

“Next time I’ll put my mouth on you,” says Hannibal, beginning to move his hand a little faster again while stroking Will’s leg with the other. “All over your body. Then I’ll use my tongue to open you up and make you ready for me. Would you like that?”

“Yes, oh God. Yes. I want that.”

“You’re stunning this way,” murmurs Hannibal appreciatively. “So vulnerable and desperate. All those noises you’re making; they might be the sounds of distress as much as desire. And the way that you’re writhing and shuddering against me you could almost be struggling; like something fragile and breakable fighting for its life. I’d have to keep clinging onto you through the final throes, wouldn’t I; hold you in my arms until you grew silent and still? And yet there is so much life in you.”

Will moans again then angles his neck into a painful twist in order to reach Hannibal’s mouth, pillaging hungrily as if his life depends on it and roughly clawing his fingers against Hannibal’s neck and shoulders with one hand while pisting at his cock almost brutally with the other. He’s planted his feet against the rug to give himself better leverage for thrusting his entire body against Hannibal’s; and Hannibal now neatly brackets his ankles around Will’s so that when he moves his legs apart Will’s are forced wide open too. “Don’t stop,” gasps Will, somewhat helplessly. “Just…oh please, please. It feels so good.”

Hannibal strokes Will’s hipbone with his free hand while rhythmically rubbing his cheek against Will’s. “So close to the edge now,” he says softly. “All that’s needed is a little push to send you spinning over the side. Just – one – little – push.”

“Yeah…oh God.”

“It’s a paradox isn’t it beloved?” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to kiss his way down Will’s throat. “I’m going to teach you all about physical pleasure, help you discover how your body can make you feel. I promise, I’ll make it so good for you; we’ll make it so good for each other.”

“Oh yes, yes. I want that.”

“But you want more as well. Don’t you Will? You want the pleasures that mind and soul can attain – you want the desire first hand. It’s what you’ve always wanted.” Wrapping an arm round Will’s chest he begins to rock him in the same rhythm as he’s moving his hand, easily able to take his weight and push him down at the exact moment he brings his fingers up until Will cries out again as another stream of pre-come spills over his fist. “You want to venture into the shadowy places and bring something back,” whispers Hannibal, straight into his ear. “You long for it, don’t you beloved? It consumes you. You know it every time you cast off morality and obey your instincts. You knew it when you attacked your alpha, and you know it right now. And you know that I can show it to you.”

“Oh God…God…Hannibal…” Will moans again and frantically pivots his hips downwards, exposing his throat so Hannibal can scrape his teeth across it. He can’t fully take in the meaning of the words, can’t separate anymore between the feverish cacophony in his head and the rapturous swell of desire in every part of his body; every cell, every fibre, every drop of heated blood. He can feel how achingly hard he is, his cock growing slick and heavy in his hand; and even though he’s hardly been touching himself for any time, in that frenzied moment he knows he’s going to come
anyway. He doesn’t even fully want to – doesn’t want to lose control that spectacularly again so
soon – and the inability to do anything about it instils a combination of something like humiliation
spiced with ecstatic, needy abandonment. The truly unnerving thing is that it’s not even something
that’s fully physical, as opposed to swelling and spilling over within a frantic and fervently over-
heated mind…and Christ, it shouldn’t even be possible. Then he can feel Hannibal’s teeth digging
into the fragile skin of his shoulder and, oh fuck, he’s actually being bitten; and then: “Oh God.”
gasps Will, sounding slightly panicked. “I can’t…I’m going to…Oh Hannibal, fuck. Oh…oh I’m
coming, oh God I’m coming, I’m coming…I…”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal reverently. “My beautiful boy. Here it is.” He crooks his fingers upwards
within the tight, smooth heat of Will’s body, expertly exploring and caressing, before pressing down
hard on the rim with his thumb at exactly the same time; at which point Will gives a long, low moan
as he tenses, quivers, goes rigid, then gasps Hannibal’s name as his hips give a final frantic jolt and
he starts to come. Hannibal wraps his arms round Will’s chest to hold him through it, kissing his
throat and murmuring praise and encouragement the entire time; and then, when Will has finally
stopped shuddering, neatly taking hold of his shoulders and manoeuvring him down onto the floor.
Will slumps forwards and buries his face in Hannibal’s neck, and Hannibal retrieves the blanket from
the side of the sofa and enfolds him in it then presses his lips against his forehead.

“Breathe Will,” he says quietly.

“I can’t, it’s…it’s just so…”

“Just breathe with me.”

“Oh God it’s so much…” says Will eventually.

He sounds overwhelmed, and Hannibal is entirely aware that he isn’t only talking about the physical
sensation. Instead he pulls Will even closer and brushes his face against his hair. “You were perfect,”
his says tenderly. “You did so well.”

There’s a long pause, and then: “So well at what?” grumbles Will from under the blanket. “I came all
over myself – twice. It’s hardly Nobel Prize material.”

Hannibal smiles to himself then gently lifts Will’s head upright so he can look at him, and who
promptly frowns and screws his nose up in response. “Oh I see,” says Hannibal, leaning forward to
kiss the nose. “You think I’m patronising you? Only you did do incredibly well. Look how
masterfully you can overcome your inhibitions when you try. A part of you felt this was the ‘wrong’
thing to do and yet how beautifully you did it anyway.” Will flushes a little and Hannibal slowly runs
his eyes over him, imagining what it would be like to see all that passion and aggression channelled
into more destructive channels: Will with blood on his face, black in the moonlight and so graceful,
luminous and precise in his ability to elevate violence into a means of expressive art. “So tell me,”
adds Hannibal softly: “Are you still feeling ashamed?”

Will doesn’t answer straight away, obviously turning the question over in his head and giving it
proper consideration. “I don’t know,” he finally replies. “Maybe a little.”

“Only a little?” says Hannibal. Moving his hands so they’re cradling Will’s face, he begins to rub his
thumbs beneath his eyes as if trying to wipe the shadows away and murmurs “Tell me what else
you’re ashamed of?” Will frowns with irritation at the question and Hannibal smiles at him again
before adding, almost as if it’s an afterthought: “Are you ashamed of the fact you want to kill your
alpha?”

For a few seconds Will goes completely rigid then glances at Hannibal with wide, panicked eyes
before trying to pull himself free. “It’s all right,” says Hannibal, tightening his grip to keep Will in place. “You don’t have to admit it if you don’t want to; you don’t even have to acknowledge it. Only know that everything you’ve said and done has silently communicated it to me – and that I don’t think any less of you. On the contrary; I admire your courage. And your sense of enterprise.”

“I don’t want to do that,” says Will stiffly. “You’re wrong. You’re completely wrong.”

“I know you want to believe that’s true,” replies Hannibal, gazing intensely into Will’s eyes. “What you’re considering in your darkest fantasies horrifies you – it’s why you broke your mirrors isn’t it? Yet that doesn’t alter the fact it’s a fantasy which wrenches ugliness out of the world and leaves something beautiful in its place. Didn’t I tell you that you were an alchemist? Indeed, I find the synchronicity of the whole thing to be incredibly fascinating. Because regardless of what you do in the future, your actions so far have transformed what is unworthy and useless into something artistic.”

“Why on earth,” says Will in a tight, strained voice, “would you think that?”

“Simple. Because your association with this alpha – this shambling lesser being, so artless and graceless and pointless – has set into motion a train of events that yields beauty and purpose.”

“How?”

“Because,” says Hannibal, gently kissing Will’s forehead, “it brought you here to me.”

Afterwards Will grows very quiet and thoughtful again, trembling slightly from the intensity of what just took place and ultimately becoming so subdued and pliant that he allows Hannibal to carry him over to the sofa so he can fall asleep on it wrapped in his arms. He wakes up some time later, still entangled together, and finds that in the interim the dogs have assembled round the sofa like a line of accusing, furry enforcers that growl at Hannibal whenever he makes an attempt to move.

“They think you’re hurting me,” says Will, gently shooing them away.

“They’re protective of you, clearly,” replies Hannibal. He shoots the dogs a look of dislike then firmly positions himself between them and Will as if he resents their attempts to claim his attention. “Although I suppose I can’t blame them; as far as they’re concerned you’re their alpha.”

_I want you to be my alpha_, thinks Will hazily, although it’s too large and overwhelming a thing to admit out loud. Instead he pulls himself up so he’s lying directly on Hannibal’s chest then tucks his head beneath his chin. “Look at you,” he adds, giving Hannibal’s shirt a tug. “You never even got your clothes off. Do you want me to…y’know.”

“No, tonight was about you. I want you to rest now – you’ve been under terrible strain for the past few weeks.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Besides, you have nothing to apologise for,” adds Hannibal with the hint of a smirk. “I can guarantee that I enjoyed myself immensely.”

Will gives a small laugh then reaches out a hand so that Hannibal can take hold of it. “How long was I asleep for?”

“About an hour. You should really go to bed.”
“I should have a shower first,” says Will wryly. “You didn’t have to stay here by the way; you must have awful cramp by now.”

“I don’t mind. I like seeing you like this; you look so peaceful. Vulnerable also – and I admit, I like that too.”

“Why?”

“Because it shows you trust me.”

Will makes a humming noise in agreement then starts to wriggle at the sensation of Hannibals stroking his neck. “Stop it,” mutters Will. “That tickles.”

“What, that?” says Hannibal innocently, doing it again.

Will makes an inadvertent growling sound in response that turns into a yawn halfway though, and which Hannibal finds so endearing that he promptly returns his fingers to Will’s neck in an attempt to make him do it again. “Stop it,” says Will. “Ugh, you’re so annoying. Have I ever told you that?”

“Yes dearest,” says Hannibal, increasing the pressure very slightly. “Often.”

“If I wasn’t so tired I would end you.”

“Then it makes sense for me to take advantage of the situation while I still can.”

“Don’t patronise me,” says Will, nipping at the side of Hannibal’s jaw with his teeth. “You think I couldn’t end you?”

“I think there are very few people who could attempt that successfully – although I accepted some time ago that you would most likely be one of them.”

“You don’t believe that at all do you?” says Will, pretending to bite Hannibal’s jaw again. “You’re so vain. You’re turning into the stereotype of the big alpha, macho meathead.”

“I am certainly not,” replies Hannibal with dignity. “You are a ridiculous boy.”

“You are a ridiculous narcissist.”

“Brat.”

“Old man.”

“If I am an old man,” says Hannibal, “then our current situation makes you a sort of catamite; although admittedly a rather elderly one. I shall have to start calling you Ganymede. Or would you prefer the Latin equivalent?”

“Ugh, gross. Don’t you dare.”

Hannibal smiles to himself then lifts his arms to allow Will to burrow further beneath the blanket before lowering them again and beginning to stroke his hair. Will makes a contented noise and tucks his face a little more securely beneath Hannibal’s chin, occasionally making an absent-minded tapping motion against his collar bone with the tip of his finger. “Can I ask you something?” he finally says.

“Anything.”
“I’ve decided to stop taking the tablets,” says Will shyly. “You’re right; they were messing me up.”

“Indeed they were. I’m proud of you Will; I know it’s not an easy decision.”

“Yeah. So. When it happens…”

“What? Your heat?”

“Yes. Would you…” There’s a small pause. “Would you stay with me?”

“You already know the answer to that,” replies Hannibal softly, kissing the top of Will’s head. “How can you even need to ask?”

Will blushes then buries a bit further beneath Hannibal’s arm as a silent indication that he’s happy about this before adding, rather hastily, “Although obviously not to bond.”

There’s another pause and from where he’s lying Will can’t see the way Hannibal’s face flickers slightly before he finally replies: “Obviously not.”

“Andrew could have you arrested.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal, renewing the rhythmic stroking motion on Will’s hair. “Although that’s not the only reason, is it?”

It’s a simple enough question, yet this time it’s Will’s turn to go quiet as fractures and splinters from the last few months cram into his mind and prevent him from attempting to answer it. Hannibal waits patiently without trying to rush a response, and Will screws his eyes closed then abruptly snaps them open with the force of the realisation, because…Oh God I’ve fallen in love with you, he wants to scream out at Hannibal; and it would need to be screamed – something raw and urgent – not whispered coyly but ripped, flayed and dripping, from out of the very core of himself. I’ve being doing it the entire time haven’t I? he thinks helplessly. Falling and fallen. I didn't even have a choice. Oh God oh God, I love you…but I don't want to – I really don’t – because the way you make me feel is overpowering. You frighten me and I’m frightening myself. I want to know you but I don’t know how. I want to feel sure. I want too much. I just want you. What have you done to me? What have you done…?

“Will?”

Will realises he’s begun to clutch onto Hannibal’s shirt in a stupidly urgent way and the awareness of it makes him flush self-consciously then let go. It’s no use though, because it’s impossible to process the enormity of such a revelation. He doesn’t want to have to face what it means, it’s too much; he can’t do it, even though he knows he’s going to have to. But not yet. Not yet. “No,” he finally says; and he sounds angry and agonised yet so hopeful and yearning, all at the same time.

“No,” repeats Hannibal. “I see that. I could see it from the way you responded to that couple in the park. The intimacy of it frightens you—the idea of being so close to someone.” He pauses again. “What it means for your sense of yourself…what it would mean for us both.” But Will just shrugs and refuses to reply, and Hannibal wisely decides not to push it for the time being so just resumes stroking his hair again instead in a soothing way that’s intended to calm. “Where do you want to be when it happens?” he asks gently. “Here? My house? Or I could take you to a hotel: somewhere luxurious and beautiful, away from the city.”

“Here,” replies Will, obviously grateful for the change of subject. “I need to look after the dogs.”

“Well I do.”

“It’s all right Will; whatever you like.”

Will makes an appreciative noise then arches up a bit closer to Hannibal who kisses his forehead again before rearranging the blanket round Will’s shoulders. “I was right though,” murmurs Will sleepily. “What I said before. This is weird.”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t really imagine us like this. What we just did. Y’know?”

“I do beloved: I was there at the time.”

Will makes a half-hearted attempt to kick Hannibal’s leg. “You know what I mean. I just didn’t imagine that us like that.”

“You mean as lovers?”

“Yeah. It’s hard to explain.” Will pauses, too tired to devise a proper response yet likewise cautious about saying too much and giving himself away. “I guess I kind of saw you as…more than that,” he eventually adds. “More than just sex.”

“Good,” says Hannibal, resting his face against Will’s hair. “That means that even after you let me make love to you, we still have something for which to aspire.”

“You understand what I mean?”

“I do, yes. As it happens I feel the same way.”

“Tell me,” says Will, despite being halfway towards sleep again.

“W-e-l-l,” replies Hannibal thoughtfully, “what does it really mean to describe someone as a ‘lover’? I suppose in the most basic sense it refers to sexual intimacy with a person to whom one is not bonded. Eros, as the Greeks would have it: fervent passion and anguish, like love set on fire – like hurtling headfirst from a cliff. But there are other ways to love a person. Philia: friendship, and a meeting of minds. Or agape: selfless love.” Will murmurs something indistinct and Hannibal tightens his grip around his shoulders. “Not that there is any such thing of course, because love is selfish. We don’t love as an act of charity; we love for ourselves because we feel elevated and emboldened through the act of bestowing our love. You, for example: you don’t wish to be loved as much as you wish to be understood.” He pauses for a few seconds, his expression softening slightly as he runs his eyes over Will’s face. “Yet no one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. With that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved’s potential comes true.”

Will stirs sleepily and Hannibal smiles again then runs his fingers through his hair. “Betrayal and forgiveness are akin to falling in love,” he adds in the same low voice. “So that’s why I understand what you were saying, because I also see you as more. More than a lover; more than an encounter for the body but as an awakening for the soul. Like Plato’s Symposium: a single soul inhabiting two bodies. One might have many lovers, yet the true object of desire…” he pauses and presses a kiss against Will’s forehead, “can never be replaced. There is only ever one imago Will; only one twin flame.” Will, now deeply asleep, murmurs something indecipherable then pushes himself a little nearer to Hannibal like someone seeking closeness and reassurance. “You can’t even hear me, can you beloved?” says Hannibal gently, beginning to stroke the side of Will’s face. “And yet it’s all for you – all of it.”
Outside the window the night has frozen and solidified, swirling in spectral silver moonlight that clashes with the scorching glow of the fire, and Hannibal watches it for a few seconds so he can enjoy the drama of the contrast between the dark and the light. Like opposing polarities – the unstoppable force and the immovable object – until the day finally comes that they can merge in the middle and Become. Flare of tinder, spark of flame, and then…ignition. In his arms Will begins to stir, frowning slightly as if his dreams are troubling him, and Hannibal smooths a palm against his back until he grows silent and still again.

“The night is always darkest before the dawn,” adds Hannibal in the same soft voice. “Did you know that? So much darkness; yet so much light for the one who can endure it and slice their way through. Try to trust me Will. One day…I promise you’re going to understand.”

Chapter End Notes

This will be the last update before Christmas but normal service will resume afterwards ASAP. In the meantime, wishing a wonderful festive period to everyone who’s celebrating, and a very happy, peaceful and positive end-of-December to those who aren’t xxx
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Enormous hugs and thanks to the brilliant puzzleboxes and michaela19901 who’ve created beautiful, beautiful art for Chapter 4 and Chapter 10 that you should definitely hop over to check out if you have the time. Many thanks also to cutglasscaress for suggesting that Price receive a token of appreciation in this chapter :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes up next morning in his own bed without any memory of how he got there and swaddled up against the cold in an old grey bathrobe that he likewise has no memory of putting on. There’s no sign of Hannibal at all, although a lingering smell of expensive cologne on the pillowcase next to Will’s suggests he must have been there at some point. He’s also retrieved Will’s glasses from wherever it was they ended up and placed them on the bedside table, and Will stares at them now rather hazily while finding himself absurdly touched by this small attention. In this respect Hannibal must have been responsible for the bathrobe as well…and which, when taken to its logical conclusion, would strongly imply that the reason Will is now in bed with no memory of getting into it is because Hannibal carried him there. The idea of this is undeniably a whole new level of embarrassing, and Will broods over it for a few seconds before straining his ears for any signs of life in the rest of the house. At first there doesn’t seem to be anything at all but after listening a little harder he thinks he can detect faint sounds of movement from downstairs, blended with a low thrumming noise that’s most likely coming from the radio – possibly classical music, although it’s hard to be sure.

Will rolls onto his side, suddenly overcome with self-consciousness at the idea of facing Hannibal – and which admittedly feels rather cowardly, although still justifiable considering the condition they were both in when they last saw each other (not to mention the bathrobe and the carrying) – so gazes out the window instead where it’s just beginning to snow. The flakes look stark and rigid against the gun-metal grey air and the trees are straggling upwards with blackened limbs like they’re trying to snag the sky as the murder of crows, undeterred by the cold, occupy themselves with skimming and slicing their danse macabre with the usual grim choreography that never fails to strike Will as sinister. In fact the whole scene is unbelievably bleak; and self-consciousness aside, it’s hard to ignore the increasingly pressing need for companionship and reassurance. The aroma of frying bacon also serves as a reminder of how hungry he is, so after a few more seconds of silent staring Will finally untangles himself from the sheets and forces himself to get out of bed. Then he attempts to do something with his hair, which is sticking out at improbably mad angles that defy the known laws of physics (sex hair thinks Wills with horror), and replaces the bathrobe with some clothes before cautiously making his way downstairs and sidling towards the kitchen while trying not to make any noise.

Hannibal is stood by the counter breaking eggs into a porcelain bowl with a series of neat little cracks, and Will pauses for a while with his fingers on the handle so he can admire him from the secrecy of the doorway. This is accomplished in a series of small furtive glances like sips; although even as he’s in the middle of doing it, Will can’t help feeling awkwardly aware of how difficult it is to admit to himself that he finds Hannibal physically attractive. It’s much easier, after all, to pretend that he’s predominantly drawn to his mind and personality – that the appeal is something lofty and intellectual, belonging more to the brain than the body. But it’s there all the same and it’s impossible
and pointless to continue denying it because Hannibal, Will decides, is beautiful; even though it’s not an epithet that’s typically applied to male attractiveness, and which shouldn’t even be true at all given that his component parts don’t really work in isolation. He has too many slants and sharp angles; all glacial skin, lean juts of bone, and features that are about as planed and fleshless as a Medieval saint. Yet combined together they still create something that’s undeniably striking. In another way he also reminds Will of the illustrations on the covers of the adventure stories his father used to buy him when he was much younger: venturesome, hyper-masculine alphas with chiselled faces, broad chests and rippling muscles who were always primed to shoot bandits or wrestle wild bears or rescue miners from collapsed tunnels (or some equally implausible bullshit) while doll-faced omegas swooned over them in the background. Not that Hannibal’s habits or personality remotely accord with the same aesthetic. Impossible, for example, to imagine those mettlesome lantern-jawed alphas stepping out of their cover illustrations to speak a dozen different languages, host elaborate dinner parties, or adorn themselves in immaculately tailored three-piece suits with matching pocket squares. In fact if anything, considering his job, a life of roughness and privation is more suitable for Will; although once again appearances are clearly deceiving because no one would think that to look at him. Will now reflects rather ruefully on his slim face with its irritatingly delicate features – the sensitive mouth, the wide eyes obscured behind his glasses – before brooding over the sheer unfeasibility of him ever being able to quell a bullying alpha like Andrew into submission with a single wave of the hand in the same way that Hannibal can.

“Good morning mylimasis,” says Hannibal without turning round.

Will flushes slightly, resentful of being caught in the act. “How’d you know I was there?”

“I can smell you of course,” says Hannibal, beginning to whisk the eggs into a pale froth with a fork. “I apologise if you were trying to ambush me and I ruined your plans.” Turning round he gives Will a faint smirk. “Feel free to go out and come in again, and I will pretend to be startled by your unexpected arrival.”

“Whatever,” says Will. On an impulse he goes and stands directly behind Hannibal and presses his face between his shoulder blades. “I’ll get you next time.”

“Of that,” replies Hannibal, “I have absolutely no doubt at all.” Putting down the fork he reaches round with one hand and tangles his fingers into Will’s hair in a gesture that’s simultaneously both intimate and casual; and Will gives a small sigh then leans luxuriously into the touch, because all the way out of bed and down the stairs he was dreading some sort of excruciating post-mortem over what happened last night and is extremely relieved that it looks like it’s not going to happen. “What does mylimasis mean?” he asks instead.

“It’s a term of endearment in my own language,” says Hannibal. “It doesn’t translate exactly. In essence it means that you belong to me – and that you are beloved.”

Will makes a sarcastic noise in response, mostly to cover up the fact he feels unexpectedly touched by this, then occupies himself with pressing his forehead against Hannibal’s back in an assorted series of angles while tentatively allowing himself to enjoy the complete lack of awkwardness between them. In fact he’d been convinced it would be hovering in the air this morning like smoke – some toxic combination of embarrassment, recrimination or regret – but it’s really not like that. Then he tries to identify what’s there in its place, and finally decides that it’s a warm sense of intimacy which is somehow both charged yet relaxed to the extent it’s almost contradictory: like a couple with honeymoon passion who’ve in fact been married for decades. Even having Hannibal in his personal space isn’t turning out to be the ordeal he expected it to be – and which logically it really should, because Hannibal has a way of taking up so much space. It isn’t just a matter of height or musculature either, but the way his sheer presence draws the eye and demands awareness; the way
he breathes glamour and intrigue the same way normal people breathe air, or the aura of sensuous strength and carnality that sometimes seems to shimmer around him. Briefly Will closes his eyes, remembering last night’s scene in front of the fire: the barely contained ferociousness in the way that Hannibal was touching him that was all desire and craving with a promise of savagery only just concealed below the surface. There was a frantic white-hot ruthlessness to the whole thing – and that’s not the way alphas traditionally tend to interact with omegas. In this respect even Andrew, for all his vindictiveness and aggression in other areas, was generally the picture of consideration and self-restraint whenever he wanted to take Will to bed, tending to handle him with extreme caution as if he was something fragile and delicate that was liable to break.

Hannibal on the other hand, despite the studied aloofness, is clearly someone of ravenous desires that are only barely restrained by a veneer of polite propriety. And of course it’s a convincing veneer – and elegant, and compelling – but that doesn’t quite change the sense that it’s a façade nonetheless. Fleeting Will now remembers the veneer on the cabinet in his childhood bedroom: the way he used to lie in bed during successive sleepless nights and pick and pick at it to see what was lying underneath. In his professional life Hannibal often seems to be someone who’s more brain than body, so coolly controlled and glacially calm that you could almost shiver in his air. And yet the promise of what lies beneath this outer coating – this veneer – is intoxicating. Intoxicating is a word closely linked with alcohol or drugs, and Will turns it over in his head for a while before deciding it’s still the right one. It makes him feel glazed and heady, like being in a heat-haze or spinning on a carousel; the type of feeling that should be described by swirling cursive letters on a billboard or poster because normal plain pronouns can’t adequately capture it. Drunken and dazed on darkly destructive delights…Then he gives a small, contented sigh and arches further towards Hannibal, gently grinding his hips against him before growing self-conscious about it and going still again.

“Look at you,” says Hannibal fondly, beginning to tighten his grip on Will’s hair. “How very charming you are.”

Will, who loathes being called charming – ‘charming’ being the only slightly more macho cousin of being ‘sweet’ or ‘cute’ – abruptly decides that that’s quite enough of that, so clears his throat and tries to think of a way to revert the conversation to more mundane grounds. Hannibal, in turn, finally releases Will’s hair and returns to preparing breakfast; and Will decides this is as good a subject as anything so prods Hannibal’s foot with his own and says: “Where’d you get all this food from?”

“From the store of course,” replies Hannibal, pouring the eggs into a waiting saucepan and adding butter and cream. “Where else would I get it from?”

“Did you hitchhike,” asks Will, knowing it can’t possibly be the case but still hoping it might be because the image of Hannibal looming by the side of the road and glaring at passing drivers into obediently puling over is so hilarious.

“I did not,” replies Hannibal with dignity. “I made use of a cab firm like a civilised person.” Turning round entirely he runs his eyes over Will’s face as if daring him to mention the business card from last night’s cab driver – and by extension that of the private investigator – and Will defiantly returns the stare for a few seconds before finally giving a small frown and looking away, still deeply reluctant to allow himself to process the implications of what it might mean.

“It’s fortunate I had the foresight to ask for that card,” adds Hannibal with clear deliberation. “As you quite rightly noted I have a tendency to do so, and one never knows when these little tokens may come in useful.” Will still doesn’t reply and Hannibal’s faint half-smile grows broader. “Of course one might also…deny the usefulness,” he adds. “One might decide that the point and purpose of such a thing takes too much trouble to acknowledge.”
“Are you going to serve that up or what?” says Will, abruptly gesturing towards the food. Hannibal, recognising this as the deflection strategy it obviously is, raises an eyebrow. “It’s going to burn,” snaps Will.

“It will not burn,” replies Hannibal, still stroking his eyes over Will’s face. “Because I have an impeccable sense of timing, which means I always know when to adjust the heat accordingly. Just like you, in fact: smouldering along until the moment comes to ignite.”

“Oh God,” says Will, “give it a rest can’t you? It’s breakfast, not metaphysics. And I’m ravenous.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” replies Hannibal, obediently shifting back to his previous, more casual mood. “You’ve got far too thin recently. I’m looking forward to feeding you up.”

“No too much,” says Will, beginning to devour bacon and eggs like someone half-starved. “I need to be able to run away from The Sculptor when he tries to give me another business card.”

“You could always roll away,” replies Hannibal with a faint smile. “I’m curious though – you’re clearly being flippant, yet you acknowledge it’s a possibility?” Will shrugs and pours himself some coffee. “Are you afraid?”

“Of course I am,” snaps Will. “I’d be stupid not to be.” Reaching across the table he tugs his laptop towards him then winces when he sees the scrolling banners across the news page. “God – look at that. It’s everywhere.”

“Naturally it is,” says Hannibal calmly. “He’s just killed his seventh victim.”

Will nods and then pauses for a few seconds before pushing the laptop closed with a sharp little click. “Everything’s just got so crazy recently with Andrew,” he adds with something that sounds close to guilt. “It’s like I’ve forgotten we’re in the middle of the biggest murder investigation in years.”

“Indeed we are,” replies Hannibal, who doesn’t sound as if he finds this particularly interesting one way or the other. “And speaking of which, you still need to show me the files on Richard Black.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m planning to.”

“The so-called Nemesis Killer.”

“So-called,” says Will sharply.

“Oh yes, you dislike these grandiose monikers don’t you?” Hannibal pauses and looks thoughtful. “I wonder what you’re going to be able to call The Sculptor when you catch him?” Pausing again he casts a long look at Will from over the top of his coffee cup. “Call him by his name perhaps?”

Will stiffens slightly then returns the look. “You think it’s someone I know?”

“From what you’ve said I think it’s…a possibility. And I believe you think so too.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll have to catch him first won’t we?” says Will, suddenly tiring of the whole subject. “One problem at a time.”

He sighs, tipping his head back as he does so, and Hannibal uses the resulting view as an opportunity to admire the smattering of bruises along the side of his throat: slightly smudged by now, as though blended by an artist’s brush, and a rather attractive shade of indigo with threads of crimson and violet around the edges. Hannibal doesn’t need to see his hips to know that corresponding ones will be speckled there too, and it takes a degree of self-control not to reach out and touch them merely for the
pleasure of running a thoughtful finger over tender flesh and feeling the thrum from the carotid artery underneath. On Will, Hannibal decides, *everything* is flattering: from burst blood vessels on the pale canvas of skin to the shadows dappling along his cheekbones or the way his hair is tangling over his forehead. He looks rather coltish this morning, all large eyes and languor, although was admittedly even more fetching when sleeping several hours ago: draped across the bed with his head on Hannibal’s chest and as sculptured, elongated and perfectly loose-limbed in the winter light as a young Narcissus lulled to sleep through the soothing charm of his own reflection. Hannibal sighs with pleasure at the memory of it, although despite the lure of the image is still quick to acknowledge that a beautiful face and body are by no means the most significant aspects of Will’s appeal. Because not even his physical charms can fully compete with how tremendously attractive his *emotions* are – whether angry, sad, pensive or playful – and where everything from quiet impishness to balefully blazing outrage are like little drops of elixir for an observer to breathe in and savour. *Every moment another turn of temperament,* muses Hannibal to himself, admiring the strong, well-shaped lines of Will’s jaw and the determined curve of his mouth. *Every instant another thought or reflection, and every second a sting of conscience battling against desire and nature. You’re so painfully uncomfortable in your own skin; yet see how you always set yourself to seek out more? More knowledge, more experience, more passion, more power – more opportunities to unleash yourself upon the world and find a sense of conquest in it.*

As if drawn by the intensity of Hannibal’s gaze Will briefly glances up and catches his eye before turning away again. He looks distinctly mournful now, staring into space from over his coffee cup like someone observing happiness from a distance, and Hannibal’s thoughtful expression softens slightly as he reaches across the table and places his hand flat over Will’s. “I know it’s hard for you to see your own situation objectively,” he says in a gentler voice. “I imagine it’s that process of ‘brainwashing’ you referred to last night. But if another omega described an identical set of circumstances to you, your advice to them would be very different from what you’re able to give to yourself.” Will shrugs without saying anything and Hannibal tightens the grip on his hand and adds: “I’m confident that we can deal with the situation successfully.”

“I guess,” says Will, trying to rally himself a bit.

“He’s coming on Friday, yes? That’s a whole three days away.” Will nods in response then picks up his fork and begins to twitch it across the plate in an aimless, fidgety way that suggests he’s working up the effort to add something else. “What is it?” asks Hannibal in the same gentle voice as before.

Will takes a deep breath then blurts out “Would you be able to contact that law firm soon?” in such a rush that the words all trip over each other as if determined to escape from his mouth before he can change his mind and gather them back again. Then he pauses and directs a rather doleful glance at Hannibal, obviously consumed with reluctance at being forced to request such a huge favour. “I promise I’ll pay you back as soon as…”

“That’s really not necessary,” says Hannibal firmly, waving away the objections with an elegant little flick of the hand. “And regarding contacting them, I did it already while you were sleeping. I know Elizabeth Lewis fairly well – she’s promised to courier something over to my office by this afternoon at the latest.”

“Really?” says Will with visible relief. “Thank you so much. It’s very generous of you.”

“It’s fine Will.”

“I wish I could give you something in return,” adds Will, beginning to look anguished all over again at the sense of being indebted to someone.

Hannibal smiles at this then abruptly uncoils himself from his chair and prowls round the side of the
table in one long, fluid motion so he can stand behind Will and put his hands on his shoulders. “You did,” he says, leaning forward and pressing his face against Will’s hair. “You gave me yourself.”

Will mutters something indecipherable in response then promptly repeats the same combination of blushing and squirming from before – partly because there’s more truth to this then he’s completely comfortable admitting to; but also, conversely, because it’s not entirely true and in being so adamant about not wanting to bond he knows he probably came across as cold and rejecting. “Yeah,” he finally says. “About that…”

“What about it?” prompts Hannibal, who still has his face in Will’s hair.

“I took the last dose of the suppressants this morning.”

“So soon?” asks Hannibal, tightening his grip on Will’s shoulders in a way that’s unmistakably possessive. “I expected you’d want to wait a little longer?”

Will shrugs then dips his head so Hannibal won’t be able to see that he’s starting to blush again. Oh God, it’s actually pretty ridiculous…even his teenaged self would have had a bit more poise than this. “I don’t want to wait any longer,” he says, injecting a deliberate note of firmness into his voice. “I want it to happen.” Briefly he considers adding I want to get it over with, but then changes his mind and goes silent instead after realising that, probably for the first time in his life, this is no longer the case. In fact while there’s an undeniable pang of unease at the idea of being in heat, knowing that Hannibal will be with him makes it something he’s no longer dreading. If he’s totally honest with himself, he’s tentatively looking forward to it.

“But it will happen before Friday.”

“I know,” replies Will, who’s already given this quite a lot of thought. “I don’t care. I don’t want to be there when he turns up: I don’t want to see him at all. I’m just going to leave the letter at reception.”

“Very good Will,” says Hannibal approvingly. “That has a level of contempt to it that’s positively elegant – and a degree of boldness that’s admirable in the extreme.” He pauses and gives a long, slow smile. “My only regret is that I won’t see the expression on his face when he opens it.”

“Yeah, well, you probably will at some point. I’d be very surprised if he doesn’t make another attempt to meet me in person.” Will pauses and frowns, imagining the scene. “And when he does, he’ll immediately sense that I’ve …”

“Had sex with someone else,” concludes Hannibal briskly; at which point Will’s inner teenager promptly reappears, because even though he’s now had a series of ecstatic orgasms with his head flung across Hannibal’s shoulder he still doesn’t seem able to hear the word ‘sex’ in that clipped, aristocratic voice without blushing. “And before you ask – no,” adds Hannibal. “I’m not concerned about any attempts he might make to come after me.”

Will smiles at this then tips his head to the side so it’s resting against Hannibal’s arm. “No,” he says. “I didn’t think you would be.”

“Besides, he’s limited in what he can do. We’re not going to be bonded so he has no evidence for a legal claim.” Will nods in agreement and Hannibal tightens his grip on his shoulders again before adding with obvious relish: “And I would genuinely welcome a physical confrontation.”

“Mmm,” says Will before he can stop himself. “Me too.”

This prompts Hannibal to deliver one of his more inscrutably Sphinxy smiles, although he continues
to bide his time and simply responds with: “I know you would.” Leaning down he brushes his face against the top of Will’s head again as if breathing him in then lets go entirely and returns to his own chair. “So,” he says, “you’re expecting it to start in just a few days? I suppose you’ll need to see your doctor beforehand? Or do you already have…” he pauses tactfully. “The necessary protection?”

“I’ll see her today,” says Will, who’s already anxious about ensuring access to the right contraceptives. “She’s usually pretty flexible – she’ll be able to fit me in during the after-hours clinic.”

“Good, I’ll drive you.”

“You will not,” says Will firmly. “I’ll go on my own.”

“How, when your car’s still at the FBI?”

“So what? Yours is too.”

“Will,” says Hannibal patiently, “you’re not seriously proposing to go outside as normal? After what happened last time?”

“That was completely different,” snaps Will. “This time I’m in control of the dosage. Today I’ll be fine; after that I’ll stay indoors.” Hannibal narrows his eyes. “Save it,” says Will, seeing the look. “Seriously – cut that shit out. You might be able to stare everyone else into submission but it won’t work on me.”

“How wonderfully stubborn you are Will,” says Hannibal in a long-suffering way. “It’s really quite impressive.”

“Yeah well…stop telling me what to do. You think I’d risk going out if I wasn’t sure?”

“I suppose 48 hours confinement would normally be considered sufficient,” agrees Hannibal grudgingly. “But I want you to remain contactable at all times – don’t turn your phone off.”

“Yeah, okay, fine.”

“You said you’re seeing your doctor after work?”

“Yes.”

“Then I would like you to come to my house straight afterwards so I can drive you back here. I don’t want you making the journey alone that late in the day.” Will’s eyebrows promptly begin to furrow and Hannibal smiles very faintly at the sight of it. “Humour me,” he says. “The last time you were in heat you nearly died. I know the circumstances were extreme, but there could be all kinds of unexpected consequences after being on suppressants for long. In fact there are still a few medical aspects I intend to look into beforehand.”

“Okay then,” says Will, relenting slightly at the undeniable truth of this. “Sure.” And then, because it seems like the Inner Adolescent has made yet another impromptu appearance in order to be a rude little shit: “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I appreciate the concern.”

“It’s fine,” says Hannibal. “It’s understandable you don’t like an alpha trying to curate your actions. Although at least you have the satisfaction of knowing I’ll be adequately punished for it, because I shall have to drive that appalling car of yours.”

Will narrows his eyes from over the top of his coffee mug. “Did you just diss my car?”
“I did indeed,” says Hannibal. “It runs like a horse with its legs tied together.”

“Okay then…great. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome,” says Hannibal briskly. “Now at least I’ve been able to feed you, so I suppose you want to leave immediately?”

“Yes: the sooner the better.”

“Very good,” replies Hannibal, who sounds as serene and composed as ever and yet is already beginning to secretly sulk at the idea of other alphas having the opportunity to run their sickly gloats over his beautiful boy when Will really ought to be here as Hannibal’s sole property. He now permits himself a brief yet charming fantasy of compelling Will to stay in the bedroom, perhaps taking his clothes away from him as an added incentive, then locking him in and leaving him there as an exquisitely pliable captive – fretfully flushed and lovely and with nothing better to do all day than drape himself across the sheets looking beautiful while waiting for Hannibal to return home from work to take care of him. Hannibal’s mind begins to mist over as he pictures Will’s face while laid out underneath him last night: almost bewildered at first, and very faintly frowning because he wasn’t entirely used to the sensation (and which is enormously pleasurable in itself because it’s a reminder that no one else has ever succeeded in making him feel that way except Hannibal) before beginning to appear rather shocked, as if he couldn’t quite believe how good it was. Then how he finally lost himself completely, mind and body departing from one another as he gave himself over to the feelings, the desire, the rapture of no longer being in control of what he was doing. The whole thing is achingly beautiful; almost unbearably so. Hannibal’s eyes then narrow slightly as he considers, in turn, how similar Will would almost certainly look in the elation of taking a life: fearful confusion slowly dissolving away, then triumphant and euphoric in the ecstasy of the kill. “So eager aren’t you?” adds Hannibal with interest as he notices the restless way Will is starting to drum his fingers against the table. “It’s not just the work itself though, is it? You wish to confront your situation head on.”

“Yes,” replies Will after a small pause. “A part of me is devastated by what happened…the fact everyone knows what I’ve spent my whole career trying to keep secret. If I don’t face it now I might never find the nerve again.” He falls silent for a few more seconds before catching Hannibal’s eye. “It’s like you said last night: I want to own it.”

“Excellent,” replies Hannibal crisply. “As you should.”

“Everyone knows,” repeats Will half to himself. “It’ll be on the TattleCrime by now.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Which means…”

“Which means The Sculptor knows too.”

“Yes,” says Will in an odd, toneless voice. “He almost definitely does.”

“And what are your conclusions to that?” asks Hannibal, low and intense. “Still ready to begin hunting again?”

Will doesn’t answer immediately, instead falling silent once more as his mind begins to skitter across snatches of their various conversations from the past few months. Yearning for the pleasures of what is illicit and prohibited…It’s what you’ve always wanted; to venture into the shadowy places and bring something back…To constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest
acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict. Here in the sunlight with the dogs milling around and the hum of music from the radio it seems vague and unreal; like the smoky after-image from a photo or a double exposure caught in the sun. Like something filtered through a prism and therefore no longer fully recognisable as scenes from his own life. In some ways they still don’t feel real. They’re like encounters that were experienced vicariously by someone else; some alternate versions of himself and Hannibal who live according to completely different scripts and devise radically different rules. And yet, and yet…

“Yes,” he finally replies. “If The Sculptor’s going to come after me then I’m going to have to be ready for him. Besides, maybe you were right; maybe it’s time to use it as the opportunity that it is.” And Hannibal catches his eye once more, although still merely smiles and says nothing.

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The taxi ride passes in companionable silence, with Will frowning over the papers in his briefcase as Hannibal gazes intently out the window at the frozen stretch of countryside while occasionally turning his head so he can stare at Will instead. The driver, who clearly likes the sound of his own voice, offers assorted meandering remarks for the entire journey about the football scores and the basketball league without seeming to require any kind of response; only finally managing to raise a reaction when he blurts out: “The weather’s the worst I’ve seen in years. A few more days like this and the roads will get blocked.”

“You seem destined to become snowed in,” says Hannibal, brushing his hand against Will’s. “All the more reason to stay inside after today.”

Will grunts in acknowledgement without shifting his gaze from the pile of reports, although secretly can’t help finding the image of being stranded in the snow with Hannibal and the dogs to be rather appealing. In fact there’s almost something romantic about it – like a pair of pioneers, or early settlers battling the elements where the rest of the world can’t intrude – and he spends the rest of the journey so happily preoccupied with the thought of it that he forgets to even look up again until they’re drawing close to their destination…at which point he wishes he hadn’t, and the peaceful expression immediately fades from his face as he catches sight of the pack of news vans and camera crews clustered round the main entrance. With a plunge of unease Will now stows the reports away then leans over and raises his voice to get the driver’s attention. “Pull up here please,” he says sharply. “I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

Hannibal follows Will’s gaze to where the journalists are milling and thronging and gives a low sigh that might be sympathetic, or maybe irritated – or possibly something else entirely – then once again places his hand over Will’s. The skin feels warm and firm and Will has to suppress a hysterical urge to cling onto it as Hannibal adds: “Just walk past them without saying anything.”

“Oh course,” says Will, staring gloomily ahead at the crowd while reflecting that they only need torches and pitchforks to complete the perfect image of rent-a-mob. “It’s not like I can do anything else.”

“I’d offer to come with you, but I assume you don’t want to be photographed together?”

“Not particularly,” says Will. “I don’t want them to start writing about you as well.”

Hannibal merely nods in response without giving any indication of his own feelings on the matter before gesturing towards the edge of carpark. “I’ll still need to collect my own car,” he says. “Although I imagine I can do that fairly discreetly.”

This time it’s Will’s turn to silently nod, even though he’s not really listening anymore because now
the time’s come to separate he’s finding it difficult to let Hannibal go and is struggling to find a way of expressing it that sounds satisfactorily casual and non-clingy. Mentally he auditions a few possibilities before rejecting all of them, while Hannibal watches with one of his more feline smiles before adding: “I’ll be at my own office all morning after that. I have a few things to see to.”

“What things?” asks Will.

“ Mostly seeing patients.”

Will narrows his eyes slightly. “What else are you seeing to?”

“Why do you imagine I would be seeing to anything else?”

“Your face – I know that look. It means you’re plotting something.”

“What look?” says Hannibal innocently.

“That look. It’s as shifty as hell.” Hannibal’s smile broadens. “Fine, don’t tell me. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Of that I have absolutely no doubt at all.”

“So you are plotting something.”

Hannibal tries, and fails, not to look amused then affectionately runs his hand through Will’s hair. “I’m hoping your lawyer’s letter might arrive soon,” he says. “If so I’ll deliver it round here in person.”

“Oh, okay,” says Will, cheering up slightly. “That would be great.”

“And remember not to turn your phone off.”

Will taps the pocket where he keeps his phone to indicate agreement and Hannibal tightens the grip on his hair before slowly pulling his head forward so he can kiss him – and which is intended to be a simple farewell gesture but seems to get rather intense rather quickly and goes on and on until the taxi driver irritably clears his throat. “Oh shut up,” says Will loudly. “You’re on the meter aren’t you?” Nevertheless he knows he can’t stay here indefinitely, so reluctantly forces himself to let go of Hannibal – who at some point he’s managed to start clinging onto with both hands in a rather embarrassing way – then exits the cab headfirst and begins to steel himself to run the gauntlet of journalists. The fact this confrontation is unavoidable does nothing to diminish how intimidating it is, and for a few wild seconds he wishes there was some way of improvising a disguise. Only short of wrapping his scarf over his head there isn’t really anything he can do; and re-enacting last night’s ET impression in front of the world’s press hardly seems the way to go, not least because the scarf is of the kind of brownness, broadness and general hairiness that would make it look like he was wearing some sort of half-assed monk’s robe. Will spends a few gloomy seconds envisaging the headlines (Will Graham enters FBI cosplaying Jedi Knight – mental breakdown suspected) then takes a deep breath and forces himself to push his shoulders back and proceed down the driveway by imitating the same manner of determined, self-confident stride that he’s seen Hannibal perform on numerous occasions. This turns out to be surprisingly effective, rather like a form of mental armour, and in the end he’s able to fight his way through the crowd with an expression of such grimly resolute menace that the reporters fall back and let him pass with far less trouble than anticipated.

Once inside the building Will dives into the elevator and leans against the wall; and it’s only when he’s several floors up that he realises how his usual aversion to it – or, more specifically, his aversion to the Dark Reflection that he usually feels is waiting inside – has temporarily been forgotten.
Beverly’s in her lab when he arrives, obviously busy with the demands created by the newest murder and, exactly as hoped for, is working on her own. In this respect Will has a pre-formed plan to practice his inevitably awkward explanations about last night with the most benign person possible; although quickly realises that he’s destined to be disappointed in this aim the moment that Beverly turns round, takes one look at him, and exclaims: “Will Graham. You look a million times better than when I last saw you. What – or, more to the point, who – have you been doing?”

“I haven’t been doing anyone…anything,” says Will irritably. “I’ve just got my medication sorted out is all.”

“Medication?” repeats Beverly. “Really? I’ve never heard it called that before.” Will shoots her an exasperated look and she gives a rather wicked smile in response then pushes her papers to one side so she can give him her full attention. “So…what brand of ‘medication’ was it Will?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Go on – you can tell me. Was it tall, dark, handsome…foreign? It was, wasn’t it? Was it imported from Europe?”

“No.”

“Was it prescription only?”

“Don’t be stupid,” says Will. Sitting down next to her he determinedly tips his briefcase onto the desk so he can begin to leaf through his own stack of reports. “It was just regular suppressants.”

“Could you drive or operate heavy machinery after taking it?” says Beverly innocently. “Could you have alcohol with it? And was it administered orally, or…”

“Oh seriously, just drop it can’t you? Anyway what happened wasn’t funny.”

“What wasn’t funny?”

Will pauses then puts down his sheaf of papers and peers at Beverly from over the top of his glasses. “You mean you haven’t heard?”

“You mean you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?” asks Beverly, looking genuinely confused.

Will sighs rather heavily, unable to decide whether he’s relieved that news of last night’s fiasco hasn’t spread as widely as feared or disappointed that this means he’s now going to have to explain it in all its depressing detail. Beverly raises her eyebrows as a silent prompt to continue, so Will runs a weary hand over his face then attempts to outline what happened as simply and concisely as possible – taking care to describe the respective roles played by Price, Hannibal and Jack, while refusing to mention anything from the taxi drive onwards. Beverly emits a reassuring succession of angry and sympathetic noises as he’s explaining it and looks suitably appalled when he’s finished. “Oh Will,” she says. “I’m so sorry. It must have been terrifying for you.”

“It wasn’t exactly one of my greatest hits.”

“You’re okay now though? You said you got some suppressants?”

“I’m sorted, yeah.”

“Honestly,” adds Beverly, “I’m really sorry. I’d never have said what I did if I’d known. It’s just when you walked in now you looked…”
Like I just got laid, thinks Will gloomily. He supposes that Beverly, as an alpha, would be able to pick up on certain cues and the thought is so incredibly mortifying that he knows his embarrassment must have briefly shown on his face. In fact for a few seconds it seems like the two of them are staring at one another with matching expressions of agonised awkwardness before Beverly breaks the tension by starting to giggle which makes Will smile too and finally begin to relax. “Well the main thing is you’re okay now,” adds Beverly more seriously.

“I’m fine,” replies Will in the usual automatic way before realising, with a jolt of surprise, that this time it’s fairly close to being true.

Beverly smiles again then gives Will a friendly pat on the arm. “We should gift-wrap a bedpan for Price,” she says. “In honour of services rendered.”

“He’d probably quite like that.”

“I reckon he’s earned it,” adds Beverly. “I’d like to brain Skinner with one myself. Honestly. There’s just no excuse for behaviour like that.”

“I know. It was awful.”

“It’s not like you can’t control it if you really try. It’s what they give alpha personnel training for after all.” She pauses then sighs again, obviously aggrieved at the idea of it. “Although you said that at least Jack and Hannibal behaved themselves?”

Will darts a quick look at her from beneath his eyelashes although is relieved to see that the question isn’t loaded in any way; a genuine expression of concern as opposed to an insinuation. “You know that offer’s still open for a drink,” adds Beverly, sounding like she’s trying to choose her words with care. “If there’s ever anything you want to talk about? Anything or…anyone.”

“Sure,” replies Will, promptly dropping his eyes back to the reports.

“Anneke would like to see you.”

“Yep.”

“Anytime – just let me know.”

“I’ll do that.”

Beverly opens her mouth, closes it again, then tactfully decides to let the subject drop in favour of returning to her own pile of reports and leaving Will to submerge himself in his so that the next few hours pass in a comfortably companionable silence that’s broken only by the occasional query or request for clarification. “There’s something about this guy that really bothers me,” says Beverly after a while, wincing over the photographs from the most recent post-mortem. “He’s so utterly unhinged. I mean I know they all are, but there’s something seriously disturbed about this one. It reminds me of that lecture you gave – remember? The one about organised and disorganised offenders?”

Will does remember, partly because it was the same evening he met Siemens and Skinner for the first time but mostly because of the loaded exchange with Hannibal that followed shortly afterwards. Briefly he now imagines the scene: the dark, gleaming pupils flickering over him and the faint smile on the angular face. They do say that the purpose of Art is to convey the truth of a thing, not to be the truth itself. Then he realises that at some point he’s closed his eyes so abruptly snaps them open again, struggling against the temptation to begin re-envisaging what happened last night. “I know,” he finally replies. “There’s a clear confusion in MOs – I’ve always thought so.”
“Split personality?”

“No,” says Will firmly. “Dissociative identities are a feature of trauma survivors and it’s a population that’s extremely unlikely to be violent – certainly not to this type of extent. No, the Sculptor knows exactly what he’s doing and is in complete control of it.” He hesitates then looks bleak. “I think he’s starting to enjoy it.”

Beverly’s features begin to arrange themselves into the same expression of grim foreboding as Will’s. “How’s it going with the review of the Richard Black case? Any new links?”

“I’m still looking into it,” says Will, his thoughts straying once again to the ‘WG’ business card and the association with himself that’s starting to appear undeniable. “There’s also this bystander that was spotted at two of the scenes in a row – that Matthew Brown guy.”

“The name’s a bit similar.”

“Coincidence,” snaps Will.

“Yeah, most probably,” agrees Beverly. Putting down her pen she stretches and yawns. “Look at that Will; it’s nearly two o’clock. We’ve been here for hours, we should get some lunch.”

“Okay, great,” says Will, who’s just about reached his carrying capacity for gruesome photographs and is more than ready for a break. “You go on ahead, I’ll meet you in the cafeteria.”

“You sure?” asks Beverly, beginning to wriggle out of her lab coat. “I’m happy to wait for you.”

“No, you go on. I’ve just got a few things to finish up first.”

“Will,” says Beverly, folding her arms to play-act at being severe. “Switch it off for a while. You need some down time.”

“I know, I won’t be long,” replies Will; and who in fact is not remotely interested in doing any more work as opposed to taking advantage of a few minutes alone to call Hannibal. Then he brandishes a nearby sheaf of papers to illustrate the point and waits until Beverly has smiled and sighed and obligingly exited the lab before diving into his coat pocket to retrieve his phone. The intensity with which he feels like he wants to hear Hannibal’s voice is actually rather embarrassing, although he can’t deny that the mere idea of it is making him feel better – despite the fact that Hannibal can’t be guaranteed to say anything remotely comforting (as opposed to a string of cryptic remarks, or possibly nothing at all) and there’s a real chance that the conversation will be entirely one-sided with Will rambling away on one side and Hannibal sitting in amused silence on the other. Will now can’t help smiling affectionately at the thought of Hannibal’s capacity for magnificently imperious muteness, and is just preparing to hit the call button when he’s foiled by the clatter of footsteps in the corridor as the lab door swings open again and Siemens comes bumbling in, closely followed by Price and Zeller. Will sighs to himself in a long-suffering way and mournfully replaces the phone in his pocket.

“Hey Will,” says Siemens. He sounds rather bashful, and while he wasn’t present at last night’s crime scene Will can immediately tell from his manner – even more gauche and stilted than normal – that someone must have told him what happened. Siemens now blinks a few times then clears his throat with an unpleasant scraping sound, and Will makes a vague humming noise in place of a proper greeting then returns to collecting his papers together as an excuse to avoid looking at the pink perspiring face.

“Good to see you,” says Siemens. Possibly he’s trying to communicate solidarity, although Will can’t
help feeling it’s the sort of voice tone you might use with an ailing, elderly relative. “You okay?”

“Fine.”

“Skinner’s looking for you,” adds Siemens. This time it’s the type of tone in which you’d inform the elderly relative that their house is about to get repossessed. “He asked me to tell you that he wants a word.”

“Right,” says Will tersely, beginning to shuffle the papers even faster than before while resisting the temptation to announce that Skinner can have two words if he wants them – ‘fuck’ and ‘off’ – or, if he insists of the economy of one, a choice between ‘bullshit,’ ‘asshole’, or even (hopefully), ‘fired.’

Behind Siemens’ back, Price and Zeller exchange pointed looks with one another. “I should have a word with Skinner myself,” proclaims Price into the resulting awkward silence. “Thanks to him I received the most wonderful gift basket. Although credit where credit’s due Will, I really ought to be thanking you as well: one for the bedpan and one for the body bag.” Will looks at him in surprise and Price adds, rather smugly: “Hannibal sent it. It arrived half an hour ago.”

“O-h-h,” says Will. From the way Price is beaming at him he suspects some sort of additional response is probably required, although it’s difficult to devise one because he’s struggling to process exactly how he feels about this. Silently weighing it up for a few seconds he decides to opt for pleased, tempered by a touch of embarrassment, and finished up with a small pinch of annoyance towards Hannibal for acting as if he has some sort of responsibility to reward people for behaving kindly to Will. “That was nice of him,” he finally says. Price continues beaming in the manner of a gameshow host and Will adds, rather lamely: “I guess I should probably have sent you something myself.”

“Well you know what they say,” replies Price. “Better late than never. Do feel free to make your appreciation known at any point.”

“What was in the basket?” asks Siemens, who has no real reason to be there now he’s delivered his message but seems oddly reluctant to leave.

“It was food mostly. All kinds of gourmet things I’d never heard of; I called him up to thank him and had to resist the temptation to get a set of instructions. Although I did ask what was in the pâté – there was no label on the jar.”

“What did he say?”

“He said ‘I’d tell you but then you’d be afraid to try it,’” replies Price. “I expect it’s something fearsome and exotic, like kangaroo livers.”

“I ate kangaroo once when I was in Melbourne,” says Siemens to no one in particular. “It was a little like beef.”

“I had cojones in Spain,” adds Zeller, determined not to be outdone. “They were…” He pauses then frowns. “Actually they were pretty gross.”

“Although if you will insist on eating testicles then what do you expect?” demands Price matter-of-factly. “Male genitals are hardly the most lovable of things after all.”

“I guess.”

“It’s not a matter of guessing,” replies Price. “They are not remotely lovable; and I speak from experience, because I’ve had to observe far more than my fair share during the course of my career.
In fact they’re terrible things when you really think about it…like a weasel embryo clutching two bulging sacks of garbage.” He pauses when he sees that everyone is staring at him with their mouths slightly open. “Well it’s true,” says Price. “Don’t tell me it hasn’t crossed your mind.”

“That has never crossed my mind,” protests Zeller.

“It will now,” replies Price smugly. “You’re welcome by the way.”

Zeller rolls his eyes so extravagantly they briefly look at risk of separating themselves from their sockets, then seems to mentally give up and abandons Price entirely in order to cross the room to talk to Will instead. “I feel like I need to bleach my brain,” he says as an opening greeting. “Although there’s probably not enough bleach in the world to get rid of that image.” Will smiles slightly and Zeller adds in a more serious tone: “It’s good to see you Will. We didn’t expect you to be in today. Not after…well. Y’know.”

“Yeah: I know.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” says Will. “More or less.”

“It’s why we’re here actually,” adds Zeller, lowering his voice. “Price was worried when he heard you’d been seen in the building. He wanted to come and check on you.”

“Did he?” says Will, who’s rather touched by this – not least because of the unfamiliar experience of someone showing concern for him that isn’t driven in any way by self-interest. “That was thoughtful.”

“Yeah, well, he has his moments. Making terrible conversation about genitals is his way of trying to break the ice.”

“I don’t mind,” says Will with another faint smile. “Let’s face it, it’s not like there wasn’t a lot of ice to break.” Zeller nods sympathetically and Will smiles again and adds: “To be honest it’s a relief not to have to dwell on what happened. I’d rather he just treated me as normal.”

“By making weird genital analogies?”

“I would, yeah.”

“Would you?” says Zeller. “In that case, I’ve got another one for you: what do you call that big, useless bit of skin at the end of an alpha’s penis?”

“A knot?”

“No,” says Zeller. “An alpha.” He and Will begin cackling with rather malicious laughter, then are abruptly forced sober up when the lab door opens again and they see Jack bearing down on them – closely followed by Hannibal.

“What’s that about alphas?” asks Jack jovially.

“Nothing,” says Zeller.

“Nothing,” says Will.

“Well it definitely sounded like something,” persists Jack.
Hannibal gives a very faint smirk, as if having already guessed the essence of what they were saying, then prowls over and casually puts his hand on Will’s shoulder in front of everyone. “I met with Beverly in the foyer,” he says, “she’s been looking for you.”

“Oh God, yeah, I told her I’d only be a few minutes,” replies Will, jointly flustered both by Hannibal’s unexpected appearance and guilt at keeping Beverly waiting. “I should go find her.”

“Well before you do…” says Hannibal. Reaching into his briefcase he retrieves an official-looking envelope and puts it into Will’s hand, briefly allowing their fingers to brush together as he passes it over. “This arrived just before lunch. Elizabeth Lewis has exceeded herself as usual.”

“Ah, that’s wonderful,” says Will earnestly. “Thank you so much.”

Hannibal nods in acknowledgement then slowly runs his eyes over Will’s face before lowering his voice so the others can’t hear. “It’s extremely well-timed,” he says softly. “And therefore means you have no reason at all to leave the house after tomorrow.”

“I know,” replies Will with a touch of irritation. “I’m not going to.”

Hannibal pauses for a while then gazes very intensely into Will’s eyes in a way that makes Will feel distinctly light-headed. “And you’re still going to let me drive you home after work?”

“Yes,” replies Will, lowering his own voice. “I told you I would. I’ll come round after I’ve seen my doctor.”

Hannibal nods again then finally removes his hand from Will’s shoulder, leaving him to falter for a few seconds as a deep reluctance to leave battles against a sense of guilt over Beverly. “Look I need to go,” he says when the former eventually wins out. “I’m sorry, but – I’ll see you soon.”

“Very soon,” murmurs Hannibal. It shouldn’t really be possible to pronounce such simple words in a tone of voice so incredibly suggestive and smouldering, yet somehow he manages it. In fact he manages it so well that Will grows concerned he might be blushing as a result, and is almost relieved when Price appears to ambush Hannibal in order to renew his appreciation for the gift basket – just as Jack comes bearing down to ambush Will from the other side and express his relief at seeing him looking so well.

“Yeah, I’m doing better now,” says Will firmly, attempting to cut the outpouring off in full flow. “I wanted to tie up a few loose ends then I’ll be off until next week. I figured I could use some time at home.”

“Sure,” replies Jack, “whatever you think’s best.” Will nods appreciatively and Jack hesitates before beginning to look more sombre again. “Look, I don’t want to put you under any pressure Will but we need you at full strength. Three new killings in as many months…the press are going berserk.”

“I know. I know they are.”

“He’s escalating,” adds Jack, inadvertently slipping into the attitude of weary stoicism that Will recognises from numerous press conferences. “It’s a crisis situation now Will – we need all possible resources on this until The Sculptor’s caught.”

“I know,” snaps Will. “What do you want me to say Jack? I’m doing everything I can. And Hannibal and I are going to go through Richard Black’s prison file after I…” He pauses and briefly looks awkward. “After I’m feeling better.”

“Good,” says Jack, who’s now looking faintly awkward himself. “That’s…yeah. That’s good.” He
starts nodding rather furiously as if to demonstrate how good it is, and Will finds himself nodding too to keep him company before catching sight of his reflection in the window and realising how stupid they both look. “I’m relying on you here,” adds Jack. “The more I think about it the more I’m convinced there’s some kind of link between The Sculptor and The Nemesis.”

Will is sorely tempted to deliver his usual lecture about not giving Richard Black the posthumous satisfaction of calling him The Nemesis, but ultimately decides that he can’t really be bothered so repeats his previous assurances about being committed to the case instead – even though he’s uttered variations of the same thing so often it’s starting to feel vaguely meaningless – before gathering his belongings together and casting one last yearning glance at Hannibal from across the room. Hannibal’s eyes calmly meet his from over the top of Price’s head and Will gives a small smile before finally forcing himself to leave so he can find Beverly and apologise for keeping her waiting. But as soon as the door closes behind him it feels like all the good humour and companionship are being sealed off inside, and as his footsteps echo down the empty corridor Will can’t help being aware of how his peaceful mood from earlier is slowly seeping away – not least because of Jack’s reflections on The Sculptor fully reinforcing the horrors Will’s going to have to wade through even if (when?...oh please let it be when) Andrew is finally sent packing back down South. In this respect the lawyer’s letter is practically burning a hole in his pocket and he finally stops walking then takes it out so he can turn it over a few times in his hands. The knowledge that it’s destined to end up in Andrew’s long nicotine-stained fingers makes it seem rather odious, and despite knowing the aversion is irrational he can’t help feeling a burning desire to get rid of it as soon as possible as a kind of symbolic gesture of separation. Unfortunately it means he’s going to be beyond late to meet Beverly, but now the thought’s occurred to him it’s impossible to ignore it; so Will casts a guilty look towards the cafeteria then abruptly turns away from it and heads towards the foyer instead – and where he’s forced to wait with mounting irritation while the receptionist, who’s obviously new and annoyingly inefficient, babbles into the phone about an order for printer paper with a level of earnest detail that’s almost admirable in its extreme pointlessness.

“Sorry to keep you waiting Mr Graham,” he says when he finally hangs up. “Only stationary suppliers...you know how they are.” Will stares back stony-faced, struggling not to snap something sarcastic. “I guess you wouldn’t know,” adds the receptionist apologetically. “What can I do for you?”

“A man’s going to come here on Friday looking for me,” replies Will, getting straight to the point. “Tall. Australian accent. Good-looking,” he adds, rather grudgingly. “His name’s Andrew Alderton. Can you make sure he gets this? It’s important.”

“Sure thing Mr Graham,” says the receptionist, gingerly taking hold of the envelope between finger and thumb like it’s something explosive. “I’ll do that. But what if he heads to your office first?”

“It’ll be locked though won’t it,” says Will with heroic levels of patience. “Seeing as I’m not going to be here.”

“Oh yes,” says the receptionist brightly. “I guess it will.”

Will cranks out a smile then lingers for a few more seconds to ensure the envelope’s been safely stowed away with the correct label before spinning round and preparing to leave – only to let out a startled gasp as he bows head-first into a spindly figure which was lurking nearby amongst the pillars like a large spider and has now successfully pounced down on him from the opposite direction.

“I’m sorry,” says Skinner in a stiff, formal voice. “I thought you knew I was there. I was trying to get your attention.”
Will straightens up then frowns at Skinner while internally cursing the crappy, awful luck that’s managed to orchestrate this unwanted meeting at the most inconvenient possible moment. “Did Siemens pass my message on?” adds Skinner, who seems oblivious to the way Will’s glaring at him. “I wanted to speak with you.”

“He did yeah.”

“Mr Crawford said I had to apologise,” adds Skinner in the same overly-formal way. “For my behaviour last night.”

Will, who’s unpleasantly aware of the way the receptionist’s ears are practically starting to flap with curiosity, gives a terse nod of acknowledgement then proceeds to steer Skinner away from the desk towards a more deserted part of the foyer where they’re unlikely to be overheard. “I was out of line,” ploughs on Skinner. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you that way.” He pauses then darts Will a distinctly malicious look. “Mr Crawford is sending me for the omega sensitisation training. Apparently it’s standard for alphas who work here, but we never had anything like that in my last field office.”

Even though he knew there was no real chance of Jack having the power to fire Skinner – at least not without getting a Wrongful Dismissal lawsuit through the post in return – the fact that the stupid bastard isn’t going to be sent away over what happened is still deeply disappointing. Will now frowns all over again with annoyance at the thought of it – and which proceeds to deepen even further at the awareness of how Skinner is delivering what he believes is Will’s expected cue as an omega: to graciously accept an alpha’s apology, preferably accompanied by a self-effacing little observation about how it was hardly Skinner’s fault all things considered. Only Will has always rejected those kind of bullshit societal scripts, so rather than doing either of these things he instead fires back with: “You’re right. You shouldn’t have behaved that way.”

Skinner, as expected, promptly drops the pretence at politeness and immediately becomes defensive instead. “Yeah well, no offence Will, but you need to take a bit of responsibility too,” he snaps. “I mean why the hell did you go out in the first place? Jesus, are you a teenager or something? I thought adult omegas knew better than that.”

“It’s not like I planned it,” replies Will fiercely. “Besides, no other FBI staff behaved that way.” He pauses then adds with obvious contempt: “Only you.”

Skinner flushes an ugly red colour, as if he’s so overstuffed with his own self-righteousness that he’s finding difficult to breathe. “Maybe so,” he hisses, glaring at Will like he wants to punch him, “but it’s not like it was due to self-control; it was only because Mr Crawford and Dr Lecter were keeping them off.” He pauses for effect and then actually wags his finger at Will as if he’s an errant five year old. “It was hardly a very good use of their time. Quite frankly you should be ashamed of yourself. You had two of the most senior taskforce members hanging round in front of a patrol car half the night because you didn’t have the sense to stay indoors when your heat was starting.”

Will opens his mouth to explain about the mishap with the suppressants before deciding that he doesn’t owe Skinner any kind of explanation and closing it again. “You realise your alpha should put you on lock down when you’re like that?” persists Skinner, determined to labour the point. “He could get fined. If I’d wanted to I could have said something to him.”

At the sound of the words Will goes extremely still, unpleasantly aware of the way that every single hair on the back of his neck has started to stand on end. “What do you mean?” he says slowly.

“That tall, good-looking guy,” replies Skinner with obvious disdain, as if good looks are a sign of weak character and he’s privately congratulating himself for having the sense and self-restraint to
avoid them. “He showed up this morning looking for you.” Will nervously darts his tongue over his lips and Skinner pauses then repeats the same malicious smile as before. “He read about what happened on The TattleCrime. I have to tell you Will…he wasn’t very pleased when I explained how you vanished with Dr Lecter.”

Will can feel a muscle starting to twitch in his jaw at the idea of this, but through a huge force of effort manages to compose his features into an expression of disinterest and simply reply: “That’s hardly any of your business, is it?”

“Yeah, well, whatever” says Skinner, shrugging in an over-exaggerated way as if Will, Hannibal and Andrew are a matter of such monumental tedium that he’s already regretting even bothering to mention them. “I told Mr Crawford I’d apologise and now I have. I’m not proud of how I acted; although the main thing is that I’d never have touched you without your permission.”

“You mean like how you wouldn’t leave when I told you to?” hisses Will.

“I would’ve done eventually,” says Skinner in an absurdly pompous voice. “At the time you seemed as if you wanted an alpha. But I wouldn’t have forced you to do anything you didn’t want to. I don’t need to force anyone.”

Will stares back steely-faced, refusing to offer any kind of absolution, and Skinner clears his throat again then smooths downs the lapels on his jacket. “I’m not going to be a hypocrite about it,” he adds. “You know as well as I do we’ve had our differences. But that doesn’t change the fact I wouldn’t have hurt you.”

Will shoots Skinner a look of pure contempt and is preparing to walk away entirely when a sudden idea comes to him that causes him to pause. Of course there’s no doubt that Skinner isn’t genuinely sorry about what happened; yet the humiliation of being sent on the training, combined with being forced to apologise to an omega, has left him in a position of relative vulnerability. And catching Skinner exposed and unguarded means that Will’s ideally placed to take advantage of it – in effect, by using it as an opportunity to ambush him with something that’s been bothering Will for months.

Turning back round again Will begins to regard Skinner steadily, monitoring each sign of unease and irritation to get a gauge of his emotional baseline so he can compare it to what’s going to happen in a few seconds time. “Okay then,” he says with clear deliberation. “Fine: I’ve heard you out. Now I want to ask you something in return.” Skinner narrows his eyes, simultaneously uneasy yet hostile, and Will adds without missing a beat: “Were you the one who told Freddie Lounds about The Sculptor’s ‘WG’ note?”

As Skinner’s mouth falls open in surprise Will leans in a little closer so he can observe the full impact of being confronted with the accusation so directly; ignoring the verbal response – which he already knows is going to be a denial – in favour of scrutinising voice tone and body language. “No,” snaps Skinner venomously. “I never told her.”

“No,” repeats Skinner, although this time there’s a thread of anxiety in his voice which would probably be undetectable to most people but which to Will seems extremely obvious. “She didn’t hear about the note from me. Jesus, get over yourself Graham. You really think I’d endanger an entire investigation because of you? You omegas are all the same: spoilt, arrogant and completely self-obsessed. You think the whole world revolves round you.” He takes a threatening step forward so he can loom menacingly into Will’s space; and Will, in turn, squares his shoulders then holds his ground, refusing to show any signs of being intimidated. “Who else have you said this to?” snarls Skinner. “Have you been going round accusing me of spilling to The TattleCrime? Running your
mouth to Mr Crawford? Because if you have…”

“You’ll do what?” snaps Will, equally threateningly.

Skinner twitches with surprise at this show of fierceness then falters for a few seconds before finally dropping his eyes first; at which point Will really does turn round and leave, his mind humming and buzzing the entire time with the weight of this new discovery. Because although there’s no way to be sure, all his instincts are telling him that while Skinner was the source of the quote about the level of suspicion and mistrust surrounding Will, he wasn’t the one who first told Freddie about the card. Which begs the critical question of… who did? In fact he’s so gloomily and anxiously preoccupied with trying to work this out that he doesn’t notice Skinner glaring at his departing back as he walks off, or how his face twists into a waxy, distorted mask of sheer loathing. But most of all, he doesn’t notice the way that Skinner waits until Will has turned the corner before sidling back towards the foyer – or how he begins an earnest discussion with the receptionist while his gnarled fingers repeatedly gesture across the desk at where the letter for Andrew is lying.

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Having made his delivery for Will – and which would admittedly have been far more convenient to accomplish via courier, but infinitely more pleasurable to perform in person – Hannibal reluctantly returns to his own office where he spends an hour seeing patients (tedious) and another hour making arrangements for his absence over the next few days (also tedious, but at least with ends that justify the means) before finally settling behind his desk and allowing himself to indulge in a period of irritating yet unavoidable restlessness over the fact that repeated enquiries have still failed to produce any information on where Andrew might be. That this lack of success was expected does nothing to diminish its aggravation and Hannibal, who is used to getting his own way in all things with only a minimal level of effort, is now struggling not to feel resentful over it. As if this problem wasn’t enough there’s also the issue of Will’s forthcoming heat to be considered; and at the idea of it he begins to frown all over again, because his current level of preoccupation – one might even call it anxiety – over another person’s wellbeing in extremely unusual and therefore not entirely welcome. In fact it’s difficult not to feel aggrieved at the indignity of succumbing to neurotic worries in the same way as a normal person would, and Hannibal permits himself an irritated sigh in tribute to his situation before closing his eyes and steeping his fingers beneath his chin. Nevertheless the concern remains there regardless, prickling and stabbing at the edge of his consciousness with the same persistence that Will himself is able to do, and to deny its presence is therefore not only entirely pointless but a waste of time; and wasting time is something to which Hannibal, on principle, is usually strongly opposed.

Earlier that morning his secretary arranged a bunch of winter dapne in a bowl on his desk, and Hannibal now opens his eyes again to give it his full attention. To an observer he looks as if he’s admiring it, although this is not because the flowers are particularly interesting in themselves but rather because of how their pale fragility reminds him of Will – an impression compounded by the fact that the vulnerable appearance is entirely deceiving and the daphne is actually highly venomous. The florist made a solemn speech about it to his secretary, who imparted it to Hannibal; and who, in turn, allowed the flowers to be placed close to the existing jar of bright yellow jasmine because he likes the contrast of the riotous yet harmless blooms that draw the eye and demand attention while the subtle lethal dapne lies in wait at its side; so beautiful yet so deadly. He now slowly runs his eyes over it, admiring how translucent it is and how the rosy glow of the lamplight make the delicate white petals look as if they’re blushing. Like pale skin, flushed and lovely in the middle of the night, lying underneath Hannibal and trembling in his arms. Something so apprehensive and elegiac, yet still fierce and defiant, and completely insensible to the breathless tender longing it inspires. Hannibal sighs again, then narrows his eyes before finally admitting defeat and grudgingly pulling his phone towards him (game, set and match to Will) in order to take the unprecedented step of lowering
himself to ask advice from another doctor. Or, more specifically, a specialist in omega health who’s renowned for his extensive knowledge of heat-related complaints and complications.

As is typical amongst doctors claiming expertise in omegan bodies, Dr Hall reveals himself to be an alpha. Fortunately he’s also obliging and biddable – and is clearly flattered to have been sought out by someone of such high professional standing as Hannibal is – so proves very willing to provide both his consultation and his time at extremely short notice. Normally Hannibal would have invited him to his office; or even, seeing as it’s on behalf of Will, have actually taken the trouble to shift himself to Dr Hall’s. But even though Will’s unlikely to be finished seeing his own doctor any earlier than 7 o’clock, Hannibal still doesn’t want to take the risk of him turning up to find an empty house, so ultimately decides to invite Dr Hall round for an early, informal dinner instead.

While Dr Hall on the phone seemed reasonably competent and professional (despite a nervous laugh, a clumsy turn of phrase, and a braying English accent like a refined donkey), Dr Hall in person turns out to be a round little man with a shock of wild hair like a gorse bush and a shiny red face like a billiard ball; and Hannibal takes one look at him and promptly loathes him on sight. Admittedly neither the braying voice nor the shiny face detract from him being a consultant clinician and therefore a source of potentially useful information; although once he’s mispronounced Hannibal’s name in an affected attempt at an Eastern European accent (then apologised and done it again even more badly), and made a series of facetious comments about the weather which he clearly believes are worthy of a response (before trekking mud across Hannibal’s expensive oak floorboards with his hoof-like feet) then the likelihood of him having anything remotely sensible to impart begins to diminish substantially. Dr Hall, in turn, privately finds Hannibal rather intimidating and is now busily overcompensating for it by adopting an overly breezy and casual manner in an attempt to appear more confident than he really feels; and in turn is completely unaware that Hannibal had intuited this within two minutes of first meeting him and has been exploiting it mercilessly ever since. Nevertheless Hannibal resolves to try and make the best of it, so grits his teeth and provides a concisely clinical summary of the situation with Will alongside the associated health concerns. Given that it’s common for alphas to help unbonded omegas through their heats – and that acknowledging himself as the alpha in question is the only way of getting the most detailed information – he’s rather reluctantly forced to be open about his own role, although is careful to present the emotional nature of the relationship as more casual and less intense than it actually is.

“How long on heat suppressants?” says Dr Hall, beginning to shovel radicchio into his mouth like an eager rodent. “Well, I suppose I don’t need to tell you that it’s going to be very hard for him. They don’t tend to manage well when the hormones hit them all at once; a bit unpredictable in that respect, poor little things.”

Hannibal, despite knowing that this is a reference to omegas in general, still finds it difficult to hear Will being patronized so excessively and gives an irritable shift in his chair. “Over-excitable,” continues Dr Hall with the manner of someone warming to their theme. “They need a steady hand.”

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal in a tone of voice that could quell a lump of granite.

“In fact you’ll probably have to hold him down at first before you can get anywhere with him,” says Dr Hall. Pausing for a few seconds he begins to twitch his nose appreciatively at the contents of his wine glass in a way that makes his large nostrils gape like a seal’s. “He should become a bit more manageable in a day or two though.”

“Perhaps,” replies Hannibal, who’s observing the progress of the nostrils with appalled fascination. “Although it’s hardly a question of him being ‘managed’.”

“You should grip onto the back of his neck if he gives you any trouble,” adds Dr Hall. “They seem
to respond well to that.” Having finished sniffing the wine he now takes a few sips and noisily
smacks his lips together. “But I should warn you; there’s a risk he’ll either get very panicked or…”
He pauses then brandishes his glass in a pointlessly theatrical way. “Very aggressive.”

“He will get aggressive,” says Hannibal fondly.

“Is that so?” replies Dr Hall, looking rather scandalized at the idea of an aggressive omega. “Then
you’ll need to hold him down.”

Hannibal, who finds such crude coercion distasteful, gives a sufficiently visible frown to make Dr
Hall raise his eyebrows when he sees it. “If you’ll excuse me saying so,” adds Hannibal, “that seems
a rather restricted perspective. I find it hard to believe there’s no other means.”

“Oh well, I suppose so,” replies Dr Hall dismissively. “Stroking, gentling, verbal reassurances…that
sort of thing. Those kind of pro-social activities you tend to see them doing with each other. Very
omegan; not what they’d necessarily expect from alphas.”

“I dare say,” replies Hannibal. “Although perhaps what they also don’t expect is a caricature of alpha
behaviour.”

“Yes, well, make sure he gets a lot of fluids,” says Dr Hall, who obviously doesn’t have a ready
response to this. “You don’t want him dehydrating.” Seeing as this is the first thing he’s said that’s
remotely worth hearing Hannibal decides to reward him with a glacial smile; although is still unable
to stop himself casting wistful glances at his steak knife at the same time as if fantasising about
thrusting it into Dr Hall’s relentlessly prattling head. Dr Hall, oblivious to either the look or the steak
knife, takes another noisy mouthful of salad and adds: “Did you say the original alpha is out of the
picture?”

“Yes, they’re estranged.”

“They might not stay that way,” says Dr Hall, disguising a small belch behind the back of his hand.
“He could find himself starting to pine for the first alpha. It doesn’t always happen, but having a heat
after a long period of suppression can bring out strange effects in some of them. It’s a biochemical
bond, not an emotional one – it’s not necessarily about being attached to the alpha, more like being
overwhelmed by them.”

Hannibal now frowns even more severely before carefully storing this information away for future
use; not least in order to prevent Will – by force, if necessary – from leaving the house immediately
after the heat. In this respect the idea of Andrew finding a depleted, disorientated Will and using it as
an opportunity to try and abduct him is genuinely concerning, and Hannibal bares his teeth very
slightly at the idea of it. “After not having heats for so long he’s going to be pretty much insatiable,”
adds Dr Hall, who’s completely unaware of the sudden snap of tension in the room. “You should be
prepared for that; he’s going to be demanding all the attention you can possibly give him and even
then it won’t be enough.” He gives Hannibal a distinctly lewd look which is not returned. “Nice
work if you can get it. And a male one too: they’re so rare, I only see one every few months.” He
pauses and examines his fork before adding, overly casually: “Attractive, is he?”

Hannibal’s eyes begin to narrow into little slits of displeasure. “Yes,” he says curtly. “Very.”

“Bless their souls they usually are. I don’t mind admitting I’ve got a bit of a weakness for them. As I
said, they’re quite uncommon in the clinic but I don’t think I’ve ever come across one that wasn’t
completely adorable. Well, I say ‘come across…’” Dr Hall roars with laughter and Hannibal begins
to twitch his steak knife like someone twirling a baton. “How’s his general health? Do send him
along to the clinic if you want him to have a check beforehand.”
“I can safely say that he won’t want that.”

“Well it’s not really up to him is it?” says Dr Hall in surprise. “If you think he needs one he should go. Just drop him off and we’ll keep hold of him for you until you’re able to come back and collect him. I could examine him myself then send you the report when I’ve finished? Admittedly we’re not supposed to – confidentiality and all that – but I don’t mind waiving the rules on occasion. I see it as being for their own good. Omegas don’t always know what’s best for them.”

Hannibal is actually briefly tempted by this, but ultimately concedes that it’s going to be impossible to force Will to go anywhere (at least not without the risk of him wrecking some costly clinic equipment in revenge which Hannibal, as the responsible alpha, is going to get billed for) but mostly because collusion with this appalling individual is hardly worth it for information that, with a few careful questions, he could almost certainly get himself anyway. So in the end he just gives Dr Hall one of his more wintry smiles and says “I’m much obliged to you, but no.”

“Well let me know if you change your mind and want to bring him along,” says Dr Hall before adding, rather lasciviously: “He’d be in safe hands.”

Hannibal’s wintry smile promptly plummets a few degrees further; and which, unbeknown to Dr Hall, is a non-verbal way of indicating that he would rather slice off the same hands before allowing them within any kind of touching distance of Will. In this respect the entire conversation is proving grimly illuminating in terms of the kind of exploitation and condescension that omegas have to battle on a daily basis; and Hannibal experiences a strong pang of admiration that Will has managed to endure it at all. “I must say that’s an ideal set-up,” adds Dr Hall, cheerfully unaware of the way Hannibal has begun to glare at him. “Enjoy them while they’re in heat then drop them back home afterwards without all the trouble of bonding. That’s always struck me as rather a waste; why would you want to limit yourself to just one?”

“How indeed?” says Hannibal, thoughtfully brandishing the steak knife in Dr Hall’s direction as if trying to illustrate the point.

“I suppose he must be looking rather irresistible at the moment,” continues Dr Hall; and which is clearly one of his more ridiculous observations, considering that Will is irresistible all the time. “They’re at their most attractive in the days before the heat starts. Their hair, their complexions…it’s really quite charming.” Mistaking Hannibal’s blank stare as interest as opposed to homicide, he then proceeds to deliver an unbelievably boring lecture about how heat hormones cause a thickening of the dermic coat in omegas’ hair; at which point there’s a knock on the door and Hannibal is glad to take the opportunity to escape in order to answer it, despite the fact it’s almost certainly going to be Will and having him in the vicinity of Dr Hall without dismembering the latter is going to test Hannibal’s self-control to an almost impossible degree.

Will has his hands thrust in his pockets and is stamping his feet against the cold as Hannibal opens the door: bundled up in an extremely ugly scarf and even more pale and tired than usual under the sickly glow of the street lights, yet somehow still managing to appear elegiac and wanly glamourous where most people would just look threadbare. “Hey” says Will, noticeably brightening up when he sees Hannibal. “Sorry not to give you any notice; I was going to call ahead but I was driving.”

Hannibal’s tense expression softens slightly and Will gestures at Dr Hall’s large red sports car, which is currently sprawled halfway across the driveway as if it’s drunk and has fallen over. “Have I caught you at a bad time?”

Hannibal runs his eyes over Will’s face again, mentally appraising the possibility of persuading him to allow Hannibal to purchase a coat and scarf that are less disastrous before regretfully concluding
that the chances of this hover somewhere between slim to none. “Not bad, no,” he replies. “Just… preoccupied. But come in; I’ll be free shortly.”

Will nods appreciatively and then allows himself to be pulled forward into Hannibal’s arms to be caressed, kissed and generally fussed over before following him into the kitchen, earnestly describing Beverly’s findings on the recent post-mortem the whole way. “…In the entire abdominal cavity,” concludes Will, before noticing Dr Hall and immediately falling silent. “Oh – sorry,” he adds. “I didn’t see you there.”

Dr Hall darts his beady little eyes over Will, puts two and two together, then mouths ‘is that him?’ at Hannibal in an overly dramatic way that’s intended to be discreet but manages to succeed in drawing more attention to himself than if he’d just spoken it out loud. “Are you all right?” asks Will rather doubtfully.

Dr Hall beams a coy smile in Will’s direction. “I’m perfectly fine, thank you.”

“Okay…that’s good,” replies Will, beginning to casually rifle through the papers on the counter. “For a minute there I thought you might be choking. Hannibal, do you have the autopsy reports from Number Five to hand? I’ve left mine at the office.”

“Well now, autopsies?” says Dr Hall jovially. “Steady on there little fellow. We don’t want to make ourselves anxious do we? Not with a nasty subject like that.”

Will pauses in going through the papers then turns round with his mouth partly open.

“They’re on my desk,” says Hannibal calmly. “In the office. Feel free to go and get them.”

Will nods in acknowledgement then falters for a few seconds and casts a look of incomprehension at Dr Hall before walking out the kitchen.

“What a little poppet,” coos Dr Hall.

“What did you just call me?” says Will, coming straight back again.

“I believe he called you a ‘poppet,’” replies Hannibal, completely deadpan. The sound of him putting quote marks round the word is extremely obvious, and Will catches his eye and can feel his mouth starting to twitch before looking back at Dr Hall and struggling to decide whether to burst out laughing or explode with annoyance.

“Come over here then little chap,” adds Dr Hall, pulling out the chair next to his own and giving it an encouraging pat. “Let me have a look at you.”

Will glances towards Hannibal again, who’s now begun spinning the knife in something like a frenzy, then returns to weighing up the relative cost-benefit ratio of laughter vs. explosion according to the amount of energy required for each one and the effect most likely to result. While he’s trying to make up his mind, Hannibal takes advantage of the resulting silence to charmingly but firmly thank Dr Hall for his invaluable input before proceeding to escort him from the premises. “I appreciate your time,” adds Hannibal as he’s gathering up his coat. “It’s been a very enlightening evening.”

“You know where I am if you need me,” says Dr Hall with a wistful glance at Will.

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal. “In that respect may I have your business card? One never knows; I might need to pick your brain in the future.”

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“Who the hell was that guy?” asks Will a little while later, who’s now lying across the sofa using Hannibal’s lap as a pillow. He’s still not entirely sure how he ended up like this. It just sort of… happened.

“A specialist in omega health,” replies Hannibal, who’s flicking through the autopsy report with one hand while stroking Will’s hair with other. “You know I’m apprehensive about your heat after what happened last time – and I am not above asking for advice on occasion.”

“You could have just asked me,” says Will, who nevertheless feels quite touched by the concern.

“You are quite right. I apologise. Although rest assured I was suitably punished for it; the man possessed levels of idiocy that were positively operatic.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“In retrospect I should have accounted for that,” sighs Hannibal. “He’s extremely prestigious in his field, and it’s almost a certainty for such people to be idiotic in precise proportion to their levels of prestige.”

“Aren’t you extremely prestigious in your field?” says Will innocently.

“What a little horror you are,” replies Hannibal without looking up from the reports.

“I thought I was a little poppet.”

“Not at all,” says Hannibal with a small shudder at the sound of the word. “‘Poppet’ implies a degree of passiveness: you are a horror through and through.”

“Honestly though,” adds Will with contempt. “Alphas. If you ever call me a poppet I will kill you.”

“If I ever do it will not be necessary,” replies Hannibal gravely, “because I shall kill myself first.” Will makes an amused noise and Hannibal briefly stops stroking his hair and brushes a finger against his cheekbone instead. “In all seriousness though; his conversation illustrated what you described to me last night in an extremely bleak way. All the indignities and impositions you face as an omega: they may not be as immediately obvious as some of the other challenges, yet I can imagine how corrosive they eventually become.”

Will doesn’t reply to this, although leans into Hannibal’s touch in a contented way that shows he appreciates having his position taken seriously. Hannibal obligingly drops the subject and renews the stroking motion on Will’s hair; unable, as he does so, to resist the temptation to lean forward a little to inspect the texture. “Stop it,” snaps Will. “That tickles. What are you doing?

“Checking your hair’s dermic coat,” says Hannibal serenely. “Promoted, I am ashamed to say, by an observation from the illustrious Dr Hall. It’s supposed to get thicker before your heat starts, although I can’t see any evidence of it…oh no, maybe a little here.”

“Well don’t,” says Will, twisting his head out the way. “Are you a hairdresser now? Check your own dermic coat and get your hands off mine.”

“Humour me,” says Hannibal, guiding Will’s head back onto his knee again. “Mine is not as medically interesting as yours. Speaking of which, were you able to see your own doctor?”

Will knocks Hannibal’s hands away then resettles himself until he’s comfortable again and closes his eyes. “Yes,” he replies, and there’s a clear note of awkwardness woven through his voice. “I’m… yeah. I’m sorted out for the next few days.”
“The mention of it has made you go tense,” says Hannibal with interest. “Why does the discussion make you so uncomfortable? I thought you’d be relieved.”

Will cracks open his eyes and regards Hannibal rather owlishly for a few seconds from over the top of his glasses. “Because I’m still not used to it I suppose,” he finally says. “I’ve gone to a huge amount of trouble over the last few years to avoid the whole thing.” He pauses for a few more seconds then rolls flat onto his back so he can look at Hannibal directly. “Anyway, why aren’t you more uncomfortable? Your reaction’s the strange one if anything. I mean doesn’t any of this strike you as odd?”

“Perhaps a little,” replies Hannibal. Smiling slightly he reaches down so he can use his thumb to smooth away the small frown line that’s begun to form between Will’s eyebrows. “It’s certainly happened very fast.”

“I mean we’re going to do this and…and it’s odd.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” says Will fretfully. “How about the fact that it’s the most intimate two people can possibly be and it’s pretty much blown up out of nowhere? It’s not like we were particularly close before, is it? I don’t even know all that much about you.”

“What would you like to know?”

Will opens his mouth then abruptly closes it again; aware of being rather overwhelmed at the extensiveness of the offer because there’s so much he’d like to know and it’s difficult to decide where to begin. Mulling it over for a few seconds he finally remembers one of several pleas made to the Dear You of the journal entries and decides to opt for that as something simple yet potentially revealing. “I hardly know anything about your personal life,” he says.

“Such as?”

“Well, for starters: what do you like doing?”


“Oh come on. That’s all you’ve got to say? It sounds like the kind of bland ‘hobbies and interests’ segment you’d put on your resume.”

“How severe you are,” replies Hannibal fondly. “Although unfortunately for you, you are not going to succeed in assembling me from a composite of my pastimes. Ultimately I intend for you to gain a greater understanding of what I am rather than what I merely do – just as I hope to accomplish with yourself. And who knows; perhaps one might even inform the other? What we both contrive to do, as well as who we are.”

“Listen to you,” says Will, although he sounds affectionate rather than impatient. “Still addicted to talking in riddles. Sometimes I wonder whether even you fully understand what you mean.”

“Perhaps I don’t,” replies Hannibal with a smile. “Perhaps my speeches are self-directed – it’s you I’m speaking with after all. You profess to dislike riddles Will, and yet you are such a stunning one yourself. Your complexity is exquisite. And I could never entirely predict you: you simply smile and turn away, and elude every single attempt to pin you down and categorise you.”

“I could say the same about you,” says Will with a touch of irritation.
“I’m sure you could,” replies Hannibal, rather charmed at the idea of such an enterprise if Will was the one attempting it. “Only the difference in your case is that it’s so unconsciously done and deftly applied. I’ve often thought so, right from when I met you for the first time. You invite the kind of fascination against which common sense and self-interest rebel but from which there is no reasonable means of escape. The way you draw us all in…you’re not even aware you’re doing it are you? And yet it’s impossible to know you without becoming captivated by you.” Smiling to himself he now leans further back against the sofa so he can admire Will’s face in more detail and absorb all the variations of expression. The small, slim enigma with the large eyes and demure transgressions, thinks Hannibal approvingly. The nature that’s struck by continuing crisis, the vitality of youth and the graceful methods of maturity: ferocious and audacious with an exquisitely obscure mind – and the darkness that closes in around you, even as you’re dazzling us with how luminous you are.

Will, in turn, goes extremely quiet and still in response to this scrutiny before finally ducking his head and looking away; clearly uncomfortable with the flattery and not entirely sure how best to respond. Hannibal’s faint smile broadens at the sight of it as he gently resumes stroking Will’s hair again, privately reflecting the entire time on how much more there is to say. Infinitely more in fact; as if all his words in all his numerous languages merely exist in that moment as willing architects for constructing a temple of devotion to this beautiful being who’s so pale and wan and fragile-looking in a cocoon of plaid and dog hairs yet remains eternally capable of conjuring up such passionate adoration. Will, Hannibal decides, cannot really be explained or accounted for, only felt and experienced; and the awareness is a deeply uncomfortable one, because it reinforces yet another sign of Will’s uniqueness in how even a single look can instil a sense of unhappiness and longing in Hannibal which he has no capacity to control. There is no withstanding or escaping from you is there, he thinks now, running his hand against the base of Will’s skull. Whoever tasted you would hunger for you eternally yet never hope to be fully satisfied. How is satisfaction ever possible? You gratify one craving, only to immediately present another thing for me to crave for. I have perpetual longings in me and you are endless appetites and infinite variety. It would take a lifetime of years to fully know you; and if you wished to you could spend each and every one binding me to my desire for your mind and soul – to the limitless views from your imagination. I might have tried to entrap you, but even if I succeeded you would always demand the highest possible price for your capture.

“Hannibal?” murmurs Will sleepily.

“Yes, dearest.”

“You’ve gone so quiet. Are you bored?”

“In your presence,” replies Hannibal with a faint smile, “boredom is impossible. I sometimes wish it was not.”

“I don’t feel great – my head hurts. Would you take me home now?”

“Of course,” says Hannibal very softly, smoothing Will’s hair out of his eyes from where it’s begun to tangle there. “Although if you can bear to wait a little longer I need to pack a few things first. Assuming Dr Hall can be relied upon then this first heat could last quite a few days – and I don’t intend to leave you until it’s over.”

“S’okay,” mutters Will. “I don’t mind having you around.”

“Thank you,” says Hannibal with mock-seriousness.

Will smiles slightly then adds: “We can go in your car if you like. I know you hate driving mine.”

“Rest assured I recognise that offer as the enormous concession it is. I’m very obliged to you.”
“I can come and pick mine up from here. When... when I’m back to normal.”

“Never be normal,” says Hannibal briskly. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Yes it does.”

“It does not. Do you want to know why? Because normal people are ordinary; and you are destined to be extraordinary in every conceivable way.” Will smiles again at this and Hannibal smiles too then takes hold of his hand. “I promise you it’s going to be fine Will,” he adds in the same soft voice. “I realise you’re unsettled by the idea of it, but your health’s going to be so much better when you’re not taking those tablets. And regarding everything else...”

He deliberately leaves the sentence unfinished, allowing Will to interpret it however he wants to – whether the situation with Andrew or the deepening of their own relationship – in a way that doesn’t force any kind of premature intimacy in the response. Although Will, contrary to expectations, finally fails to devise any new doubts or objections and instead merely returns the pressure on Hannibal’s hand before catching his eye and replying, very soft and serious: “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew, sorry it’s gone quiet for so long my lovelies. I can imagine after months of weekly updates the sudden silence was frustrating, so enormous thanks for your patience. I eventually got to the point I needed a break from all the negativity surrounding this fic and have been recharging my batteries by doing some writing for a different fandom. But I’m back now with Writing Mojo intact and to reassure everyone who’s enjoying this that I love you all and will continue doing my best for you to get it finished quickly. As always, huge thanks to people who’ve been getting in touch with advice and positive feedback – I know I gush all over you at regular intervals, but it really does mean a lot to me and remains a major source of inspiration.

In this respect, bleh, but due to a broken laptop there’ll be no update next weekend. Yeah I know, after all that Triumph Over Adversity speech in the last paragraph #Anti-climax. I pretty much do all my Hannigramming on train journeys so am a bit screwed without it, but will (hopefully) be able to post the new chapter in a fortnight xxx

*Technical literary term
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I’ve been meaning to do this for a-g-e-s now, but this is a quick shout-out for anyone who enjoyed This Dangerous Game or the other one with the dementedly long title (honestly, wtf was I thinking?) and hasn’t visited in the last few months, as both now have podfics and beautiful new cover art and assorted chapter art. I won’t spam you with it all here, but the links are in the Gift section of my profile if you like that kind of content and want a chance to tell some very talented creators how brilliant they are :-) Speaking of which *drumroll* if you like Bright Hair then you should read This Dark Heart by Damonfreak89, which is an ABO story partly inspired by it and is highly recommend as a fantastic twist on canon written with incredible beauty and skill.

Huge hugs and thanks also to MrsSteampunk for making me a Sassy Will Gallery (meaning I have no excuses for writer’s block ever again). Anyone who can look at the first picture without laughing gets the Bryan Fuller Award for services to Hannigram.

Fiiiinally, please be warned that sections of this chapter are very smutty (NSFW! PORN! PORN! Omg…so much porn) although they’re clearly signposted so easy to skip if that’s not your thing.

Will decides later that he’s always going to remember the journey back as one of those rare moments where the various pieces assemble in the right time and the right way to render them strangely perfect. Of course it shouldn’t really be possible for something so mundane as a night-time drive to be perfect, and if he’s honest with himself it seems like a fairly stupid choice of adjective. Yet inappropriate or not it’s still somehow the right one, because it really is – it’s perfect – and there’s nothing about it he’d want to alter in any way. The silence is perfect, and the chilly silver landscape in the moonlight is perfect, and the sense of closeness and companionship is perfect too. Even his assorted fears and anxieties seem less urgent than usual, and he’s aware of being able to turn them over in his head with a curious sense of detachment like they’re nothing more than abstract conundrums which belong to someone else: examining them for a while before they lose all appeal and can be safely stashed away again and forgotten. At regular intervals Hannibal takes his hand off the wheel and casually rests it on Will’s thigh, and the easy intimacy of it is another thing that strikes Will as perfect to the extent he places his own hand over Hannibal’s just as casually then stretches back against the seat and gazes out at the way the clouds eddy and swirl like skeins of tattered silver silk in the sky. The radio is playing very softly in the background, a raw husky female vocalist crooning ‘Because the night belongs to lovers, because the night belongs to us…’ and it’s the type of soundtrack that would normally make Will squirm with self-conscious awkwardness but right now doesn’t at all, because – maybe what she’s singing is right?

The dogs, resentful of being left alone for so long, descend on Will as soon as he opens the door in a joyful flurry of fur and lolling pinks tongues; and by the time he’s greeted them, fed them, then let them out for a moonlit run he’s pleased to see that Hannibal has made himself entirely at home without needing to be asked, almost as if he lives there all the time and the chair he’s sitting in and the glass he’s drinking from belong as much to him as they do to Will. Will, in turn, walks past him on the way to the kitchen and presses a hand on his shoulder in an easy, affectionate way that comes
extremely naturally, and Hannibal makes a quiet noise of acknowledgement without looking up from his book in a way that strikes Will as delightful – that he’s obviously pleased at being touched yet blasé at the same time, as if Will patting him at random intervals is no big deal and is not only something he’s used to but something he’s come to expect. Nevertheless, and despite how much he’s enjoying it, the relaxed atmosphere can’t entirely banish Will’s lingering sense of awkwardness over the sleeping arrangements; because while it seems ridiculous to offer Hannibal the spare room, the idea of issuing an outright invitation into his own bed before the heat starts can’t help feeling rather embarrassing. In this respect he’s relieved when Hannibal settles it for himself (of course) by prowling upstairs and into Will’s room like he’s been doing it for years, even to the extent of commanding one of the dogs to get off the bed – then looking rather awestruck when it gets straight back up again.

“I don’t know why I expected anything else,” says Hannibal when Will starts to laugh. “They’re clearly as rebellious as you are.”

Will tries and fails to subdue another cackling sound (although decides this isn’t entirely his fault, seeing how the image of Hannibal being put in his place by a tiny, fluffy canine is borderline hilarious) then whistles the dog away so he can get into bed himself and allow Hannibal to get in beside him and tangle their legs together. A series of good-natured bickering then ensues as to how long the light gets left on for, with Hannibal insisting on being able to read and Will insisting equally loudly that he can’t – and after Hannibal has pointed out that some people require intellectual stimulation and Will has retorted that if other people want to stimulate themselves in the middle of the night like a giant bat then they can do that shit somewhere else – a compromise is finally reached in which Hannibal agrees to switch the light off and read from his phone instead while Will curls up against his chest with his head tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin. Hannibal rubs soothing circles into Will’s back with his free hand and occasionally brushes his lips against Will’s forehead; and Will’s final conscious thought is that he can’t quite understand how he’s ever managed to fall asleep without being held like this.

The next day the dynamic changes dramatically as some underlying biological process seems to ignite in Will that causes him to grow nervy and skittish and extremely unwilling to be touched in any way. Hannibal obediently draws back to give him some space and restricts contact to occasional attempts to feed him or requests to check his temperature and blood pressure for any signs of cardiac stress. Will permits these attentions rather reluctantly, although also shows precisely zero interest in doing any of the traditional omega pre-heat activities of nesting or care seeking – and the fact Hannibal was partly expecting him to serves as a sharp reminder of how, like most alphas, he actually has very conventional, stereotyped ideas of how omegas are supposed to behave. The notion of being conventional in any area is deeply irritating, and Hannibal frowns over it for a while before consoling himself that his lack of awareness about omegas isn’t particularly surprising considering he’s never gone to the trouble of acquiring one. Anyway, he doesn’t really care what omegas in general are supposed to be like; he only cares about Will.

Will, oblivious to this silent scrutiny, takes himself over to the window and spends a huge amount of time gazing out at the fields which are now entirely covered by a coating of snow that’s as crisp and white as icing on a cake. The only thing capable of rousing his attention are the various demands of the dogs and Hannibal tries – and fails – not to feel resentful over this, but still bides his time and draws on his infinite reserves of patience to resist the urge to force Will to interact in any way before he wants to. In this respect it’s not entirely obvious whether the urge to retreat is primarily driven by emotional or physical causes, although Hannibal suspects that it’s most likely due to both – a combination of heat hormones blended with his instinctive wariness of being intimate with anyone. For the first half of the day Will limits his contact to occasionally turning round from the window and snapping at Hannibal to stop staring at him, although it’s notable that when Hannibal goes upstairs to retrieve a book Will waits a few minutes before following him so he can resume his silent staring
from the bedroom window in preference to staying downstairs by himself. So Hannibal abandons his original plan of returning to the living room and settles down to read on the bed instead, glancing up every so often from the pages so he can admire how flattering the pale winter sun looks on Will’s equally pale face.

“Are you hungry,” asks Hannibal around midday.

“No.”

“You should eat something. You need to keep your strength up.”

“Later,” replies Will.

He pauses and twitches irritably at the collar of his shirt, and the fact he’s performed a similar gesture several times in the last hour confirms one of Hannibal’s existing private suspicions and prompts him to add: “If you could come over here for a few moments, I have something I want to give you.”

Will sighs loudly then turns round in a kind of laboured, jerking way that suggests he’s finding physical activity an enormous trial before slowly moving forward and perching on the side of the bed. Hannibal has to resist the temptation to grab hold of his wrist to stop him leaving again, although is well aware how much Will would resent it so has to content himself with placing a palm on his forehead instead to check for any signs of heat fever. Will sighs again in a long-suffering way that comes from a combination of being fusssed over alongside his deep-rooted dislike of gifts, and Hannibal smiles faintly at the sound of it before reaching into his suitcase to retrieve what he wants to give him: a shimmering silk house robe of deepest richest blue. Comparing it now against Will’s skin, Hannibal silently congratulates himself on getting the shade exactly right. Will definitely suits the colder end of the colour spectrum, and it’s incredibly pleasant to imagine the robe as only one in a long line of future garments of assorted shades of indigo, amethyst, and pewter which Will might be persuaded to wear; preferably interspersed with the occasional deep red or pristine white to prevent Hannibal from getting bored at always looking at the same thing.

Will, in contrast, seems considerably less pleased as he silently takes the robe in order to inspect it. The fabric is so incredibly slinky and delicate he suspects he could fold it up sufficiently small to fit into the palm of both hands, yet while it’s undeniably beautiful – and unquestionably expensive – there’s no escaping the fact that it’s also the type of thing which would be more at home enfolded on an artist’s model while draped across a chaise longue and glancing knowingly out of the canvass… probably in the sort of picture that would have got banned by the Victorians for being too suggestive. “I can’t wear this,” says Will, blanching slightly at the thought of it.

“Why not?”

Because I’d look like a pole dancer, thinks Will gloomily. “Because I’d feel self-conscious,” he says instead. “It’s not my sort of thing.” Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Will adds firmly, so there can be no mistake: “At all.”

“It’s not intended to be your sort of thing,” replies Hannibal, completely undeterred by this show of resistance. “But one of the few useful things Dr Hall pointed out to me is how sensitive your skin is going to become. The kind of fabrics you usually wear” – he pauses and runs a fastidious eye over Will’s shirt as if silently commiserating with it for being so awful – “are going to be extremely uncomfortable.”

Will, who hadn’t really considered this, falls quiet and then looks down at the robe with an expression of resigned suffering that wouldn’t be entirely out of place for a martyr tied to a stake. “For heaven’s sake, don’t look so anguished,” says Hannibal, whose lips have begun to twitch very
slightly. “It’s not as if anyone’s going to see you in it except myself.”

“I suppose.”

“The dogs too of course; although I imagine you can count on them being discreet?”

“Are you laughing?” says Will accusingly.

“No.”

“You are. You totally are.”

“Perhaps a little,” admits Hannibal. “Although primarily I’m just happy you don’t have more pressing concerns beyond what you’re going to look like.” Unable to resist the temptation any longer he finally moves forward to place his hand on Will’s shoulder, who automatically twists out of the way. “If you can get through the next few days without anything more serious to worry about,” adds Hannibal, “then I’d consider it a very good result.”

Will gives a small smile in response to this, although still stands up so he can neatly fold the robe and lay it across the chair before returning to his vigil by the window, where he proceeds to stand in silent contemplation for over an hour as if his batteries have gone flat. Hannibal is eventually able to tempt him downstairs a little later for something to eat, and Will thaws out sufficiently to agree to sit at the table and nibble half-heartedly on the food Hannibal provides before vanishing again into the living room where he rejects the window in favour of folding himself into the armchair like he’s trying to make himself as small as possible. By now the early signs of heat prodrome are unmistakable, and Hannibal watches him with a fierce sense of possessiveness while fondly reflecting on the fact that the instinct of most omegas at the same stage would be to seek out comfort and reassurance whereas Will’s is to do the exact opposite. In fact by now his need for space and solitude is so acute that he takes himself off to sleep on the sofa; and where Hannibal finds him next morning curled into a ball with a blanket pulled up so high that only a few tufts of hair are visible.

Hannibal moves a hand down very carefully so as not to wake him then gives the blanket a quick twitch so he can see Will’s face. His cheek is pillowed against the palm of his hand, and he looks so incredibly pale and still that he could almost be reclining on a pedestal like a piece of sculpture; a bit of antique marble, if not also so breathing and blooming and fatally beautiful. In this respect Hannibal has no guilt at all in acknowledging a temptation to begin administering a combination of certain drugs into Will’s food in order to prolong this current listlessness for just a little longer; not least because when he’s like this it’s extremely easy for Hannibal to keep him to himself. Nevertheless while Will might be aesthetically pleasing when pale and delicate he’s undeniably more interesting when fiery and agile, and after a brief consideration Hannibal is forced to admit the obvious benefits of taking sufficiently good care of Will that he returns to full health and strength as quickly as possible. As on numerous other occasions the wave of attachment this creates in him is powerfully unfamiliar, and Hannibal sighs very quietly on behalf of both himself and Will as he waits for the latter to wake up.

This actually takes some time, as Will makes an intimation of fighting his way into consciousness like someone struggling their way out of a net. *Always fighting something,* thinks Hannibal affectionately. “Morning,” Will finally says, his voice thick with tiredness.

“Good morning,” says Hannibal. “How are you feeling today?”

Will scrubs his hand over his face then regards Hannibal rather gloomily from over the top of his fingers. “Terrible.”
“Physical pain?” asks Hannibal with interest. “Or the way you feel emotionally?”

There’s a small pause as Will frowns to himself like he can’t quite decide which is causing him the greatest aggravation. “Both,” he finally says in the same mournful voice.

“There’s not much I can do for the bodily discomfort I’m afraid. A degree of it is inevitable – and being on suppressants for so long can hardly have helped.” Will grimaces in response, although whether it’s a sign of agreement or irritation at stating the obvious is impossible to tell. “On the other hand,” adds Hannibal, who’s privately marvelling at how Will’s assorted gargoyle-like expressions of annoyance manage to be so endlessly appealing, “I would very much like to hear about the psychological aspects.”

“Yeah,” says Will sardonically. “I bet you would.”

“Have you changed your mind?”

“No,” replies Will, much firmer this time. “No, I haven’t changed my mind. It’s just…”

“It’s just that now it’s going to happen it’s unnerving?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“It’s understandable Will; especially considering what you went through last time. I don’t just mean the health risks either.” Hannibal pauses for a few seconds, narrowing his eyes at the idea of Andrew. “You’ve been treated like a possession most of your life because of it.”

“I know.”

“Although it’s not only that is it?” adds Hannibal, slowly running his eyes over Will’s face. “It’s because you dislike the idea in principle.”

“I know,” says Will irritably. “We discussed it already, remember? At length. You think I’m afraid of losing control.”

“Perhaps you should be,” replies Hannibal without missing a beat. “All that simmering potential you have within you. It’s a responsibility to wield an instrument as powerful as that. Isn’t it Will? To cultivate the urges as the inspirations they are…no wonder you want to keep it safely suppressed.” Will scowls mutinously as if on the verge of losing his temper and Hannibal smiles to himself at the sight of it, relishing – not for the first time – the novelty of being with someone who not only refuses to be intimidated by him, but also possesses a sufficient degree of intelligence and darkly chaotic turn of mind to speak the same language as Hannibal does. “You don’t need to be concerned,” he adds now in a gentler voice. “Over the next few days you are in control, because it’s something you’ve actively chosen. Besides, you’re embracing and accepting your nature and what better display of control can there be?” Will nods, not looking entirely convinced, and Hannibal adds: “You also know that I’m not going to try and overpower you in the same way as Andrew. More to the point, you know why I won’t.”

Will smiles at this and then for the first time begins to visibly relax. “Yes,” he says. “Because I won’t let you.”

“Precisely,” says Hannibal, who’s still not entirely content with this, despite the fact he actively respects it. “I can persuade, I suppose. And suggest; insinuate, even. But even I’ve never been able to fully predict or control what you’re going to do.”

Will nods again then opens his mouth like he’s going to say something else before appearing to
abruptly tire of the whole conversation in favour of pulling the blanket back over his head. “I imagine that’s the last I can expect to see from you today,” says Hannibal fondly. “We should devise a system of communication; perhaps I can pass you notes from beneath your layers.”

Will shakes his head in a way that makes the entire blanket vibrate then finally lowers it a few inches so he can peer at Hannibal from over the top. “I know,” he says. “I’m being odd; I don’t really understand what’s the matter with me.”

“It’s the effect of the heat hormones,” replies Hannibal. “You’re retreating.” He pauses then smiles very slightly. “Most omegas would become more needy and affectionate in the same stage, whereas you do the exact opposite.”

“Oh,” says Will. He goes quiet for a few seconds and runs his hand through his hair. “Sorry.”

“Why? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Yeah, I know, but…well. I guess it’s not that great from your point of view.”

“Forget my point of view,” replies Hannibal briskly. “I don’t have any particular expectations. Besides, I’m used to you being taciturn; if you suddenly grew very demonstrative I probably wouldn’t know what to do with you. It would be like having a different person in the house.”

Will can’t help smiling again at this, rather fascinated by the idea of such a foreign version of himself who would be clambering into Hannibal’s lap demanding endless petting and attention…possibly even cuddles (Christ). “You see?” adds Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts. “You are in control. Even with this rather intense biological process, you still haven’t changed into a different version of yourself – merely amplified your existing traits.”

“It hasn’t started yet though has it?” replies Will, gloomily thinking about the cuddling imposter and trying to weigh up the likelihood of him making an appearance.

“It hasn’t no, but I think the pattern will maintain itself. An amplification of existing traits, remember?” Hannibal pauses then runs his eyes over Will’s face again even slower than before. “In that respect I’m probably the one who needs to worry – no doubt you’ll be attacking me before too much longer.”

“I will not be attacking you,” says Will, clearly offended by the suggestion.

Hannibal allows himself a small private smile, although in the end doesn’t reply with anything beyond: “I’m sure you know best.”

“I do,” says Will firmly, taking care to stress each word so there can be no mistake. “I do know best.”

Hannibal catches Will’s eye and gives him a rather pointed look, who promptly scowls in response as if he wants to argue about it before changing his mind and vanishing beneath the blanket again. “I suppose this means I’m being dismissed?” says Hannibal with amusement. “And now you will be immobile for the rest of the day. I should probably get you one of those little serving bells so you can ring it if you want me to bring you anything.”

Will’s eyes reappear over the top of the blanket. “Would you really?”

“No,” says Hannibal. “I would not.”

“I bet you would. You love feeding people.”
“You’re intending to try it now aren’t you?” says Hannibal with a smile. “What a tyrant you are.”

Will mutters something indistinct but fails to emerge from the blanket for a second time, and after a few seconds Hannibal presses a hand on his shoulder then leaves him alone so he can resurface whenever he’s ready. This takes several hours, at which point Will finally gets off the sofa and drifts round the house for a while looking pale and restless before making a half-hearted attempt to go into the yard. “No,” says Hannibal firmly, pulling him away from the door. “Absolutely not.”

“I want some fresh air.”

“Then open the window.” Will narrows his eyes and squares his shoulders, obviously revving up to fight over it. “You are not going outside,” repeats Hannibal, completely undeterred by the way Wil’s starting to bristle at him. “Not smelling like that. Every alpha for miles will be descending on you the second you step out the door.”

“There aren’t any alphas,” snaps Will. “Not even for miles.”

“No? You know that for certain do you?”

“Pretty much. Who’s going to be wandering around out here?”

“No,” repeats Hannibal, locking the door then removing the key. “Why take the risk? I’d offer to come with you of course, but then it would be a case of me having to defend you in the event of any alphas emerging – and I don’t suppose you’d want that either?” Will shrugs irritably. “Exactly,” says Hannibal. “It’s only going to be a few days. Just try and relax.”

“But the dogs need some exercise,” replies Will. He sounds forlorn now, like a parent who’s anxious about neglecting their offspring, and Hannibal can’t help casting an incredulous look at the dogs while wondering how anything so hairy and slobbering can possibly arouse such fond feelings in an otherwise sensible human being. “I should take them for a walk.”

“Surely they can run around unsupervised?” says Hannibal, who even to appease Will isn’t about to volunteer for this task himself. “You’ve trained them well enough after all.”

“I guess.” Will’s previous mournfulness is now blended with a twist of annoyance at being told what to do, and after shuffling irritably for a few seconds in silent resentment of it he makes a sudden dash for the door – having seemed to forgotten that the key was taken out only a few seconds ago. His movement is distinctly uncoordinated without any of the usual purposefulness, and it’s this combined with the mental disorientation that convinces Hannibal that the full heat is probably only a few hours away. Oddly, the way he smells doesn’t reflect this at all – being potent to Hannibal but nowhere near as strong as the previous evening – and is undoubtedly yet another complication from being on the suppressants for so long.

Out of curiosity Hannibal now snaps “Will,” in a very severe voice, simply to see if the heat impulse to be claimed by an alpha is stronger than Will’s natural inclination to disobey. The result turns out to be a rather endearing combination of the two, in that Will goes still then moves away from the door while simultaneously glaring at Hannibal as if he wants to punch him. “What a determined boy you are,” says Hannibal in amusement. “The perfect distillation of strong-willed.”

“Oh shut up,” mutters Will. Moving a bit closer, he finally gives in and presses himself against Hannibal’s chest and rests his face on his shoulder. “Your puns are terrible.”

“I suppose so,” replies Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair. “And yet your name lends itself to so many, which makes the temptation considerable. Free will. Willpower. A will of one’s own. I’m
afraid you’re going to have to humour me.”

“I will certainly not humour you,” says Will. Despite the obvious disorientation his voice still carries a note of weary stoicism that’s kind but firm – the sort of tone he might use with his dogs – and Hannibal can’t help being amused at knowing he’d never tolerate being spoken to that way by anyone else except Will. “I’ll ration you instead – no more than one a day.”

“But can I possibly obey such a strict stipulation? I imagine time will tell.”

“Last Will and Testament,” says Will. “Which is what you can expect to be getting if you don’t be quiet.”

“Is that a threat my love? Perhaps I deserve it; give me an inch, after all, and I will take a mile.”

“Enough. That will do.”

“Will it? Perhaps I should be quiet then. Or in the words of our ecclesiastical friends, there will be much hell to pay.”

“Oh God,” says Will, who’s beginning to unconsciously arch himself against Hannibal’s chest like a cat. “Just give it a rest can’t you? You’re so annoying.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal. Brushing his lips against Will’s temple, he adjusts his hands so he can skim them up and down his back, enjoying the faint sensation of delicate bones and warm skin beneath the thin material of his shirt. “You’re very forbearing to put up with me. I’m afraid I constantly test your sense of goodwill.”

Will laughs at this then pulls away so he can look at Hannibal directly. A few strands of hair are tangling into his eyes and rather than brush them away he twists his mouth to blow them off instead in a gesture that strikes Hannibal as almost unbearably charming. “Okay,” he says. “You win. I won’t go outside. Only – no more will puns.”

“Agreed; not a single one. Although it’s hardly a question of winning or losing – merely protecting your interests.” Hannibal follows this speech up with a self-righteous sigh for good measure; and which manages to be extremely convincing considering the fact that none of what he’s just said is especially true. In reality the extreme unlikeliness of any alphas being nearby combined with his subdued scent means it almost certainly would be safe for Will to leave the house for a short period – only Hannibal has no intention of telling him that, because he’s far too invested in the opportunity of having Will completely and utterly to himself. In truth it’s actually rather fascinating: a rare chance to study him in his natural habitat. Idly Hannibal now begins to re-envisage Will’s earlier response to his stern voice tone and begins to privately plan for other experiments of a similar type; and which is undoubtedly the type of manipulative scheme that other people might feel guilty about but which Hannibal (of course) does not, instead considering it a wasted opportunity if he failed to take full advantage of the situation. After all, Will confused and disorientated is incredibly interesting in a way that would just be extremely tedious in anyone else, and to fully appreciate such a unique and delightful a mind as Will’s is means examining it from all angles and in all possible conditions. Because really, Will’s mind is mesmerizing. It’s a great shame that no means exist of levering his skull open in order to inspect the various thoughts and impulses existing in it…a chance to sort through skeins of nerves and tissue like a jeweller categorising precious gems. I would be so gentle, thinks Hannibal, regretful at this denied opportunity. I only wish to know you better; to possess you so completely it dismantles and remakes you.

Will, oblivious to any of this, quivers slightly beneath Hannibal’s hands before reaching up to give the hem of his shirt an irritable twitch. “You were right,” he says rather grudgingly when he catches
Hannibal looking at him. “My skin…it’s getting weird.”

“Sensitive?” asks Hannibal. Very delicately he begins to increase the pressure against Will’s spine, fully aware that it’ll make him uncomfortable but finding the temptation impossible to resist on the basis that relishing Will’s discomfort is yet another thing that’s proving incredibly addictive. Not that Will doesn’t seem deeply uncomfortable most of the time. On the contrary; it’s like being in his own skin is unbearable to him on a daily basis. The skin that’s forced to house the darkly chaotic mind…no wonder it’s in perpetual discomfort. You want to bear a more typical mind don’t you, thinks Hannibal, tenderly stroking the skin as if in sympathy. A more ‘normal’ one. It’s not your fault; you’ve never learned to appreciate the privilege. Fortunately you now have me to show you.

Will quivers again beneath the insistentely wandering hands, although once more makes no attempt to pull away. “Yes,” he says. “It feels…I don’t know. Prickly.” He pauses a few seconds then defiantly catches Hannibal’s eye as if daring him to say I told you so. “I’m going to need your robe.”

“It’s not mine,” replies Hannibal. “It’s yours.” With the same smooth movement as before he dips his hands further down Will’s back then casually slides them beneath his shirt so he can stroke all the warm fragile flesh underneath. Will makes a small sighing noise and lets his eyes fall closed. “Look at you,” says Hannibal fondly, beginning to rub his cheek against Will’s hair. “You’re so preoccupied with being uncomfortable you’ve forgotten to be aloof” – and which he promptly regrets mentioning because it makes Will grow sufficiently self-conscious to wriggle out of Hannibal’s arms and vanish straight back to the sofa again. He then proceeds to stay there for several hours before finally emerging in order to haul himself upstairs with the same level of effort as previously; reappearing several minutes later wearing nothing expect the robe and a faint pink flush across the top of both cheekbones. Initially Hannibal assumes that the latter is due to embarrassment, and is just beginning to enjoy the idea of his presence being the cause of it when a closer inspection makes him realise that the blushing is the result of something infinitely better than misplaced modesty – specifically, a sign of impending heat. In fact from the way Will’s eyes are glittering and the rapid flutter of his ribcage it must be very close indeed; and the realisation requires Hannibal to draw several deep breaths before exerting an almost supernatural level of self-control to not simply launch across the room and wrestle Will onto the floor there and then.

“What?” says Will with obvious irritation. “You’re staring at me.”

Hannibal can’t help smiling at this flash of temper; aware, even as he’s doing it, that this is the type of thing that would be intolerably rude in anyone less special than Will is. “Yes,” he replies. “I suppose I am.”

“Well stop it.”

“I apologise,” says Hannibal, without making the slightest effort to avert his eyes. “Only I’m not entirely devoid of feeling. When I see you as you are now, it’s…compelling.”

“Not devoid of feeling’,” repeats Will in same fretful tone as before. “Yeah, you say that, but I’ve never seen you show any real emotions. Not once; not like normal people do. You don’t get sad, you don’t get angry – you just sit there and absorb what everyone around you is doing.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Will shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other, clearly regretting the outburst yet not seeming able to bring himself to apologise for it. In this respect it’s very obvious that he’s growing nervous and is lashing out in an attempt to control it, and Hannibal can’t help finding it incredibly charming despite, once again, being behaviour he’d find repellent in anyone else. Quite the opposite in fact, because these little flares of anger are so pure and authentic that it’s impossible not to find them alluring and wish to kindle them into even greater heights. “Will,” he says now, gentle yet firm. “Come here.”
Will hesitates a few seconds and then moves towards the chair where Hannibal’s sitting and folds himself onto the floor with his back against Hannibal’s legs. “That’s better,” says Hannibal, beginning to gently massage his shoulders. “Be calm.”

Will nods then dips his head a little to give Hannibal better access to his neck. “I’m sorry,” he adds. “What I said before – I know it’s not true.”

“No indeed; naturally I experience emotions.”

“Yes. I know you do.”

Perhaps not as much as is typical,” concedes Hannibal. “But they exist all the same. In fact rather more often than I would like – it’s not always convenient.”

Will nods again then exposes his neck even further until his head is drooping in the manner of a flower wilting on its stem. Hannibal, wondering if Will even realises what a beautiful display of vulnerability this is, gives the neck an appreciative stroke in reward. “I’ve seen you angry,” adds Will. “That time in the parking lot: when Andrew was rude to you.”

“You think that’s the only reason I was angry?”

“Yes,” replies Will, whose voice is now so faint and tired that Hannibal has to lean in to hear him. “Maybe…I don’t know.”

“It’s all right,” says Hannibal, who’s intrigued but likewise aware that further probing is currently pointless. “We can discuss it another time; you sound exhausted.”

“I am. I’m wrecked.”

“Why don’t I get us something to eat?” adds Hannibal, beginning to idly count the vertebrae along the top of Will’s spine. “We’re both going to need our full strength over the next few days.” Pausing slightly he reaches round so he can brush his thumb against Will’s lower lip. “Especially you.”

“I couldn’t eat anything right now. I’m not hungry.”

“No? Then is there anything else I can do for you?” Will frowns then begins to gnaw on his thumbnail, obviously reluctant to ask for what he wants. “What is it?” asks Hannibal, while privately considering how difficult it is to refuse Will anything…and how inconvenient such a weakness could become if (when?) Will realises the full extent of his influence and decides to exploit it.

“Would you mind waiting upstairs for a while?” Will finally replies. “Just for an hour or so?” Twisting his head round he looks up anxiously at Hannibal as if concerned about giving offence. “It’s not personal. You know that right? I just feel like I need to be on my own again.”

“Of course,” says Hannibal serenely. “Whatever you need.” In fact he’s deeply reluctant to let Will out of his sight for even a second, but can also understand and respect Will’s obvious need to maintain his space and independence for as long as he can. Will pulls his knees up to his chin and wraps his arms round them like a child, and Hannibal’s expression softens slightly in sympathy at the obvious anxiety before pressing a reassuring hand against his hair then quietly removing himself to the bedroom where he settles down with a book as the snow pours down outside and the light grows dim and shadowy. An hour passes like this, then two, with no signs of life at all; and after the third hour has tiptoed past bringing no sight or sound of Will then Hannibal is contemplating whether to go and check on him when the silence is finally and abruptly shattered by the sound of breaking crockery followed by Will calling out Hannibal’s name in a high, panicked voice. Hannibal immediately drops his book then flies downstairs with fearsome speed: and where he finds Will
doubled up against the wall in the kitchen surrounded by a pool of water and the shattered remains of a glass, and looking about as pale and strained as Hannibal’s ever seen him.

“Oh God,” says Will. His voice is stretched taut with anxiety and his lips are faintly swollen from where he’s been biting them. “I think…I think it’s starting.”

Hannibal crosses the room in three quick strides and gazes at Will for a few seconds before stroking a finger against his cheekbone then scooping him into his arms to prevent him cutting his bare feet on the glass. The gesture is protective and as such automatic, although even as he’s doing it he’s expecting Will to struggle – and is therefore both surprised and touched at how Will clings onto him without making any attempt to pull away. In fact if he’s honest with himself he’s not entirely prepared for how satisfying it feels to do something so simple as offer comfort and to have it accepted, and for a few seconds Hannibal is aware of a pang of genuine emotion as a result of it.

Tightening his grip he presses his face against Will’s hair so he can breathe him in. “Yes, it’s going to start,” he says gently. “Within the next hour or so.”

Will makes an anguished sighing noise in response, so Hannibal wraps him even tighter in his arms then carries him into the living room and lies back on the sofa so he can pull Will against his chest. “I don’t want it,” says Will, and he sounds frightened yet also angry, as if he’s resenting his body for letting him down. “I don’t want it.”

The words themselves are forceful enough, yet this time they’re delivered in an eerie monotone voice that’s so far removed from the vitality and nuance of Will’s normal one that Hannibal realises he’s already entered full blown pre-heat syndrome and is going to tip over within 30 minutes at most. This is sufficiently fast that his medical instincts can’t help but be slightly alarmed at it, and he mentally takes a few seconds to curse Dr Hall’s ridiculous advice before returning his attention to the matter at hand by trying to gentle Will as much as he possibly can through a combination of touch and voice tone. “Be calm, beloved,” he now says softly. “Just stay here with me. We can wait together.”

He begins to stoke Will’s hair with one hand while rubbing slow circles against his back with the other and Will makes a fretful noise in response then clutches onto Hannibal’s shirt, quivering with anxious tension the entire time. “You’re going to be fine,” adds Hannibal, even though he suspects Will may be past the point of being able to process what he’s saying. “I intend to take good care of you; the best possible care. Why would I do anything else? When something is so unique and precious there’s no option but to preserve it.”

Will makes another whining noise, a little quieter than the last one, and when Hannibal presses his fingers against his throat he can feel the way his pulse is fluttering like a small bird thrashing in a cage. “You’re beautiful like this,” says Hannibal in the same quiet voice. “I’m fated now to always remember it; how perfect and trusting you were. One day I want to describe it to you Will – I want you to understand the ability you have to live in my memory.” Leaning down he brushes his lips against Will’s temple who gives another small sigh in response. “Memory is a form of artistry, beloved,” adds Hannibal softly. “It is an architect. With memory one can reconfigure reality and alter the shape of things into whatever one most wishes them to be. Regardless of what occurs in the future, I’ll have a version of you that I can keep with me always. Because I remember everything about you Will; from the first day I met you and from all the days that followed. I remember the way you used to lean against my desk with your hands in your pockets, or pace about my office, or stare
at me with that blend of sadness and defiance that’s uniquely your own. So many recollections Will: they’re etched into my memory like calligraphy, each illuminated to its best advantage, stored away and set to music and I could recreate any one of them at a moment’s notice. All these little fragments of you – a look, a glance, a feeling – preserved for posterity more attentively than you could ever possibly know.”

As expected Will gives no indication of having heard any of this, but Hannibal continues to hold onto him regardless; lightly touching his face and hair and murmuring soft words of reassurance until the trembling has stopped and he’s lying quietly in Hannibal’s arms. In fact he’s no longer tense with stress anymore but soft and pliable like his limbs are molten, with a warm humidity to the skin and balminess to his breath. And Hannibal can tell the exact moment the heat hormones finally ignite when he suddenly goes completely rigid before abruptly springing upright and roughly seizing hold of Hannibal’s shoulders to try and haul him up too. Hannibal sighs rapturously and allows himself to be tugged into a sitting position, then takes hold of Will’s waist and lifts him into his lap so they’re facing one another. Will’s eyes are gleaming slightly in the firelight and he looks beautifully stormy and wild: a perfect tempest of flame, fearlessness, intelligence and passion, like a breathing sculpture or poetry brought to life; and clearly prepared to push his body to its absolute limit, just as he so often does in different spheres.

“So,” says Hannibal, reaching up to smooth Will’s hair back off his forehead. “Here you are: welcome back mylimasis. Can you hear me?” Will gives no sign of whether he can or he can’t, merely grips onto Hannibal’s shoulders with a level of pressure that’s clearly intended to hurt and Hannibal begins to smile at such an unrestrained show of aggression. “My beautiful boy,” he adds, low and intense. “You’re mine now. For the next few days you belong entirely to me.”

Once again Will refuses to reply, instead grabbing hold of Hannibal’s hair with one hand so he can tug it while arching his back and pivoting his hips at the same time. The effect is extremely striking in its arrangement of pale skin and willowy limbs, and Hannibal can immediately tell that he’s displaying himself. The idea of this is immensely charming – that Will is trying to make himself look attractive for his alpha – and Hannibal now reaches down so he can begin unfastening the robe, doing it extremely slowly to make the moment last as long as possible while staring intently into Will’s eyes the whole time.

“You’re not going to be needing this,” says Hannibal softly as he completes untying the belt and then reaches up again to remove the robe entirely. The fabric is so incredibly smooth and fine that it slips down without any encouragement at all, and Hannibal is unable to stop his breath catching slightly at the sight of so much undeniable beauty. Then he brushes his fingers over Will’s lips, who immediately opens his mouth as an invitation to push them in; rocking his head to try and take them as deep as possible until he nearly chokes. “I know my love,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s jaw with his thumb. “It’s so difficult isn’t it? Look at you; you’re begging to be filled up. All you want is to feel something inside you.”

In this respect Hannibal is struggling with an urgent impulse to pace himself and remain in control for as long as he can, because he wants to make this last and knows that once his sense of restraint has snapped then it’ll be completely impossible to salvage it. However, while this might be a good idea in theory, what he hasn’t accounted for is Will – who clearly has no intention of waiting and now begins ripping and tearing at Hannibal’s clothes in something like a frenzy. Exactly as expected, he also becomes extraordinarily aggressive: clawing and gouging and even, on occasion, attempting to bite. That’s it my love, thinks Hannibal rapturously, completely insensible to the pain and only aware of how luscious Will looks when so fierce and agile. In this respect, he decides, Will is like a tiger cub that’s been raised by humans: something wild and beautiful and solitary that has learnt to be tame, and even affectionate, yet remains primed to turn savage and wounding at a moment’s notice because it can’t repress its true nature. In fact he’s struggling now with an intensity that approaches
outright violence, although it’s clearly not an attempt to escape as opposed to testing the limits of Hannibal’s endurance to see how much aggravation he’s either able or willing to take.

“You want a dominance fight, don’t you beloved?” says Hannibal admiringly, and Will makes a growling noise in response before launching in for another attack. It’s breathtakingly aggressive, and Hannibal can immediately tell that Will is establishing his suitability as an alpha – with rejection a clear possibility if he fails to meet Will’s standards – so allows the assault with minimal complaint, only finally intervening when Will goes for his face because he doesn’t want it scratched. Will hisses with anger at the sensation of his wrist being seized and Hannibal, who never sees any good reason not to indulge his more sadistic impulses, is now overcome with curiosity at how it would feel to hurt Will in some way so calmly takes hold of his arm and wrenches it behind his back. Will gives a gasp of pain and grits his teeth although refuses to either cry out or beg Hannibal to stop in favour of swivelling round and trying to attack him again. “You’re not going to submit are you?” says Hannibal with approval. “You’d let me break your bones before you did so.” He releases Will’s arm in time to prevent the risk of actually injuring him, then takes hold of his face with both hands instead and forces him to keep his head still so Hannibal can stare very deeply into his eyes. “All the things we are going to do together,” murmurs Hannibal, soft and hypnotic. “How beautiful and terrible you are going to be. You don’t understand yet…but you shall.”

Will takes a few laboured breaths, obviously tired from fighting so violently, and goes extremely still as if he’s about to surrender – only to wait until Hannibal has loosened his grip slightly before pouncing on him again and wresting him onto the floor. Hannibal gasps at the suddenness of it, resentful at being caught off guard even as he’s admiring of the cunning that enabled it to happen, then allows Will to climb onto his chest before grabbing hold of both his wrists. “You’re a perfect predator aren’t you my love?” he says softly. “I always knew it; I saw it in you. With your ferocity and stealth and your hunter’s heartbeat. Terror and trepidation, dearest: all you require is fangs and claws.”

Will, clearly angry at being retrained, makes a snarling noise in response then wrenches himself free and makes a dive for Hannibal’s throat, who has to quickly roll out of the way to avoid it. Will lands a few centimetres away with a surprising degree of gracefulness and Hannibal neatly rolls back again then pins Will down underneath him, using his greater weight and strength to keep him in place and nearly desperate to kiss him but reluctant to attempt it because of the high likelihood of being bitten. In fact he’s desperate more generally to get Will upstairs and into bed, although short of slinging him over his shoulder there doesn’t seem any immediate way of accomplishing this. Will snarls again and arches his back in an attempt to fight his way free, and Hannibal spends a few seconds admiring the ruthless, white-hot ferocity of him – so furious and exhilarated – before eventually getting to his feet and picking Will up so their faces are nearly touching and Will can hitch his legs round Hannibal’s waist. Spinning round he pushes Will against the wall, cradling the back of his head to protect it from the impact, and begins to kiss his way down the side of his jaw. “That’s better,” he says as Will sighs and briefly stops struggling. “Are you going to behave yourself now?” Pausing slightly he smiles then scrapes his teeth against Will’s throat and adds very softly: “I hope not.”

At the sound of Hannibal’s voice Will immediately grows aggressive again, although this time the undertone of passion is even more inflamed than previously as he begins to rock his hips against Hannibal’s and twists his arms tighter round his neck so he can pull his hair before darting forward to try and bite him. “Look at you,” says Hannibal rapturously, shifting his neck to give Will better access. “You’re perfect.” Nevertheless there’s no question of him knotting Will for the first time up against a wall, and the fact he can feel his own self-control poised on a precipice and ready to snap makes him spin round again and stride towards the doorway. His arms are deliciously full of Will the entire time, and while he’s surprisingly heavy for someone so slim Hannibal barely notices the weight – or for that matter, the effort or discomfort of carrying him up a full flight of stairs – and practically runs the final few steps to the bedroom before flinging Will onto the bed then kicking the
door closed behind them.

Will lands with sufficient force to leave him momentarily breathless although it’s still not enough to stop him springing up again and pouncing towards Hannibal with his teeth bared; and who, because he was already expecting something like this, is able to catch him fairly easily before wrestling him back down and finally attempting to kiss him. Will goes rigid with outrage for a few seconds and twists his head away, so Hannibal catches it between his hands to hold him still then lowers his face so it’s hovering directly above Will’s until Will finally relents and lets him press their lips together. For a few seconds it’s extremely tentative, like a fragile sort of truce with Hannibal silently testing out exactly what Will’s going to allow – and Will determining how much he’s prepared to let Hannibal have – before Will gives a low, breathy moan then pushes his tongue into Hannibal’s mouth and wraps his legs round his back; at which point Hannibal, very uncharacteristically, completely loses control and tugs Will’s head back by the hair so he can suck a livid bruise onto his throat while pinning him down by the wrists with the other hand. Will, in turn, wraps his legs even tighter in a punishingly strong grip then drags an arm free so he can claw at Hannibal’s shoulders; and for a few minutes it once again feels more like opponents in a fight than a pair of lovers in which neither of them are prepared to submit first. And the entire thing is so turbulent and riotous and fiercely passionate – so full of bruising tenderness and vicious intimacy – that it seems as if the other person’s touch is enough to scorch, and Hannibal half expects to see livid prints across his skin from where Will’s hands have been; a brand, signifying ownership…what love would be like if it was set on fire.

Will is whining now, increasingly demanding and impatient, and Hannibal unconsciously gasps back in solidarity before pulling away slightly while trying and failing to get himself under some sort of control again. Not that it really matters; there’ll be time over the next few days to be gentle, but right now it’s impossible not to want to take advantage of Will’s instinctive omegan desire to be taken possession of; or – just as urgently – Hannibal’s own madly craving need to possess. Nevertheless he still pauses for a few seconds, taking a series of deep breaths as he notes the presence of that wave of tenderness within him that only Will ever really seems capable of bringing out. It’s so familiar by now yet also so foreign; the same way a reflection is distorted in a broken mirror – just like Will’s own series of shattered mirrors downstairs.

Hannibal now reaches down and cups Will’s cheek with his hand as he considers the way this tender aspect wants to proceed with gentleness and devotion: not frenzied and urgent, but slow and sensuous with Will on his back in the lamplight so his hair can be stroked and his face kissed and eyes gazed into the entire time. Then he fleetingly remembers Will’s fears of losing control and is unable to stop himself sighing over them, because once again it seems as if the situation has been turned back on Hannibal and it’s actually him who’s the one to lose reason and perspective – reduced to an unaccustomed collection of primal, primitive urges which have no patience for tenderness and want nothing more than Will on his knees with his legs spread wide open in a show of willingness to take whatever his alpha is about to give him. Not just willingness in fact, but eagerness; he wants Will to beg for it. And most of all, he can’t overcome the need he has for Will to be taken as passionately and firmly as possible this first time so that his boy gets an early opportunity to understand exactly who it is he really belongs to. In other words Hannibal’s normal acumen and restraint have been submerged by a kind of raw, feral desire in a way that he would never have thought possible; and it means that Will has once again managed to subvert every expectation Hannibal has about himself simply by existing. The swell of emotion in response to this is deeply uncomfortable and somewhat extraordinary: difficult to typify or pin down and, in a life so impeccably well-ordered and methodical as Hannibal’s is, disturbing in its utter uncontrollability. There’s only the sense that if Hannibal has always celebrated his mind as the most finely-tuned and impeccably nuanced instrument then this strikingly singular being, this Will Graham – his every thought, mood, action and idea; every expression he has, every time he looks at Hannibal – are like
hands that dart across the keys and show neither mercy nor restraint in it. More than I would have thought possible, thinks Hannibal with something like wonder as he gazes at Will’s face. More than sense or reason. More than I have words to tell you.

“What are you doing?” gasps out Will, who seems unsettled by the sudden lack of attention. “I need you.” His voice is scratchy and hoarse from lack of use and he stares at Hannibal for a few confused seconds before starting to repeat it as a kind of chant – you-you-you – in a way that Hannibal can’t immediately make sense of until he remembers the ‘Dear You’ of the journal entries and the relevance finally becomes clear. In fact the resonance of it is extremely powerful, and for a few seconds he can’t do anything except reverently run his eyes over Will: taking in the damp flushed skin and the wide eyes, the heat and humidity, the quiet yearning and the outspoken passion, delicately adorable while fiercely and passionately adored…a tangle of limbs, languor and longing with a breathless, heady capacity to fascinate, captivate and inspire.

“If you only knew how vital you are to me, thinks Hannibal with a sudden raw sincerity, then you would not dare to roam away ever again. You would never leave, never stray; you would allow yourself to be as attached to me as my own shadow, and you would remain by my side for as long as we both have life in us.

Catching his breath slightly he leans forward then presses his lips against the back of Will’s neck where, if they were bonded, the bite mark would be. “I know my love,” he says quietly. “I need you too.”

“I need it…” gasps Will. “I need…”

Hannibal makes a soothing noise. “It’s all right Will,” he says in the same gentle voice. “I know exactly what you need. And you know that I’m going to take care of you.” Unable to resist the temptation any longer he lightly scrapes his teeth against Will’s neck and is surprised – and undeniably touched – by the display of trust that means Will doesn’t pull away. Sighing again he kisses Will’s neck one last time then moves away and takes hold of his waist instead so he can haul him upright. Given Will’s relative inexperience Hannibal is expecting to have to arrange him into place himself, although once again Will surpasses expectations by immediately dropping onto all fours and tilting his hips and spine so he can present himself to Hannibal in the classic lordosis position without needing to be asked. In fact considering how much effort he’s gone to in the past to suppress his heats his performance is remarkably good, and while there remains some room for improvement the fact it’s the result of desire and natural instinct rather than any kind of omega training makes it even more beautiful. He’s also incredibly wet and Hannibal’s breath catches slightly at the sight of it as he forces Will’s legs further apart so he can admire how lush and glistening the trail of slick is against all that creamy pale skin. Will, obviously feeling he’s being ignored, arches his back with an angry, fretful sound and Hannibal sighs even louder then leans forward to kiss the curve of his hipbone.

“Forgive me my love,” he says. “I’m neglecting you aren’t I?” Will gives a mewling noise in response, and Hannibal takes a few blissful seconds to relish how small and sweet his hole looks; flushed with desire as would be expected, but still a sufficiently delicate shade of pink to prove he isn’t bonded with another alpha. Using the pad of his thumb he begins to massage it in slow circles, which makes Will moan and clench rather beautifully as Hannibal gradually increases the pressure until he feels the muscle relax and he can finally push inside. Even by omegan standards Will feels exceptionally tight and Hannibal gives another sigh of admiration at the exquisiteness of his boy's perfect body. In fact if anything he’s too tight, which might be a result of the suppressants – or possibly some lingering subconscious reluctance to allow an alpha any kind of access to him – and Hannibal spends a few seconds deciding how best to proceed. There’s no doubt that if Will can’t offer receptiveness then he has no reservations in knotting him anyway in his resistance; yet it’s also very important to him that Will enjoys it, so he murmurs some soothing words of encouragement while withdrawing his thumb and replacing it with a finger, then two, so he can repeat the process of
rubbing and stroking before sliding them in as Will gasps ecstatically and spreads his trembling legs even wider.

“Good boy,” murmurs Hannibal, slightly overwhelmed by how incredibly stunning Will is like this: the way he looks, the way he sounds and, even though he hasn’t been knotted yet, the fact he already smells like he belongs to Hannibal. “So good for me; so responsive. You like how it feels, don’t you?” He begins to move his hand faster, thrusting in a smooth rhythm that alternates with shorter, firmer strokes; and looking down he’s enormously satisfied to see how hard Will’s cock is starting to get as he bucks his hips and tries to take the probing as deep as possible. “You really like it,” says Hannibal softly. “You’re so excited: look at you.” He spends a few more seconds admiring the sight of Will’s tight little body stretched round his fingers then moves up so he can drape himself across Will’s back and begin to kiss the side of his throat. “Show me what else you like,” he says, giving Will’s earlobe a gentle tug with his teeth. “Do you like it harder? Faster, perhaps? Do you like it deeper?” He alternates the movement of his fingers according to each adverb, and Will gasps again and tips his head back. “Although this isn’t enough for you is it?” purrs Hannibal, delighted with such a rapturous response. “You need more. You can certainly take more, can’t you? I know that you can.” He eases in a third finger, enjoying how lovely and receptive Will is starting to feel, then as an afterthought reaches up with his other hand and grips his neck to keep him still; because while it’s rather wonderful watching Will fuck himself on Hannibal’s fingers, he can’t help resenting the idea of Will dictating his own pleasure and enjoying his body in any way that Hannibal isn’t in ultimate control of. Frustrated at being prevented from setting his own pace, Will makes an angry gasping noise and buries his face in his arm before blindly grasping to where his cock is straining hot and hard between his legs so he can start to frantically jerk himself off.

“Not yet, beloved,” says Hannibal. Taking hold of Will’s hand he twines their fingers together then presses it flat against the bed. “Not until I’m inside you. I want you to wait; would you do that for me?”

“Let go of me,” gasps Will. For a few seconds he sounds more like himself, although when he speaks again his voice has reverted to the more breathy, toneless quality of someone plunged deep into heat. “I can’t…I can’t wait…” Swivelling his head round he makes an attempt to bite Hannibal’s arm, which makes Hannibal smile adoringly all over again at how magnificent these continuing flashes of aggression manage to be. “I want it.”

“Tell me what you want, my love,” says Hannibal, beginning to move his hand faster. “Do it now; I want to hear you say it.”

“I want you to – ah – I want you to fuck me.”

“Just once, my dearest?” purrs Hannibal, deliberately letting his hand go still for a few seconds. “Or several times.”

“All night…Forever…Oh God, now. Please, just do it, I need it…”

“I’m going to beloved, I promise; just let me enjoy you a little longer like this.” Leaning forward again he kisses Will’s shoulder blade then rubs his face against his hair before tilting downwards so Will can search out his mouth for another deep kiss. “I’m going to make you mine Will,” adds Hannibal, low and intense. “You have no idea. I’m going to have you over and over again; take you and own you until you’re finally satisfied, then hold you close to me and let you fall asleep in my arms.”

“Yes. Yes. Oh fuck, I want that.”

“Only I can’t tame you forever can I?” murmurs Hannibal, half to himself. “Afterwards I’ll have to
let you go again: release you back into the wild. My war deity and warrior; my hunter. My little wild
thing. Like a beautiful bird of prey, Will. Can I trust you to come back again when you’re called, or
do I need to find a way to keep you here?” Will gasps and shakes his head, obviously too far gone to
process the complexities of what’s being said, and Hannibal kisses him again then lets his cheek rest
against Will’s. “I can’t clip your wings, can I beloved?” he says softly. “You’d always find a way to
stop me. No, force is never going to work on you…I simply need to try and train you better.”

Will sighs and stretches rather wantonly, already starting to quiver with anticipation and appearing to
enjoy the steadying tone of Hannibal’s voice despite being completely unaware that Hannibal has
once again reached the absolute limit of his self-control. In fact it scarcely seems feasible to wait any
longer, yet in spite of it he’s still desperate to let the moment linger on as much as possible so he can
relish their mutual urgent desire and anticipation. It’s actually a sort of paradox, because in his entire
life he doesn’t think he’s ever wanted anything as much as he wants this; yet once it starts that means
it’ll have to end, and a part of him feels like he could stay like this with Will indefinitely. There’s also
the issue of wanting to explore Will’s body as intimately as possible while he still can, so he now
wraps an arm round Will’s legs to make him stay still and rubs slow circles onto his back with the
other hand and goes completely rigid. “Good boy,” says Hannibal tenderly, pulling away to kiss
his thigh. “It feels good doesn’t it? For me also – I’ve wanted to do this to you for so long.” Will
moans something indecipherable, and the awareness of how much he likes it makes Hannibal
continue a series of slow teasing circles before narrowing his tongue to work the tip inside, sighing
ecstatically at the way he can feel Will quivering and tensing with pleasure as he begins to gasp out
Hannibal’s name. Hannibal takes hold of his hips to help him stay upright then slides one hand along
Will’s abdomen so he can stroke his cock. The tip is soaking wet now, and Hannibal longs to taste
that too but knows it would almost certainly make Will come and is therefore going to have to wait
for another time. Although hopefully not too long – and he can’t help his mind briefly misting over
as he thinks of all the numerous other things he wants to persuade Will to try at some point: to knot
his mouth; to use a plug on him, or even a collar; to fuck him up against the wall, hard and fast, whether in heat or not.

“Oh God,” pants Will, writhing helplessly at the warmth and thickness of the slowly stabbing
tongue. “Oh God. It’s…oh.”

“You’re so responsive,” murmurs Hannibal against Will’s skin. “I knew you would be.” Finally
pulling away he replaces his tongue with two fingers and begins to stoke again so he can focus on
the sensation of the delicate little furl of muscle fluttering beneath his touch. “You’re ready for me
now, aren’t you?” adds Hannibal, letting go of Will’s cock so he can take hold of his shoulder
instead and pull him back against the slow slide of his fingers. “Look at that: I know you can feel it
too. So wet and wanting; you can’t hide it anymore, even if you wanted to.” Will moans even louder
and Hannibal shifts upwards then rests across his back and takes hold of his hand, wrapping his other
arm across the top of Will’s chest so he can clasp onto his shoulder and kiss the side of his face.
“Mylimasis,” he says softly. “You’re mine now; you belong to me. You belong to me and you are
everything.”

Will opens his mouth like he wants to agree before some deeper instinct seems to prevent him and he
just gasps again instead then goes rather limp in Hannibal’s grasp as his arms look like they might be
about to give way. And Hannibal tightens his grip on him as he feels the last vestiges of rigid self-
control – arduously preserved for so long – finally shatter into fragments as the urge to claim and
possess finally gets the better of him. Undoubtedly the previous restraint was less on Will’s behalf
than it was for Hannibal’s own, because the awareness of giving into instincts and urges like an
animal is something he prefers to see as beneath him. But it’s hardly feasible to pay attention to that
anymore when what really matters is the fact he now has Will beneath him instead; and a version of
Will that’s so passionate and needy and impossibly beautiful, and practically begging to have his tight, trembling little body filled up with a knot. In fact it’s Will’s relative peacefulness compared to the turbulence from earlier that finally pushes Hannibal over the edge once and for all; because he knows that Will has been testing him out the whole time, and the fact he’s finally been accepted and deemed worthy is incredibly powerful. Not only powerful, but moving, and therefore irresistible: the sense that someone like Will, so perpetually restrained and reserved, would finally allow himself to let go entirely when in the care of someone he trusts.

Hannibal makes a low noise deep in his throat, a rich vibration that’s very close to a growl, then releases Will’s hand so he can roughly jerk his head back by the hair and kiss him properly. In fact the kiss has a level of intensity to it that borders on violent, but it’s how Will deserves to be kissed – with attention and passion and devoted dedication – and Will returns it with enthusiasm, entirely fierce and unafraid, until Hannibal finally pulls away then puts a possessive hand on the back of Will’s neck and roughly knocks his legs further apart with the other. There’s a vague sense of wanting to take his time and savour the moment, but right now patience is no longer an option so he takes hold of Will’s hips with both hands then reaches round with his thumbs to spread him open and pushes into him with one long thrust. Will cries out then buries his face in the sheet as his arms finally give way, and Hannibal grips onto his waist so he can slam into him even harder before leaning back on his heels so he can relish the sight of his boy’s exquisite body sliding up and down his cock in all its slick, tight perfection.

In fact he’s being much rougher than he’d planned to be, although it’s not from an attempt to harm, or even to dominate, but rather as a means to demonstrate devotion. I can’t get enough of you, he tells Will with every harsh movement and every thrust and push. I can’t, I can’t – it’ll never be enough. Let me own you, claim you…this is how much you matter to me. Will appears to feel the same if the way he’s gasping and rocking his hips are any indication; and besides, there’s no risk of hurting him because omegas are designed to take it as beautifully as this – something no beta would ever, ever be able to imitate. Hannibal can feel Will’s muscles gripping round his cock as a sign of how much he wants to feel it inside him and he can hear himself murmuring “You’re mine Will, you’re mine,” in the same reckless, heady way that Will was previously chanting ‘you’. His neck looks pale and vulnerable, gleaming in the lamplight like ivory, and for a few seconds the temptation to bite him is overwhelming. But he knows if he did it would completely destroy the developing state of trust, so in the end has to content himself with leaning forward so he can scrape his teeth against it instead. Will moans in response and Hannibal murmurs his name then slows down a little and rocks gently against him instead while pressing tender kisses against his throat and jaw.

“Oh God, it’s good,” gasps Will, and once again his voice briefly sounds like his usual one: more nuanced and purposeful with its customary dash of energy. “So good.”

“I know beloved. For me too.”

Will takes a shuddering breath then twists his face round so he can search out Hannibal’s mouth for another kiss. He doesn’t even have to move at all now, with Hannibal determined to do all the work for both of them, and as his entire body trembles Hannibal can tell that he’s extremely close to orgasm, possibly only seconds away; and how obvious it is that the stimulation of being filled up with someone’s cock is going to be enough all on its own to make him come. While it’s not unheard of for omegas to do this it’s generally unlikely unless they’re hopelessly excited and aroused; and the knowledge that he’s made Will feel such intense pleasure creates a powerful wave of tenderness combined with another overwhelming urge to possess. His neck might not currently be an option, although surely he can still be marked in some way? In fact there has to be a way, because it feels essential to brand Will with a sign of ownership which can ensure that from now on, whenever people look at him, what they’ll really be seeing is Hannibal.
Possibly Will is going to be angry about it when the heat subsides and he’s more alert and aware again, but right now Hannibal’s desire to do it is far greater than the trouble it would take to stop himself; so he tightens his grip round Will to stop him moving then lovingly laves his tongue across the delicate skin of his shoulder before sinking his teeth into it. Will gives a groan of pain, although makes no attempt to pull away. “It’s all right,” murmurs Hannibal, moving back for a few seconds so he can lave his tongue across the graze his teeth have made before biting Will for a second time even harder than the first. Will groans again which turns into a breathy whine halfway through. “That’s it,” says Hannibal adoringly. “Just…take it. Take it beloved.” His presses his palm against Will’s slim stomach so he can feel the vibrations every time he fucks into him then begins to speed up the motion of his hips; slamming into Will with enough force to make his knees slide across the bed as Will cries out helplessly and spreads his legs even further apart. Then he tenses, quivers and goes completely rigid; and when Hannibal bites him for a third time his whole body gives a frantic, fevered jolt.

“Oh God. Oh God, I’m going to come,” gasps out Will, and he sounds almost shocked, like he can’t quite believe it. “I’m coming – I’m…oh.”

Hannibal, by now plunged in a rare instance of being lost for words, only manages to groan in response and ecstatically smooth his palms up and down Will’s back as a reward for being so perfect. Then he reaches down and holds of Will’s cock where it’s hanging impossibly hot and heavy between his legs so he can feel the rush of wetness as Will comes all over it in a series of hot pulses. Will moans over and over again and Hannibal licks his hand rather ravenously so he can taste his boy before grabbing hold of his hips even harder than before. “Yes,” Will is gasping and it sounds more like a chant by this time; a mantra or an article of faith. “Yes, yes, oh God.”

Hannibal manages to say Will’s name, very low and soft as if it’s a term of veneration or the words of a prayer, then pulls out nearly all the way so he can admire how lusciously wet and well-fucked that sweet little hole now looks before slamming back in with one hard thrust. When his own orgasm hits him the force is more intense than anything he’s ever experienced – not least because of how incredibly satisfying it is to know that Will’s slender, trembling body is currently being filled up with his come – as beneath him Will begins to moan loudly and shamelessly as a sign of how much he enjoys the sensation. He can feel Will throbbing round him, literally impaled by now, and tight and stretched to the absolute limit with a full knot. But contrary to expectation he doesn’t seem remotely panicked or resentful, and after a while when the initial sting of discomfort he lets his whole body grow limp and soft as an invitation for Hannibal to cradle him to his chest and stoke his hair. Alphas emit pheromones at orgasm that are supposed to have a sedative effect on omegas to stop them pulling off a knot too soon and injuring themselves; but Will doesn’t seem sedated as opposed to calm and peaceful, and it’s hard not to believe that the contentment is genuine as opposed to merely biochemical. In fact it’s impossible not to try to prolong it even further, and Hannibal gives a worshipful sigh then spits onto his thumb so he can start to stroke the slippery, taut skin where Will is stretched around his knot. Will catches his breath then lets his head fall back against Hannibal’s shoulder.

“Again, beloved,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to nuzzle the side of Will’s face with his own. “Show me how much you like it when I’m this deep inside you. I want to see it; I want to watch you.” He rocks his hips very slowly and gently with the same rhythm as he’s moving his thumb, and Will quivers again and whispers Hannibal’s name. “Show me mylimasis,” urges Hannibal, caressing Will’s face with his other hand then slowly pushing his fingers into Will’s mouth so he can suck them. “Would you do that for me? Are you going to try?” Moving his hand further up between Will’s legs he takes hold of Will’s cock and begins to stroke it; and Will gives a long, low moan as his body spasms round Hannibal’s knot and he comes hard for a second time, closely followed by a third.
“Perfect,” sighs Hannibal with a spark of genuine devotion. “My beautiful omega boy. You’re so attuned to me aren’t you? Just as I am to you.” Then he wraps his arm round Will’s chest to pull him close while pressing very delicate kisses against the back of his neck and smiling with satisfaction at the little rumbling purr-like noise such lavishly attentive touches manage to create. Omegas are known to make this sound when contented – a counterpart to the growling noise that alphas make in extremis – and the fact he’s so rarely heard Will do it, combined with the fact that Hannibal himself is the cause, is unbelievably gratifying. In this respect, and despite a heat being something Will was always intensely opposed to, he seems far more peaceful than Hannibal’s ever seen him, rather as if all the chaos in his head has temporarily fallen silent. Serene and softened and sated and beautiful, thinks Hannibal approvingly. And mine.

In fact the only sound now is the soft plashing of snow against the window and the small purring noise from Will that goes on and on, and Hannibal tightens his grip on him while wishing it was possible for Will to be as fully aware of this moment of mutual peace and acceptance in the way that Hannibal is. This is such a small speck of time, he thinks, beginning to stroke his face against Will’s hair. A fleeting moment – destined to be lost and worn away – but I’ll never forget how you look right now. No matter what darkness and corruption come afterwards I’ll remember you this way; and while the loss of it would be unimaginable, I’d still rather be driven mad by this image of you than not to have it at all. Your perfection in this moment shall haunt me for the rest of my life.

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When Will wakes up a few hours later he’s completely forgotten his previous pliancy and instead grows aggressive again; waking Hannibal up by biting him because he wants more attention and obviously feels aggrieved that he isn’t getting it. While he lacks Hannibal’s physical strength he more than makes up for it in ferocity and determination, and when Hannibal attempts to leave the room to get some water Will is so resentful of being left that he climbs on his back to make him lose his balance before pouncing on him and tackling him onto the bed. Hannibal, who finds being attacked by Will almost unfeasibly enjoyable, puts up a very limited resistance and generally only intervenes – and even then reluctantly – when it looks like Will might get too out of control and end up injuring one or both of them. Will clearly resents these interventions and is likely to become even more aggressive as a result of them; but despite the bruises and the scratch marks and the numerous indentations from Will’s small sharp teeth, Hannibal always finds that he enjoys that too.

As predicted by Dr Hall another change comes over Will on the second day, and he grows much calmer as the previous aggression gets replaced by a state of pensiveness that leads him to lie silent and still for hours like someone in a trance while Hannibal sits next to him and strokes his hair. The only thing capable of holding his attention is the sight of the snow, so in the end Hannibal carries him into the living room so he can have a more expansive view from the large French windows. Will silently crawls onto Hannibal’s lap and lies immobile against his chest with his head tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin, then gazes forlornly at the swirling sheets of white while Hannibal silently admires the far more striking image of Will in his delicate, sensuous state of sadness.

Outside the window the snow is soft, silver and soundless and blows against the glass as if it’s trying to find a way into the house. “Like being inside a snow globe,” says Hannibal. He continues holding onto Will until he’s fallen asleep, then gently lays him down onto the sofa and covers him up with a blanket before retreating onto the opposite chair for a suitable vantage point to begin sketching him while he sleeps. In fact Hannibal deliberately packed a set of art supplies for this exact purpose, and has already amassed a sizable collection of similar drawings from the past few days; some of which are taken from life (deep in sleep like now and draped naked across the bed, oblivious of the moment being captured for posterity), some from memory (ferocious and passionate when the heat began for the very first time) and some of which are plucked purely from imagination (running or fighting or crouching or pouncing, yet always victorious and glowing with all the grace and fierceness of a
young Grecian warrior). There is monochrome Will, stark and uncompromising in charcoal or pencil, and technicolour Will rendered richly in pastel or crayons; and when Hannibal finally obtains the time and privacy to execute it, fully intends for there to be Will depicted gloriously on canvas with swathes of expensively creamy oil paint that are lavishly and liberally applied. Not, of course, that any of these hues or tints can ever truly capture the vibrant splendour of the original. ‘Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint half-flush that dies along his throat’ quotes Hannibal to himself with a slight smile. He pauses for a few seconds and runs his eye across the paper, then adds some pencil strokes to lengthen the line of Will’s jaw and deepen the frown line between his eyebrows, lending a brutal grimness and determination to the expression that’s only rarely displayed in real life.

On the third day Will stops being sad and becomes needy and restless instead, requiring constant attention and reassurance which Hannibal is more than happy to provide. In this respect he’s fully aware of what a huge show of trust it is for Will to be so vulnerable in front of someone – although still has no reservations in exploiting it mercilessly by deliberately hiding himself in the most far-flung parts of the house simply for the pleasure of sitting there and waiting for the inevitable sound of footsteps before Will forlornly comes following after him because he can’t bear to be on his own. In some ways Will’s need for sex is even more urgent than at the beginning of the heat, although the way he expresses it is entirely different and invites a dramatically different presentation from both of them as if making love is an idiom all of its own; a language of the body. This is a kind that’s languid and tender in which Hannibal gazes into Will’s eyes and calls him beloved, dearest or my darling then strokes his face and tangles their fingers together, telling Will how beautiful he is, how desired and wanted, and how good he wants to make him feel. This kind is softly lit by the glow of the fire or warmed in the winter sun and is guided by worshipful, questing touches that seek to read a story in each other’s skin the way a blind person reads braille: quiet and yearning in the morning or sweetly peaceful in the evening, and always begins with soft kisses then ends with murmured pledges of how Will is adored and valued – how he is essential – before falling asleep entwined in each other’s arms.

On the last day of the heat Will grows pliant and tactile, and doesn’t seem to require anything more for complete contentment beyond being as close as possible to Hannibal at all times. Because he’s so wan and exhausted by this point it means that Hannibal is obliged to spend most of his time in the bedroom keeping him company as he rests; and while the confinement would be frustrating in other circumstance, he does it without any kind of resentment or complaint. Will sleeps excessively in short bursts, so Hannibal remains there all day to watch over him, only leaving the room when night is starting to fall and it looks as if Will might finally stay asleep until morning. The house is dark and cold, and Hannibal heads to the kitchen in a rather long-suffering way to tend to the assorted needs of the dogs – and who are not remotely grateful as opposed to borderline resentful that Hannibal is the one to see to them rather than Will – before pouring himself a glass of wine and taking it into the living room, where he settles himself into the armchair and watches the way the snow is spilling down silver in the moonlight. It’s barely twenty minutes since he came downstairs, but sure enough there’s soon the faint sound of footsteps and a few seconds later Will appears, having obviously woken up and been dismayed to find himself alone. He’s extremely pale and drawn with shadows under both eyes and seeming unable to walk straight; and yet in that moment, illuminated in the moonlight, to Hannibal he’s never looked more perfect.

Putting down the wine glass he holds out his hand and says, very softly: “Come here Will.”

Given Will’s ingrained resistance, if not outright dislike, of asking for affection Hannibal isn’t entirely expecting him to obey; and therefore can’t help feeling rather moved when Will immediately crosses the room so he can wordlessly curl up onto Hannibal’s knee and bury his face against his neck. He’s shivering slightly with the cold and Hannibal cradles his head with his palm then uses the other hand to trail his fingers up and down Will’s back, pausing occasionally to brush his face against his hair and murmur quiet words of praise and encouragement until Will grows so relaxed he finally
falls asleep again in Hannibal’s arms.

“Will,” murmurs Hannibal softly. “Beloved.” Will, still wrestling with sleep, whimpers slightly and Hannibal makes a soothing noise and tightens his grip around Will’s shoulders. Then he tilts his head to the side to get a better view of Will’s face; and while he’s only intending it to be for a few moments, he finds it temporarily impossible to tear his eyes away, because – just a few seconds more, just a few. Just a few more enraptured, agonised moments to simply gaze at…this. This living, breathing paradox. This light and life, problem and solution, all sin yet entirely soul; capable of deciphering all manner of mourning and misfortune while remaining beautiful and terrible and knowing and unaware – and belonging entirely to Hannibal while simultaneously free and unfettered and impossible to fully take possession of. Even his current vulnerability, something that would be deeply contemptible in anyone else, has an artistry about it that strikes Hannibal as so acutely moving it’s almost unbearable. You and your fatal beauty, he thinks, running his finger along Will’s cheekbone. How do you manage to do it? It’s scarcely possible you can be real and yet your heart beats and your blood flows. Gently he now moves his fingers down to press them against Will’s throat, noting the strong healthy throb of his pulse. It’s a vivid testimony to how much life he has in him, and yet Will is something that can haunt Hannibal’s mind and lull his sense of reason to sleep; and surely something so enigmatic could only ever be a figment of the imagination, not blood and bone and breath?

Across the room the desk is now illuminated by a stray shaft of moonlight, and Hannibal stares at it for a while as he remembers the moment he first discovered Will’s journal. The fact it’s locked away means he’s been unable to revisit it since, although with his remarkably retentive memory the most meaningful passages are still inscribed and stowed away; and remembering it now he can’t help musing over one particular entry. The irony of it isn’t lost on him, and in that moment the force of the observation seems like a form of cosmic punishment for his hubris and arrogance in under-estimating what he was taking on when first attempting to draw Will into his world. Closing his eyes he now briefly re-envisages it, the words spilling across the page in Will’s distinctive, bold handwriting like a mocking message from the future: ‘It’s impossible to imagine anything happening to you over which you didn’t have complete control.’

Because that wasn’t entirely true, was it? thinks Hannibal wryly, beginning to stroke his cheek against Will’s hair. After all – you happened to me.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Huge hugs and thanks to the wonderful Rimu who’s made a very lovely painting of Will from the last chapter that you can see here on Tumblr. Oh wow, this fandom’s full of talented people! We’re all so lucky <3

It seems to Will as if he returns to himself very slowly post-heat: bit by bit and piece by piece, until several days after it first started he finally finds himself back to normal. The gentle gradualness of it is unexpected – surreal almost, in being so stately and slow – and feels a bit like watching an image solidify from photographic film as the fervid feral version dissolves away and the old version comes back instead. In fact recovering from it is nothing like the ordeal he expected it to be, and instead feels smooth and sedate like the tide coming in as opposed to the rough, mangled, mutilated re-emergence that he’d been dreading. He doesn’t even feel too bad physically; just a bit tired and aching, the way you might after a cold.

“So…” he says to Hannibal over breakfast the next day. “That’s it done then.”

“Yes indeed. Finished and done.”

“What was I like?” persists Will, consumed with a sudden curiosity.

Hannibal is arranging papers together in his briefcase and he now pauses then slowly swivels round to give Will his full attention. Will raises his eyebrows expectedly and Hannibal gives a small smile.

“You were perfect,” he says.

“Don’t be stupid,” replies Will impatiently. “No one’s perfect.”

“You were perfect in your extreme imperfection. In fact you were exactly how I imagined you would be.”

“Which was what?”

Hannibal smiles a little more broadly then dips his head so Will can see the technicolour stripe of grazes and bruises that are running along his throat. “Fierce.”

“Oh God,” says Will, aghast. “I did that? I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not.”

“Perhaps you should,” says Will, who’s uncomfortably aware of how he’s starting to blush. “They look painful.”

“They are,” replies Hannibal, who now seems to be enjoying some sort of private joke. “But pleasure and pain – they’re so very closely aligned. Pleasure without conscience; pain without principle.” He pauses again and the faint smile grows broader still. “You know about both don’t you?”

Will catches his eye, and for some reason the automatic denial snags in his throat and leaves him
unable to protest (or, more truthfully, pretend) that he doesn’t know what Hannibal’s talking about. Hannibal’s smile now stops getting wider and instead begins to glint round the edges in the same way a flame might flicker along the wick of a candle. “Anyway,” adds Will, with a touch of defensiveness, “you bit me.”

“I did,” replies Hannibal serenely. “I’m afraid I rather lost control of myself.”

Almost like it’s listening, the bite on Will’s shoulder promptly gives a painful twinge. He’s already seen it in the mirror in its full glory – the edges a raw sore scarlet with a vivid purple blaze of bruises along the side – and he half wants to rub it, except is concerned that the gesture might look too deliberate and petty; especially considering how Hannibal isn’t complaining about his own wounds. To his surprise, Will then realises that he’s not actually as annoyed by this injury as he would have expected to be, not least because he can’t help finding something compelling about the way they’re both bearing signs of their mutual passion for one another like a series of duelling scars. In this respect alphas are notorious for biting omegas, although the opposite is far less likely to be the case and Will is pleased at how Hannibal doesn’t seem remotely offended by it. Someone like Andrew, on the other hand, would have hauled Will off to a psychiatrist by now for a dose of medication or some omegan behavioural therapy if he’d been attacked the same way. In fact taking Will to a psychiatrist is probably the least of what he would have done.

“We both lost control to differing degrees,” adds Hannibal with another faint flicker of the mouth. “Humans often tend to do so when confronted with such primitive, elementary drives. Sex...death; how they consume us. We think we are so civilised, don’t we? But we are not.” A delicately suggestive little silence follows this statement, in which it’s not entirely clear whether the ‘we’ refers to human beings in general – or Hannibal and Will in particular – and Hannibal stretches and smiles then adds: “I kept my promise, however: I didn’t bite your neck.”

“I didn’t think you would,” replies Will. “I trusted you. I knew you wouldn’t lose control that much.” Pausing slightly, he suddenly looks bashful. “I mean, I know that you wouldn’t have wanted to. To bond. It...it would be a big step.”

“It would,” says Hannibal, who’s now staring at Will very intently.

Will wants to add something else but finds that he can’t because he doesn’t know what else to say, so in the end just shrugs his painful shoulder instead then gestures rather aimlessly towards the window where the snow is swirling in a pale, powdery cloud like icing sugar. “You should set off earlier than usual,” he adds, cringing internally at such an unnecessary statement of the obvious. “It’ll take a while to get in.”

“Agreed,” replies Hannibal. “Although at least the main roads should be clear. And what are you going to do with yourself all day?”

“A shower for starters,” says Will wryly. “And give my hair a proper wash. It’s a bit oily.” Although after several days of ecstatic heat-sex, ‘oily’ seems putting it mildly; to be honest he’s half surprised it doesn’t have distressed sea life in it and a crowd of disapproving Greenpeace campaigners camped around the edge waving signs. Will frowns now at the thought of it, resenting the amount of time that’s regularly wasted in the washing and drying of hair. “Wouldn’t it be easier being bald?” he says, giving the ends of it an irritable tug. “I should probably just shave it off.”

“You will not,” replies Hannibal firmly. “I like your hair.”

“Yeah exactly, genius – my hair.” Hannibal’s eyes begin to narrow and Will can’t help laughing at the sight of it. “Stop trying to tell me what to do. You’re not my alpha.”
“No indeed,” says Hannibal with amusement. “Although it hardly matters, because even if I were I don’t imagine I’d succeed in telling you what to do.”

Will grins again then gestures for a second time towards the snow. “You’ll be careful won’t you?” he adds more seriously. “Tell the cab driver to go slow.” Not that Hannibal is the sort of person who really requires wishes of care; but Will still feels like he wants him to have them all the same.

Rather like he’s reading Will’s thoughts, Hannibal begins to smile in an unusually benevolent way at this display of concern, then prowls over and stares at Will for a few seconds before suddenly wrapping him in his arms and spinning him round. And it should really be a ridiculous thing for two adults to be doing, but somehow it’s not; and Will finds himself laughing in the kind of playful, high-spirited way that he never really associates with himself. “I shall take the utmost care,” replies Hannibal, whose voice is slightly muffled from where his face is pressed against Will’s hair. “Although only if you promise to do likewise – no leaving the house.”

“It’s been 24 hours now. I really don’t think it would matter.”

“Not smelling like that,” says Hannibal firmly. “Another day will be sufficient. Two at most.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately and Hannibal begins to tighten his grip. “Okay, fine,” says Will, even though it’s hard to tell whether Hannibal is being totally serious or not. “I’ll stay inside. If it’ll keep you happy.”

“It will keep me enormously happy,” replies Hannibal in the usual deadpan way. “It will also save me the trouble of being concerned over your wellbeing while I’m gone.”

Will gives a small sigh then disentangles himself and clears his throat before darting another slightly shy glance in Hannibal’s direction. The truth is that he’s longing to ask if he’s planning on returning to Will’s house after work rather than going back to his own but is struggling to find a way of expressing it that won’t sound embarrassingly needy and clinging. Hannibal catches his eye yet again and then, having appeared to have worked out what the problem is, adds: “Do you want me to bring you anything back?”

Just yourself, thinks Will. Although of course it’s impossible to say such a slushy thing out loud, so in the end he just smiles instead to make sure that Hannibal knows he’s pleased about this. And then, because he has a rather insane impulse that he wants Hannibal to have something to remind him of Will in the time they’re away from each other, plucks up his scarf from where it’s lying on the table and proceeds to fasten it round Hannibal’s neck. As he’s doing it Will actually suspects that this is a terrible idea (and is even vaguely aware of a part of himself that’s stood on in horror yelling ‘Oh my God, don’t give him that you fucking fool – it’s goddamn hideous’) although it’s a bit late now and he doesn’t really have any choice but to see the whole enterprise through to the bitter end. In fact the scarf really is hideous, possessing the kind of brownness and hairiness that in the wrong light looks like the mortal remains of some depressed furry creature – and is probably the sort of thing that Hannibal would normally only agree to handle with protective gloves and a pair of tongs – although contrary to expectation he doesn’t look displeased or irritated by the gesture, and instead puts his hands over Will’s to help fasten it with a smile that’s distinctly softer and gentler then the usual sharp contortion of the lips that’s Will’s grown used to.

“Thank you Will,” says Hannibal now. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“No problem,” replies Will off-handedly. Then he gives another vague smile, although privately can’t help thinking that Hannibal probably shouldn’t encourage him; after all, a few more mornings like this and Will might be driven to do something truly appalling, like packing him lunch boxes with sappy little love notes inside. He now cringes at the thought of it then adds in a voice that’s kept
deliberately casual: “You could always just take another day off?”

“I could,” agrees Hannibal. “And I would like to – very much – only I have several things that need attending to. More to the point, I can see that you need a bit of time to yourself.”

Will can feel himself blushing faintly at this, concerned that he’s made it too obvious while simultaneously being touched and appreciative that Hannibal is sufficiently attuned to his moods to be able to recognise his need for solitude. “Yeah,” he finally says. “It’s nothing personal. It’s only that…”

“You value your own space,” concludes Hannibal, idly stroking along the edge of the scarf with his long fingers as if it’s something alive and in need of attention. “I understand Will; you don’t have to explain. In fact I’m flattered you’ve been able to tolerate me being in your house for as long as you have.”

“I didn’t just tolerate you,” says Will firmly. “I was glad you were here.”

Hannibal smiles again then moves forward and wraps his arms round Will’s back even tighter than before, and Will smiles too then leans contentedly into the touch. “I’ll return as soon as I can,” adds Hannibal, brushing his cheek against the top of Will’s head. “Rest assured you’ll be in my mind the entire time. In fact it’s rather ridiculous; I haven’t even left yet and already I find myself missing you.”

Will wants to say that he feels the same, but is concerned it’ll push them perilously close to turning into a pair of sentimental old bastards so opts to let Hannibal know silently instead by running his palms across his back. Then he stands at the door with a blanket round his shoulders and waves him off while Hannibal turns round and gazes from the back window of the cab with an intensity that should probably be unnerving, yet somehow just feels reassuring instead. Will stands watching until the cab has disappeared from view, then readjusts the blanket round his shoulders before jumping slightly as his phone goes off in his pocket with a loud pinging noise. Pulling it out he sees it’s a text from Hannibal: Go inside.

Will grins then turns round and closes the door behind him while trying not to notice or care about the lonely, echoing quality the house seems to have taken on now that Hannibal is no longer in it. In this respect Will knows he’s going to be on his own for several hours now, and he can’t help finding it ironic that after endless complaints of being over-worked he has absolutely no idea of how to fill a stretch of much longed-for free time. Mentally he starts to inventory the sort of activities people normally do when they’re home alone (before rejecting all of them as boring and pointless) then paces round rather fretfully while trying not to check his watch, seeing as he already knows it’ll tell him that Hannibal’s barely been gone 10 minutes. “But I wanted to be on my own,” says Will out loud; and which is certainly true because he did. The current restlessness doesn’t even make any sense.

Will finally goes back into the kitchen again to brew a cup of coffee – not because he particularly wants it but because he can’t think of anything better to do – then stands and waits for the water to boil while hopping at intervals because of how cold the tiles feel on his bare feet. A few of Hannibal’s books are lying nearby on the table in a neat little stack and he begins to idly flick through them while he’s waiting, admiring how stately and splendid they manage to seem in the midst of Will’s far more mundane belongings. In fact they’re the sort of books you’d expect to see in a university library, being mostly leather-bound and embossed with lengthy titles in unfamiliar languages, and Will gently runs his forefinger across the covers while thinking how nice it is to see them there. This thought, in turn, makes it tempting to push the idea a bit further and start to consider how nice it would be to see more of Hannibal’s things in the house: scattered around and blended in
with his own in a comfortable comingling of space.

Not loads of them, Will hastily amends to himself, because it’s not like he’s expecting Hannibal to move in or anything like that. Nevertheless the idea of just a few is undeniably appealing. Hannibal’s coat snugly draped over Will’s while hanging on the same hook, for example, or their jackets sharing closet space; or even something as simple as an assortment of cufflinks, watches and loose change strewn together in a heap on the bureau. They might end up casually borrowing each other’s things without having to ask; and Will has a brief but pleasant image of Hannibal using Will’s razors or shampoo because he can’t find his own, or Will grabbing one of Hannibal’s shirts first thing in the morning then wearing it all day with only the two of them being aware of the switch. In fact the image has so much allure that it’s enough for Will to grasp hold of it, then combine it with the fact he has several hours of time to kill, and finally put the two ideas together to conclude that it might be nice to create a bit more space for the storage of Hannibal’s hypothetical items by tackling a task he’s been putting off for ages: specifically, sorting through the boxes from his old house that are currently stacked in his bedroom in a haphazard pile where they’ve been quietly gathering dust since he first moved in. Admittedly his reasons for wanting to do it make him feel presumptuous and mildly stupid, although now the thought’s occurred to him it’s nearly impossible to dislodge it. Besides, it’s not only because of Hannibal. It’s not like it doesn’t need doing.

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to do it for ages,” Will tells one of the dogs; and who gives him a long mournful look in response as if it couldn’t give less of a shit. Will sighs out loud then makes the coffee – and drinks it, then makes another one and drinks that too – then stares at the pile of books again before finally accepting the inevitable and trailing upstairs in a rather self-conscious way so he can make a start.

The boxes in question are mostly full of relics passed on by Will’s father when cleaning out his own house, and sorting through them now Will gets an odd sense of excavating his life in the manner of an archaeological dig: a palimpsest of his past selves, arranged in fusty layers of reducing recency that begin from just a few years ago and get older and older until he’s passed his college graduation photo and arrived at his high school yearbook, then his collection of trading cards from the 8th grade, and then a bag of brightly coloured Lego that can only date from kindergarten and which Will can’t actually remember ever owning. He’s half-hoping he might discover a picture of his mother to add to the lonely frame downstairs, although the photographs themselves are few and far between and are mostly limited to the formal impersonal type, such as Will onstage receiving a certificate from the principal of his old high school for outstanding academic performance. The principal had never liked him, and looking at the picture there’s an obvious crease of irritation on the old bastard’s face. Will smirks slightly then tosses the photo onto the pile on his right before adding the year book and then, when he finds it, the certificate itself. There are actually three of these piles – one for the trash, one for charity donations, and one of things to keep – with the majority of the boxes’ contents going to the first pile, a few on the second, and so far nothing at all on the third.

Wil finally reaches the bottom of the last box, and is about to congratulate himself on a Job Well Done when he pulls out the final item and finds himself pausing in the act of depositing it on the trash pile. The object isn’t particularly interesting in itself: just an ancient dog-eared book called The Velveteen Rabbit with a curling cover and a series of watery tear marks on the spine from where his father once spilt coffee on it. Yet combined with the mournful nostalgia unleashed by the rest of the boxes, the sight of it creates a slight pang in Will that he can’t immediately identify. It doesn’t even make sense because the book doesn’t hold sad memories; quite the opposite in fact, because he remembers loving it as a child. Slowly he now opens it up to inspect where he’d written his name on the fly-leaf, smiling faintly at the way he’d used the full ‘William’ rather than Will in an obvious fit of infantile self-importance. The book had been a gift from some absent relative of his mother’s, seemingly unable to appreciate that a small boy with a passion for fishing and football was unlikely
to derive much satisfaction from a children’s book first published in 1922. ‘What on earth did she send you that for?’ his father had demanded in disgust. ‘That’s typical of Jeanie; she never thinks…’ Only on this occasion his father had got it wrong because Will, who was romantic and imaginative and enormously charmed by the idea of toys coming to life, had simply loved the book; demanding to have it read aloud over and over again until he knew it off by heart, before one day he finally outgrew it and the simple words and pictures lost their appeal. At the time the enthusiasm was for nothing more than the story on a literal level, but looking back on it now his fascination seems prophetic: as if the child self somehow knew how relevant the themes of vulnerability and authenticity would become as an adult. Picking it up again he begins to leaf through it until he comes to the section that’s begun to resurface in his memory, slowing running his eyes over the delicate Edwardian watercolours of a toy rabbit and horse.

‘“Real isn’t how you are made. It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Sometimes. When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.’

‘Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?’

‘It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.’”

Will frowns to himself then abruptly slams the book shut and tosses it onto the floor. To an observer he appears irritated and impatient, not to mention slightly embarrassed for having given attention to something so trivial. Yet even as he’s throwing the books aside, Will knows the gesture is nothing more than an attempt to disguise the aching mournfulness that’s now more powerful than ever; and which he finally understands is coming from a sense of sadness on behalf of his child self. The child that loved picture books enough to write his name in them and believed that toys could come to life if you were just prepared to love them hard enough; and who smiled, and sometimes even laughed, and all the time had no idea that he was destined to end up in a lonely house in the middle of nowhere with a collection of shattered mirrors and a Dark Reflection and a mind that breaks itself day after day in the service of seeking out monsters. Because staring now at the pile of old possessions, it’s impossible not to give them an entirely different meaning and wonder whether the Reflection was there too and if they belong as much to it as they do to Will. Was the Reflection stood by in the shadows the entire time? Was it there reading story books and winning awards from the principal, all the while dreaming of when its moment would come and it’d be stood triumphant in the thrill of the kill with its pale face and eerily glittering eyes. Was it waiting Will’s whole life?

Will sighs out loud, exhausted and overwhelmed, and consumed with something a little like grief: a requiem for the person who never really was. Then he has a brief, helpless impulse to shout it out – ‘What happened to me? Where did I go?’ – and probably would as well, except for the knowledge that no one would be able to answer; and that the person least able to of all is himself. It’s not like the book’s moral isn’t complete bullshit anyway. Will has never wanted to embrace his own loose joints or shabby fur, and the idea that such blemishes can be elevated by love of oneself and acceptance from other people seems both saccharine and faintly laughable…although at least the author got it right when she stated that it hurts. Besides, how it is even possible to imagine someone else accepting you when you can’t bear to accept and experience yourself?
“Real isn’t something you are, it’s something you become,” mutters Will under his breath. Suddenly feeling self-conscious he abruptly gets to his feet then deposits the book on the trash pile and shuts the door behind him.

*****

Will drifts around for the next few hours feeling fidgety and restless; and while it’s embarrassing to admit it, he knows the impatience comes from waiting for Hannibal to return and breathe some life back into the house again. In this respect the temporary loss of the ability to be content on his own unsettles Will and makes him feel irritated, but likewise the awareness of missing Hannibal is too obvious to be denied and there hardly seems any point in not acknowledging it. Cringing slightly he goes back into the bedroom and locates one of Hannibal’s shirts from where it’s draped across the chair so he can put it on over his own then heads downstairs again feeling even more self-conscious than before. A lingering effect of heat hormones is undoubtedly partly responsible, yet he also knows it’s more than just that. In fact the emotional resonance of needing Hannibal is powerful enough on its own to make Will ponder it with a growing sense of tension as the impressions from the past few days combine with his response to the boxes’ contents in a heady way that makes him catch his breath. The sound of it is staccato-sharp in the empty air, and Will paces for a few more seconds before finally sitting down at his desk and searching out the journal from inside its locked drawer. He hasn’t used it for a while now and it already feels unfamiliar, but he pulls it out anyway then sits for a few seconds in silent contemplation before picking up a pen and beginning to write.

Dear You

So, I don’t remember much about the past few days; at least not in a conventional sense. I don’t remember exactly what we did or how I acted, or what you might have said or how I might have responded…but I definitely remember how I felt. This is why I’m writing to you now. I want to tell you what I remember.

It was this.

~

I remember feeling that it was as if we’d fused together; like my body was your body. Like I was you and you were me.

I remember that I didn’t see what we were doing as sex, or fucking, or making love, and that I didn’t define you as an alpha, or a potential mate, or myself as an omega. I didn’t need to, because none of those labels mattered anymore. I just defined myself as you; and you as me.

I remember that for a brief snatch of time we weren’t two people anymore but one. We were two halves of the same whole, an unsplittable atom, and I didn’t know anymore where I ended and you begun. In that single moment I felt like I could have merged with you, if such a thing was possible.

That if it were possible…I would have done it.

~

That’s a lot, isn’t it? A lot of memories with a lot of feelings inside. I guess most people would say it was the heat talking, and perhaps it was; at least partly. Certainly I feel a lot calmer now. Less frenzied and ardent. Less like I want to step inside you. Because back then I really did, and it’s what I remember the most. I didn’t just desire you, I felt as if wanted to be you. I felt like the only way I could ever be close enough was to climb into your body and wear it as my own.
Dear you, there are no right words to describe how disorientating this is, and now I’m going to tell you why. I found a book this morning: just an old, stupid children’s book that I’d forgotten I’d ever had, yet it reminded me of the idea that people can only truly engage with someone else when they’ve embraced their own imperfections. That it helps them feel ‘real.’ It made me realise how vulnerable a person becomes when they get too close to someone else, because if the Other has the ability to make you feel happy it means they have the power to hurt you as well. But it also made me realise something else: that all the craving urge to be close to you came from the way I experienced you during these last few days as an enlargement and extension of myself. It was like looking into one of those broken mirrors in the hallway. Me but not-me: because when I looked at you, I saw myself staring back. You were like my Dark Reflection, and you owned it and accepted it so completely I felt like I could love you for it.

I felt like the only way I could know myself was through knowing you.

The thing is, what you need to understand is that I’m used to being looked at – especially by alphas – but I’m not used to being truly seen. You see me, don’t you? And I’m starting to see you.

I see the darkness in you.

But even more than that...I see the way it reflects back the darkness in me.

*****

Spelling out his conflict in such a raw, uncensored way means that Will is fully expecting to feel worse after confiding in the journal. In fact he’s expecting it so completely that he becomes actively reluctant to stop writing, rather like he’s dreading having to come to an end then face the implications of what he’s expressed. But once he’s finally put down the pen it doesn’t take long to realise that the opposite is the case, and instead of feeling any renewed dread or doubt he’s actually experiencing a sense of closure that makes him feel far more calm and accepting than he did half an hour ago. Of course the calmness doesn’t change the fact that the information is unsettling – or that the calmness itself is in spite of the journal entry, and not really because of it – yet there’s undoubtedly still something cathartic about writing it down. In fact facing up to his feelings in this way seems to be a means of temporarily exorcising them, to the extent that locking the journal back in the drawer makes Will feel as though he’s locking his anxieties away alongside it where they can remain confined and contained until the time arrives to take them out and examine them again. It is what it is, thinks Will with a certain numb acceptance. Besides, it’s not necessarily something he’s always going to have to face on his own.

In this respect Hannibal isn’t likely to return for a few more hours yet, so Will pushes back his chair then goes upstairs where he vetoes the shower in favour of a long leisurely bath while inspecting his assorted bruises and scratches and wondering whether Hannibal’s own collection of wounds is similar. Then he puts some fresh sheets on the bed and moves the reading lamp from the table on his side and puts it on Hannibal’s instead before starting to plan how they might spend the evening when Hannibal gets home (and whether Will dares attempt to cook a meal for them both, or whether that would be too epic an exercise in public humiliation considering who he’d be cooking for), when it suddenly occurs to him how he’s thinking of Hannibal’s return as ‘coming home’ rather than ‘coming back’, as if he lives here all the time and the house is his place of shelter as much as it is Will’s. As an idea it’s not an unpleasant one, although it inevitably causes Will to push it and prod it to its logical conclusion and wonder what the holy hell Andrew is going to say when he finds out about the past few days. Because of course, at some point, he’s almost definitely going to.

Will frowns then bites his thumbnail for a few seconds, silently mulling this over. Andrew would have been given the letter on Friday and has undoubtedly been on the phone to his own lawyer since
then. Mr...what was the man’s name? It was one of those Deep South ones that sounded like a brand of face powder sold in pale pink compacts, or cakes with too much cream in them. Oh yeah, Lafayette. Mr Lafayette, attorney-at-law; a chilly silver-haired alpha with extremely white shirt cuffs, a mouthful of gleaming teeth as large and square as tombstones, and who was annoyingly prone to short barking laughs that sounded like a dog with kennel cough. Will remembers him fairly well, because he’d written up the custody claim on Andrew’s behalf in what still probably counts as one of the most humiliating hours of Will’s life. Mr Lafayette was some old friend (emphasis on old...the shrivelled bastard) of Andrew’s family and had affectionately referred to Andrew as ‘son’ the whole time while ignoring Will entirely as if he was merely one of the office’s fixtures and fittings and of no more practical relevance than the collection of Law Reviews in the bookcase or the stupid lamp in the centre of his desk with all the Tiffany glass. “How old is he?” he’d said to Andrew. “Does he want an allowance? Has he had a medical check? Does he have any family with a claim on him?” Will had lost patience almost immediately and started loudly answering the questions on his own behalf, at which point Andrew had laughed and exchanged an amused glance with Mr Lafayette as if Will was an adorably feisty pet that had just performed a trick of some kind. “Did you have something to say to me young man?” Mr Lafayette had finally asked, peering at Will from over the top of his glasses; and Will had opened his mouth to confide exactly what he wanted to say when Andrew had placed a warning hand on his arm, and Will was reluctantly forced to go quiet again while fantasising about putting that fucking hideous lamp to good use by giving them both a few good clouts with all the Tiffany glass. Thinking of it now Will can feel his blood starting to boil – a spluttering cauldron of injustice and outrage – although at least the fact that Mr Lafayette is so hopelessly old-fashioned and out of touch should go in Will’s favour. After all it’s hard to imagine him being much of a match for Elizabeth Lewis, with her New York accent and scrappy demeanour, who’s known to take on difficult cases pro bono that other lawyers claim are unwinnable and who regularly writes pieces of furious eloquence in the national newspapers about the barbaric way that omegas are treated...

Will is just considering whether to phone the half-wit receptionist to check if Andrew got the letter as planned, when all of a sudden his brooding is abruptly and shockingly disturbed by a noise outside that slices through the silence without warning and causes him to automatically stiffen before going completely still. Admittedly the clattering is softer that it would normally be owing to the subduing effect of the snow, but Will’s sharp ears still detect it anyway; and the unexpectedness of it, as well as a lack of any obvious cause, immediately makes him uneasy. Quickly pushing back his chair he goes to the window and conceals himself behind the thick fabric of the curtains so he can peer out into the rapidly gathering gloom. At first there’s nothing to see at all beyond curdled pools of shadow and the gleaming silver of freshly fallen snow, but then he peers a bit harder and suddenly stiffens all over again as a flickering movement in the corner catches his eye. The assorted shadows are still slithering round the yard in a macabre crosshatch of spindly black, yet while they’re by no means distinct Will’s seen enough to convince him that one shadow in particular has started to solidify as it begins to separate from the others and slowly but surely – almost agonisingly so – transforms itself into a human figure.

Will catches his breath in a sharp exhale as one by one he feels every single hair on the back of his neck begin to stand on end. In fact he barely moves or makes a sound; yet while it’s impossible that the thing in the yard could have heard him, the black space where the face would be still gives a sudden sharp twitch as if it’s seen Will in his hiding place and is now staring straight at him. The way it abruptly jerks forward makes the movement seem so disjointed and crawling that in the dim winter light it looks like a giant insect, and Will catches his breath again with a sigh of anger that’s so low it’s almost a hiss. Forgetting Hannibal’s instructions about not going out, he sprints towards the front door before abruptly stopping then doubling back so he can grab the nearest and most effective weapon that it’s possible to improvise at short notice: a large steak knife that’s lying on the kitchen counter from where Hannibal left it after preparing last night’s meal. The handle feels solid and firm and the blade looks gleaming and deadly with a sleek silver sheen; and Will grips onto it then runs...
towards the front door again, dimly aware the entire time of how different his reaction is to when he first thought he saw a stranger prowling round the yard. Because back then he was scared and bewildered, and now he’s filled with a blistering sense of outrage that’s furious and exhilarating and wants nothing more than to hunt the figure down then pounce on it and pound it into pieces in the snow. As he sprints down the hallway he fleetingly catches sight of the shattered glass in the mirror, only now the frame looks as empty as the gaping eye sockets in a skull. There’s no Dark Reflection living there anymore; it’s left its post. *It's slipped away,* thinks Will wildly. *It's Become.*

Outside it’s started to snow again. The flakes pound onto Will’s head like a silver scream, settling on his face and eyelashes with an iciness that’s so acute the sting of them feels hot rather than cold. Its thickness makes the landscape look numb and smothered, reducing it to a series of crude outlines and blunt edges like a face without features and nothing but an expanse of gleaming white skin. Then another noise makes him stiffen again before realising that it’s only the relentlessly mournful *caw-caw-caw* from the murder of crows as they skim across the sky like as many drops of tar, dancing and weaving in the wind in the manner of witches at a stormy Sabbath. Will draws in his breath, all muscles strained and every nerve tense and tingling with a mixture of cold and adrenaline, as he slowly begins to turn his head from side to side like he’s scenting the air. To the left: the gate and the suffocated remains of his car as it drowns in snow. To the right: the empty fields and naked trees and a murder of crows. But of the figure itself there’s no sign at all.

Cursing softly under his breath Will now tightens his grip on the knife and performs another slow scan of his surroundings. It scarcely seems feasible that the figure could have just vanished with the same eerie efficiency as it did before; yet once again there’s no sight or sound of it, and Will is forced to question – also just like before – whether or not he was imagining things and there never was anybody there. The snow is sufficiently churned up from his own footsteps and those of Hannibal to make any new tracks impossible to detect, yet it’s so hard to shake the initial impression of seeing something prowling round the yard. Will can hear his pulse in his ears and the roar of blood, and as he tightens his grip on the knife for a second time he knows he’s thinking that the phantom intruder is linked to Andrew in some way. Another private investigator come to attempt an abduction, or even Andrew himself…he knows this, even as he knows that his grip on the knife handle has begun to tighten even further at the thought of it.

In the midst of all the silence another sound now begins. It comes from somewhere to Will’s left and starts off faint and gradually gets louder and louder: a soft gurgling sound that’s low-pitched and eerie, and could almost pass for laughter except for how the sighing of the wind distorts it beyond recognition of anything capable of being produced by a human. The blizzard is badly disorientating now to Will, as if he’s being choked in frozen shards, and it means the yard’s been surreally transformed into something that feels enormous in size while remaining stifling and claustrophobically small in scope: a miniature arctic wasteland with Will himself as the lone pioneer. Next to his feet he can see that the woodpile’s been knocked over and as he bends down to inspect it a particularly vicious gust of wind cuts through him like a switchblade – like his own knife, or even one of The Sculptor’s. Discouraged by the lack of progress Will straightens up then performs a final, frustrated check of the yard before being reluctantly force to admit that even if anyone was there they must be long gone by now. Turning round he begins to retreat towards the safety of the house so that he can search out something more tangible than frozen blackness; and, in doing so, completely misses the spots of scarlet in the snow that lead in a trail towards a glistening heap that’s likewise slimy and scarlet and looks as if some time, long ago, it came from something living. But Will’s attention is honed on finding something large and alive, not the partial remains of something dead, and so he doesn’t see it; just as he also fails to see the small white business card that’s been tied to the hatchet at the top of the wood pile. Just a few seconds more would have been enough to notice it, but it now stays where it is alone and undisturbed; destined to be discovered at another moment, and carefully sheathed in laminate to protect it from the elements and preserve a message that’s been
written in the centre with the same spidery handwriting as all the others: Catch me when you can Mr Graham.

And then, on the other side: Expect me.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to CrazyInLov3 for the fantastically atmospheric cover art and to marlahanni for the beautiful photo edit to go with last chapter’s diary entry. Ahh I’m so grateful; both images are gorgeous and fit the story perfectly :-)

I also wanted to clarify that I didn’t write the section from The Velveteen Rabbit (although I wish I had :-D). Sorry for any confusion! I shouldn’t have taken for granted that people would have heard of it, but yes it’s a real book by Margery Williams; first published in 1922 and still very lovely and timeless. In fact was reading it to my little sister a few weeks ago and was all ‘ooh, that’s a bit Hannigrammy’ so in it went.

[I’ve just read that back and realised how stupid it sounds. Can we all pretend I said Hannigram-esque instead? Thanks *cough*]

Finally, a section of this chapter is NSFW – as always it’s clearly signposted, so easy to skip if you prefer to :-)
across the counter like a peddler displaying their wares. ‘Die-cast zinc pick resistant deadbolt,’ the woman had proclaimed with obvious professional pride. ‘No one’s getting past these little suckers. They’ll keep out any burglar in the world.’ And Will had secretly wanted to ask whether they could also keep out alphas; specifically powerful, wealthy, possessive ones with a catastrophic grudge against Will in one hand and an ownership contract in the other.

Not, of course, that he wants to keep out all alphas. In this respect the knowledge that Hannibal is due back any minute promptly makes Will cheer up and decide to replace his scrutiny of the yard with scrutiny of the road instead. The view from the living room is too obscured by the snow to see much of anything, so he ends up hanging out the bedroom window waiting for a glimpse of Hannibal’s car; then immediately running downstairs and bursting out the door to meet him once he sees the gleam of headlights, even though it occurs to him halfway through that this might be a bit too exuberant (particularly as all the dogs get the wrong idea and come pelting out as well like a furry tsunami). Only Hannibal doesn’t seem to mind being greeted in such an undignified way, instead giving one of his rare genuine smiles before gathering Will into his arms. Then he eases Will’s mouth open with his tongue and kisses him on and on and on until Will feels a bit dizzy with it so has to pull away and bury his face against Hannibal’s chest and mutter “Hi” into the front of his coat.

“Hello,” says Hannibal, stroking his cheek against Will’s hair. “What a very charming welcome.”

He’s obviously returned to his own house since this morning because he’s wearing a different coat from before that’s more appropriate for the snow; and which, combined with the presence of a leather suitcase on the passenger seat, Will takes as an encouraging sign that he’s planning to stay for at least a few more days. Even better he hasn’t used the opportunity to substitute Will’s tatty old scarf for one of his own, despite the fact it looks rather out of place against the expensive coat.

“I don’t know if charming’s the right word,” adds Will, finally disentangling himself.

“No? You have a better one, perhaps?”

“OTT.” Hannibal raises a questioning eyebrow. “Over the top.”

“That’s three words. And I still prefer my singular one, because you are immensely charming; even more so for being completely unaware of it.”

Will rolls his eyes slightly and Hannibal rolls his right back, then smiles again and puts a hand on Will’s shoulder so he can follow him into the house. “That rather suits you,” he adds as he’s removing his coat and has seen Will for the first time in the light of the kitchen. Will promptly looks confused and Hannibal gestures towards him and adds: “You’re wearing my shirt.”

Will can immediately feel himself blushing, so turns round and pretends to be busy with making coffee so that Hannibal won’t notice and guess. “Yeah,” he says, internally cursing himself for having forgotten to take it off. “Sorry. I was, um…I was cold.”

“It’s fine,” replies Hannibal. “I like seeing you in it.” Then he gives Will a long leisurely stare which suggests he’s already worked out exactly the real reason that he’s wearing it; and which means Will has to brace himself for the inevitable interrogation before realising, to his huge relief, that it’s not going to materialise and Hannibal appears inclined to show some mercy for once and not push the issue. In fact he generally seems far more casual than Will’s used to seeing him, and in the end a quietly companionable hour proceeds to pass in which Hannibal takes charge of preparing a meal for them both while Will sits on the counter and fixes the broken catch on the extractor fan and asks Hannibal how his day’s been.

“I’ve had an extremely tedious day,” says Hannibal, beginning to dice up cubes of beef with
amazing speed. “The press are going berserk over the Sculptor still being at large. Remember me telling you about Jack Crawford’s threat to come and sit in my office with his head in his hands? Well, this afternoon he came extremely close to carrying it out.”

“That conversation seems like ages ago now,” replies Will, rather dreamily. “So much has happened since then. It was the night you gave me the massage wasn’t it? And kept calling me The Will.”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal. “Where there’s a will there’s a way’. And deciding that it ought to be The Will, considering there is only one.” He pauses then starts to smile again. “Which of course is an error of reasoning, because there are many Wills – yet somehow still only one who manages to signify.”

“I suppose one is more than enough.”

“That’s what you said before. As it happens I agree; although I suspect for very different reasons.”

He doesn’t go on to explain what his reasons are; and Will, while curious to hear them, feels too self-conscious to ask so just closes his toolbox and climbs off the counter instead – only to make a startled ‘oof’ noise as Hannibal abruptly appears behind him and picks him up by the waist to lift him back up again. Will can’t help laughing at the unexpectedness of it, then shifts forwards and wraps his legs round Hannibal’s waist and gives a sharp tug so he nearly loses his balance.

“Got you,” he says.

“So it would seem,” replies Hannibal, reaching out to adjust Will’s glasses back into their proper position. “That was a very underhand move; what a little villain you are.”

“What a pushover you are. Anyway you love it, you liar.” He moves his face down until he can press it into the curve of Hannibal’s shoulder then wraps his arm round his neck. “I missed you today.”

“Good. I missed you too.”

“Were you thinking about me?”

“Constantly.”

“Like what?”

“I suppose you’re expecting me to describe something profound or philosophical, but I’m afraid you are going to be disappointed. I surprised myself by being incredibly conventional, just like a normal person.” Hannibal pauses, then frowns, having pronounced the word ‘normal’ in the same sort of tone that most people would reserve for ‘genocide’ or ‘Guantanamo’ or ‘genital warts’. “I ended up preoccupied with how much I wanted to see you, after which I began wondering whether you’d eaten enough and what I was going to feed you when I got home. And after that, I wasted a lot of time imagining the various things you might be doing – at which point I gave myself up as a lost cause.”

“So all the time you’re sat there looking superior you’re really just thinking about the same crap as the rest of us?” says Will, beginning to kiss his way along Hannibal’s jaw. “A pushover and a fraud. What would Jack say?”

“He’d say I have been overpowered by The Will.”

“And what would you say?”
“I would agree. Then no doubt spend the next ten minutes being very boring about how unique and fascinating you are before he forced me off the premises.” Will smiles at this, obviously pleased, and Hannibal smiles too then raises a hand so he can smooth Will’s hair out of his eyes. “You know, I was telling the truth before when I said you were charming,” he adds. “I think you’re charming right now; I like you this way. Do you want to know why?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re being playful,” says Hannibal with obvious satisfaction. Leaning forward a little he lightly skims his lips along the edge of Will’s temple. “It is always predators who are the most playful Will, because they have the confidence and the leisure for it. Prey, on the other hand…prey is never secure enough to be playful. All its resources go towards survival. Look how playful a cat is compared to a bird; or your own dogs compared to the sheep they like to chase so much. Look at yourself. Or indeed – look at the Sculptor and his business cards. He enjoys taunting the FBI because he thinks he’s the superior predator.” Lowering his voice even further he shifts his head and resumes kissing Will’s face on the opposite side, very light and delicate like the rustling of feathers. “Only in that he is mistaken, isn’t he?” murmurs Hannibal, straight into Will’s skin. “Because he doesn’t yet know the truth about you.”

Once again Will doesn’t give any clear indication of agreement; although likewise doesn’t actually disagree either, instead just closing his eyes and tightening his grip round Hannibal’s waist. “It’s a constant tightrope walk,” adds Hannibal in the same soft voice. “Isn’t it Will? Inch by inch, so careful and cautious; and yet you only barely make it onto the side of morality and righteousness. Perhaps one day you’re simply going to have to invent your own side?” Smiling slightly he straightens up then kisses Will’s forehead and abruptly turns round to resume preparing the food again as if the past few minutes never even happened. “And so you’re planning to return to work soon I suppose?” he adds. “How do you expect you’ll find it?”

Will blinks a few times, disorientated by the startling change of tone even while he’s aware that Hannibal is doing it deliberately. In this respect he’s also aware that it’s the type of thing he would have once found unsettling, whereas now there’s a certain dark thrill in their ability to speak the unspeakable using only metaphor and subtext. Although it is only a metaphor, Will hastily amends to himself. It’s not as if Hannibal is literally suggesting Will has a predatory instinct to rival the Sculptor’s. Straightening up as well he neatly jumps down from the counter then joins Hannibal at the table and picks up one of the knives. “I’m not sure yet,” he replies casually. “It depends how people react to me.”

“I would expect the people who really matter to treat you exactly the same as before.”

“You’re right, yes; they probably will. In fact they mostly have.”

“And Andrew?” replies Hannibal, bringing down his own knife with a particularly deft slicing movement. “What do you anticipate happening there?”

“That he’ll try and contact me again. I guess he’ll speak with his own lawyer first, and then…and then I don’t know; I don’t know exactly what he’ll do. He can be pretty unpredictable.” Will pauses and frowns, his hands briefly going still halfway through chopping up cloves of garlic. “At least I don’t know the specifics, but the generalities are pretty obvious – he’s going to try and get me back.”

“Yes I imagine so, although I’m still confident that the lawyer’s letter will deter an attempt by force. However he may still attempt to persuade you.”

“What do you mean?” says Will sharply.
Hannibal finally puts his own knife down then briefly outlines Dr Hall’s warning about Will’s risk of being disoriented by Andrew’s presence post-heat. “Apparently there’s a likelihood of you pining for him,” concludes Hannibal. “Although I don’t suppose you have been?” Will grimaces and pulls a sarcastic ‘what do you think?’ expression, which makes Hannibal begin to smile again. “Even so, it’s not worth taking the chance. It’s one reason I didn’t want you to go out today.”

“To be honest I know exactly how I could get rid of him,” says Will, reaching over Hannibal to retrieve another clove of garlic. “I should just call him up to tell him I’ve changed my mind and I’ve finally realised all I need in my life for perfect happiness is the sight of his fucking stupid face staring across me from a pillow every morning. If he genuinely thought I wanted to be with him he’d immediately lose interest.”

“Yes, in theory.”

“Oh Andrew,” adds Will in a falsetto voice, beginning to slice up the garlic with renewed speed. “You’re so amazing Andrew. Take me now, I’m begging you: I want to be your lawfully wedded wife.”

As amusing as that might be,” says Hannibal, “I’m afraid I can’t allow you to do it.”

“It wouldn’t work anyway,” replies Will in his normal voice. “He’d know I was bullshitting him. Even so, what he likes is the idea of forcing me to do something I don’t want. It’s just a power trip for him at this point, not me as an individual. He doesn’t even like me all that much. The irony is that if I did go back he’d hate having me around.”

“I understand what you mean,” says Hannibal. “Although I think you’re underestimating your own appeal. Undoubtedly this is a power play, but he does have some genuine desire for you as well – I could immediately tell from the way he was looking at you.” Hannibal smiles serenely then thrusts his own knife into the edge of the chopping board with a deft little flick of the wrist. “I suppose we’ll have to await his next move. But the letter from Elizabeth was very good, and as long as he has a reputation to lose – which at the current time I think we can agree that he does – then his options are extremely limited.”

Will sighs non-committedly in response, because while he wants to believe it he still can’t summon the same level of optimism that Andrew will simply slink off quietly without a fight. Then he forces himself to rally a bit and helps Hannibal to gather up assorted plates and glasses and carry them through to the living room where they eat dinner propped up against each other on the hearthrug like a pair of bandits crouched round a campfire. Hannibal claims his back is aching after hours of sitting and driving in the cold, so after they’ve finished eating he sits upright on the floor and Will kneels behind and massages it for him.

“You know I never thought I’d say this,” admits Will. “But I actually really enjoyed just relaxing at home today waiting for you. It was nice not having any responsibilities.”

“I never thought you’d say that either.” Hannibal pauses then dips his neck slightly to give Will better access, lithe and statuesque as a dancer in the way his muscles flex. “Nor do I expect to hear you say it again; at least not until your next heat starts. You normally do your best to avoid a passive role.”

“It wasn’t about being passive,” says Will sharply. “That makes me sound docile: like I’m dependent on you or something. It’s hardly like I was expecting you to go and hunt food for me while I sat around and…” Then he frowns and pauses himself, trying to think of a suitably withering analogy – except the only one that comes to mind is looking after babies, and the production and raising of those things is such an awful thought that he can’t even use it ironically. The purpose of his original
comment was to mockingly put Hannibal in a kind of macho, posturing caveman role; but what the
hell did omega cavepeople actually do anyway? Pick flowers? Gather berries? Oh fuck it. “…Sat
around and guarded the cave,” Will finally says, rather triumphantly.

“I know,” replies Hannibal. “I was being flippant. Which of course is a luxury alphas have that
omegas don’t; I know that to you it’s not a laughing matter. No, I understand that waiting for me was
incidental. What you’re really describing is a sense of freedom.”

“Yes,” says Will firmly. “Exactly.”

“Freedom from pressure and expectation. And from solving crimes for Uncle Jack.”

Will nods before remembering that Hannibal can’t see him, so squeezes his shoulder instead to
indicate agreement then dips his hands beneath the collar of Hannibal’s shirt. Hannibal arches
appreciatively in a rather feline way, all loose-limbs and easy grace. “You’ve got soft skin haven’t
you?” adds Will with interest, running his finger along the edge of an angular shoulder blade. “It’s
unusual for an alpha.”

“Have I? It’s not something I’ve ever really considered.”

“You have, yeah.”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” asks Hannibal in amusement. “Did you expect me to be covered
in scales?”

“No,” says Will, shifting to the opposite shoulder. “It’s just…I don’t know. Do you moisturise or
something?”

“It’s not like you haven’t felt it before,” adds Hannibal, flexing his neck again. “Or perhaps it seems
as if you haven’t? I expect you don’t have much memory of the past few days.”

“I remember some of it,” says Will cautiously.

“How much?”

“Fragments,” replies Will. “Bit and pieces: more the way it felt than what I actually did.” Then he
abruptly envisages the recent Dear You outpourings in the journal and clears his throat before falling
silent for a few awkward seconds. “I’ll tell you some other time.”

“Yes, do; I’d like to hear about it.”

“Yeah,” says Will sardonically. “I bet you would.” Hannibal makes an equally sardonic noise in
response and Will smiles then gives his hair a gentle tug. “Stop it,” he says. “You’re being
annoying.”

“Yes dearest,” replies Hannibal in an exaggeratedly sincere voice. “I dare say.”

Will smiles again then resumes massaging Hannibal’s shoulders, enjoying the way he can feel the
muscles flexing under his fingers. “You’ve got an awful knot,” he adds after a pause. “Right here,
just at the side of your spine.”

“I’m aware.”

“Have you been tense today?” asks Will, finding it rather hard to imagine.

“Not particularly. It’s more from sitting at awkward angles for so long; that and the cold.”
“Yeah, it’s freezing. Coldest winter on record apparently.”

“I appreciated your scarf,” adds Hannibal. “No doubt I would have been even more uncomfortable without it. That was very considerate of you by the way – people don’t normally give me things.”

“No?”

“No. Or at least – only very rarely.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.” Leaning forward, Will briefly nudges his face against the top of Hannibal’s head. “You don’t come across as someone who’s easy to buy for.”

“Probably not.”

“Also that you seem to have everything you need already.”

“Not quite,” says Hannibal fondly, reaching round so he can tangle his fingers into Will’s hair. “Not everything.”

“I bought you a gift once,” adds Will. “Only it didn’t go to plan – at all – and I ended up breaking it.”

“Unfortunate.”

“On purpose.”

“That was singular of you. And why did you do that?”

“I was frustrated and it was the first thing to hand,” replies Will, wishing there was a way to convey all the grim fatalism of the moment that sounds less childish. “It was the night Andrew first came back. And then I saw you kissing Alana.”

“I’m glad you did,” says Hannibal; and then, when Will makes a vague noise of protest, “not about the distress it caused you obviously, but because it enabled a particular train of events.”

“You mean forgetting to take the suppressants?”

“Yes. We’d hardly be in our current situation without it after all.”

Will hums in agreement, although given that the memory is still too painful to dwell on he decides to let the subject drop and instead renews his attempt to pummel the sides of Hannibal’s spine until his forearms are starting to ache. “Stop if you want,” says Hannibal, who seems to be developing a slightly supernatural ability to intuit Will’s moods. “You must be getting tired.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll probably ask you to do it again later though; it felt very pleasant.” Will hums again and straightens Hannibal’s shirt into place, then waits until he’s looking the other way before neatly pouncing on him and climbing into his lap so he can gently tug his ear with his teeth. “That was another extremely underhand move,” says Hannibal, beginning to skim his palms across Will’s waist. “I suppose you’ve spent all day practicing them.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll probably ask you to do it again later though; it felt very pleasant.” Will hums again and straightens Hannibal’s shirt into place, then waits until he’s looking the other way before neatly pouncing on him and climbing into his lap so he can gently tug his ear with his teeth. “That was another extremely underhand move,” says Hannibal, beginning to skim his palms across Will’s waist. “I suppose you’ve spent all day practicing them.”

“No,” says Will. “It’s just that you’re too old and slow.” He swivels round so his back is pressed against Hannibal’s chest then rests his head on his shoulder and closes his eyes. “It’s been an odd sort of day to be honest,” he adds in a more serious voice. “I thought I saw someone in the yard again.”
“When?” says Hannibal sharply. Will shrugs in response and Hannibal adds “Tell me what happened,” in an even sharper tone than before. In fact the force of it borders on unsettling, and makes Will think that if he was cat-like before he’s now suddenly become more like a dog, or even a wolf: bristling and territorial.

“It was nothing,” says Will with another shrug. “There’s nothing to tell.”


“I told you,” snaps Will. “Nothing. And don’t speak to me like that; I’m not a child.” Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately, merely raises his hand instead and curls it round the back of Will’s neck in a way that’s gentle but firm. “It was a few hours before you got home,” adds Will; relenting slightly at the obvious concern, even as he’s annoyed with himself for having succumbed so quickly to a classic alpha dominance gesture. “It was just like before – I ended up wondering whether I’d imagined it.” Hannibal now automatically shifts his hand from Will’s neck to his forehead to check his temperature, and Will irritably twists out the way. “Not like that. I wasn’t sick, and I wasn’t hallucinating.”

“So the impression was strong yet ultimately undetermined?” replies Hannibal. “Logic suggests there was no one there but perception speaks to the contrary.” Very slowly he removes his hand from Will’s face and curls it round the back of his neck again. “What does your instinct tell you?”

“I don’t know,” replies Will, silently resenting the presence of the hand yet somehow not quite enough to want it removed entirely. “I’m split.”

“Nevertheless, I suppose you still ignored my request?” adds Hannibal. Will doesn’t reply and Hannibal smiles to himself then begins to trail both hands downwards across Will’s chest so he can pull him closer. “Most people would have stayed indoors and called the police; but not you. You went out to confront them didn’t you?”

“Yes,” says Will after a beat of silence.

“And did you arm yourself?”

“Yes.”

“With what?”

“A knife.”

“A large one?”

“Of course.”

“Sharp?” asks Hannibal, with an odd little clicking sound on the ‘p.’

“Yes.”

“And would you have used it if you had to?”

“Yes.”

“Y-e-s,” says Hannibal. “Naturally you would: charging out into the darkness with that large sharp blade of yours. Only you were too eager mylimasis; you should have used your bare hands.” Trailing downwards again he now begins to entwine his fingers with Will’s. “And such beautiful hands, so
slender and well-shaped. See? Look how delicate your bones are: fragile and willowy, yet capable of such great potency. These hands of yours…there’s so much ferocity in them. Have you ever considered it Will? All the things one can accomplish with one’s bare hands?” Will’s breath gives a small hitch and Hannibal brushes his lips against his temple and adds in a voice that’s almost a purr: “Just imagine if you had; do you think it would have made your heart beat faster? Would you have appreciated the…intimacy of it?”

Will arches his back slightly then lets his head fall further back against Hannibal’s shoulder. “Perhaps,” he says quietly.

“Good boy,” murmurs Hannibal. “Of course you would. And why shouldn’t you? You’d elevate the gesture to an art form: customized from you to your prey with planning, forethought and endless tender patience.” Once again Will fails to reply and Hannibal pulls him a bit closer then begins to kiss his way down his jaw. “Beloved,” he says softly. “There’s so much in you that captivates me, but beyond everything it’s the way that you walk into the shadows. Collude with them. Converse with them. Engage and empathise with them – don’t you Will? Then emerge again with your spirit unbroken and your reason preserved. It’s why I feel the need to explore you so thoroughly. It would be unforgivable for such a rare thing as you to be misused and wasted.”

Will remains extremely quiet throughout this speech, and from his lack of motion or expression it’s impossible to tell whether he’s in agreement with what’s been said or troubled by it. At the very least he seems earnest and somewhat pensive; the way he often looks when he’s turning something over in his head – the expression of a hundred different crime scenes. Hannibal, who almost never encounters people who can hide their emotions from him with this level of skill, can’t help being impressed by Will’s reserve and as a reward begins to stroke his arms and chest with the same tender reverence that you might touch expensive fabric or the contours of a priceless antique. Will arches his back again and leans into the touch, and Hannibal takes a few seconds to admire the faint remains of the heat flush that’s just about visible along his cheekbones. By tomorrow it’ll have faded entirely, although at least now Will has agreed to stop taking the tablets it won’t be too long before it reappears. And then, if all goes to plan – which where Will is concerned is admittedly no means a certainty – a more permanent solution can be reached where Will would agree to being bonded. Not just agree in fact, but desire and actively ask for it.

Hannibal now sighs with pleasure at the idea before allowing his thoughts to stray to the various possibilities it might entail. Mostly these ambitions are arranged in contrasting opposites – controlled ferocity, beautiful horror, depths and heights – in which he and Will can subsume and contrast with each other like two halves of the same chaotic equation. However he’s occasionally able to consider more mundane concerns as well; and, in honour of the current moment’s quiet domesticity, chooses to try and imagine what it would be like to have Will as a mate in the more conventional sense. In this respect Hannibal normally has zero interest in children, finding them annoying, dirty and generally tedious, although the idea of something that’s been created from both himself and Will possesses an undeniable fascination. In his mind he begins to survey the various options for this illusory child, who he decides to give Will’s hair, eyes and pale skin, as well as the forcefulness, creativity and dark intelligence of both of them – and yet somehow also possesses the yearning air of sadness that belongs entirely to Hannibal’s own sister; long dead now, but whose memory never fades or blemishes and whose softness, susceptibility and quiet need to be loved reminds him entirely of Will. Then Will stirs slightly in his arms and Hannibal immediately loses interest in the image, because for all its appeal and intrigue it can’t ever hope to compete with the more precious and important presence of Will himself. Nevertheless, he still can’t resist the temptation of sliding his hand over Will’s slim, flat stomach in a rather possessive way at the thought of breeding him, and which immediately makes Will flinch and try to pull himself free.

“Don’t,” says Will sharply. “Don’t touch me like that.”
Hannibal doesn’t reply but just gives Will’s neck a gentle nudge of apology with his forehead; and Will makes a low sighing noise in response as a similar, non-verbal expression of regret for over-reacting. “Tell me something,” adds Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s arms instead. “That gift you mentioned; the one you broke. What was it?”

“It was a set of tea-cups,” says Will vaguely. “Antique ones.” Hannibal’s hand goes promptly goes completely still for a few seconds as if frozen in place before resuming the stroking motion even faster than before. “It was nicer than it sounds,” adds Will, interpreting this sudden silence as displeasure.

“It sounds perfect,” replies Hannibal in a rather odd tone of voice that Will can’t remember him using before.

“Hmm. They were pretty.”

“Would you show me? I’d like to see them.”

“Yeah, what’s left of them.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal. “The paradox of beautifully broken things.” Will mutters something indistinct and Hannibal gives another low sigh then begins to rub the side of his cheek with his own. “Listen Will,” he adds after a few seconds pause. “If anyone comes here again then I want you to tell me. No matter what – even if you think you’ve just imagined it. And if I’m not nearby then you must call me immediately.” Will makes a grumbling noise in response. “Immediately; don’t delay.”

“I will – I did tell you. But please don’t overreact about it. I don’t need anyone to protect me.”

“I know you don’t need protection,” says Hannibal. “But I’m afraid you need to allow for my more jealous, possessive instincts; at least in circumstances like this.” He strokes his face against Will’s a little harder than before, and when he speaks again it sounds low and slightly hypnotic with a clear edge of threat running through the words. “Understand this Will: you belong to me now. If anyone ever touches you, if they even look at you; then I – will – kill – them.” Will goes extremely still and doesn’t reply, and Hannibal presses their faces closer together and murmurs straight into his ear: “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” says Will quietly.

“It doesn’t matter who they are or why they’ve done it,” continues Hannibal in the same softly menacing tone. “I will not show any mercy, and I will not show any restraint.” Will nods in silence, appearing a little overwhelmed, and Hannibal tightens his grip before finally letting go and kissing the back of his neck. Normally he might have pushed the implications further, not least because Will’s confusion and conflict are so endlessly appealing. But right now he’s consumed by the powerful alpha instinct to respond to an overwhelmed omega – specifically his omega – in a way which can comfort and soothe, meaning he’s more than happy to back down for once and focus on taking care of Will instead. “Then we comprehend each other,” he adds in a gentler voice. “And can therefore let the subject rest.”

Will nods again then opens his mouth like he wants to say something before turning it into a yawn halfway through in a rather artless, child-like way that strikes Hannibal as impossibly charming. “You’re tired,” he says, beginning to rub Will’s shoulders. “Come to bed.”

Will blinks a few times without replying, obviously still subdued from the intensity of the past few minutes. Then he yawns again and finally swivels round so he can nudge Hannibal’s forehead with his own. “Yes?” says Hannibal fondly.
“You’re right, I’m tired. Are you going to bed too?”

Instead of replying Hannibal briefly shuts his eyes and returns the pressure against Will’s forehead. Then he gets to his feet and lifts Will up by the waist before taking hold of his hand so he can lead him upstairs. Will follows behind very quietly without any of the usual protests about being patronised, instead seeming content to cling onto Hannibal’s hand in a way that’s so peaceful and compliant it seems vaguely out of character. In fact the mood has shifted now to something softer and more mellow – the kind of calmness that comes from a sharing of confidence and a wordless exchange of quiet yearning recognition – and ultimately there’s a casual intimacy to the whole thing that exerts a sedative effect on Will and fills him with a blissful haze at being so close and cared for. Even the potential awkwardness at spending their first night together post-heat doesn’t materialise and once they get to the bedroom the easy intimacy continues just the same as before, with Hannibal moving around in such a casual way it’s as if he’s been sleeping there for years while the dogs, still completely oblivious to the concept of sex, start taking flying leaps at the bed in a way that’s been driving Hannibal insane with irritation over the past few days and always makes Will laugh. In fact it’s tempting to think this might end up being one of those secret shared customs that couples often have; and Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts, gives the obligatory long-suffering sigh just as Will stifles the obligatory cackle of amusement before calling the dogs off then rolling his eyes in Hannibal’s direction who promptly rolls his right back. Then he goes to use the bathroom without offering it to Hannibal first – seeing as letting him wait makes him feel less like a guest and more like someone who lives there all the time – and washes his face and brushes his teeth while continuing to bask in a warm sense of companionship that’s currently wrapped around him in a snug little glow. The numerous packs of heat suppressants are still stacked in the cabinet and Will stares at them for a few seconds with slightly mixed feelings before defiantly slamming the lid closed on them. Then he catches sight of the blue robe hanging over the back of the door, and after a few seconds of self-conscious hesitation strips off his clothes and puts it on instead because he has a sudden sense that Hannibal would probably like to see him in it.

When he goes back into the bedroom Hannibal’s reaction promptly proves this theory right, in that he gets perilously close to doing a double-take when he catches sight of Will before his eyes take on a darkly intense expression that makes them look like they’re gleaming. Will pauses in the doorway, deliberately letting the moment last, and Hannibal holds out his hand and says in a voice that’s pitched so low and forceful it’s practically smouldering: “Come here Will.”

Will can’t help smiling to himself when he hears Hannibal’s tone, because while he’s a little embarrassed to admit it there’s something about being to wield such enormous influence simply by walking into a room when dressed a certain way that’s undeniably heady. It’s the sort of sensation that fizzes and snaps, a bit like champagne bubbles or the wind on your skin, and he walks over very slowly and kneels upright on the bed before casting Hannibal a rather defiant look from beneath his eyelashes.

“Look at you,” says Hannibal with obvious admiration. “You look…” He pauses then strokes his gaze across Will’s face. “Edible. You’re doing it on purpose aren’t you?” Will’s faint smile grows a little broader and Hannibal begins to smile too. “I’ll take that as an affirmative. Congratulations Agent Graham – you succeeded.”

“Good,” says Will lightly. “Didn’t I do well?”

“You did indeed: extremely well. May I touch you?”

“No Dr Lecter, you may not.”

“Oh I see,” replies Hannibal with another slow smile. “You’re going to make me persuade you again
aren’t you?” Will quirks an eyebrow in response then settles more comfortably onto the bed and rests his hands in his lap. “I’m going to have to earn it. I suppose this is your punishment for me trying to control you earlier?”

“Pretty much,” agrees Will. He tips his head back slightly then casts Hannibal another distinctly defiant look. “Well go on then: what are you waiting for? Show me your ace.”

“What a terrible tyrant you are,” replies Hannibal approvingly. “Not that I can blame you. It’s one of the powers beauty has after all. One expects it to be cruel and capricious; it is beauty’s privilege. What would you accept as a suitably earnest petition, I wonder? What if I said ‘please’ and sounded as if I meant it; what if I promised to make it worth your while?”

“In that case,” says Will, delicately arching his back in a way that lengthens his spine and makes his hips tilt. “Perhaps I might let you. If you sounded like you meant it – and if you made it worth my while.”

“A transaction, then?” replies Hannibal. “Trading one desire with another.” He releases his breath in a low sigh then reaches out so he can slowly slide his palms across the slim shimmering silk of Will’s shoulders; pausing to caress the soft skin at the back of his neck with his thumb, then skimming along the curves of Will’s throat and jaw with his fingers like he’s trying to memorise each contour. Will quivers slightly at the touch and Hannibal makes a soothing noise then strokes down his arms and back up again, rubbing slow circles round his nipples with both thumbs then dipping down to take hold of his waist. “You get to enjoy being worshipped,” adds Hannibal softly, “and I have the satisfaction of being the celebrant. That seems more than fair.” As Will’s breath begins to speed up, Hannibal gently massages the hollows of his hipbones through the silk then slowly strokes back up along his ribcage and returns to his nipples again, enjoying how stiff they’re starting to feel beneath the thin fabric. “And yet you’re so excited now, aren’t you beloved?” purrs Hannibal, taking a few seconds to admire how obvious Will’s beautiful erection is from where it’s tenting the front of the robe. “You’re so aloof and indifferent to all this adoration, but even so you can’t conceal it. Would you if you could? Or would you still let me have my reward for being so devoted?”

As before Will still refuses to reply: merely smiles again then finally opens his eyes and looks at Hannibal directly. “I don’t believe you’re quite so pitiless,” adds Hannibal. Moving a little closer, he reaches out and curls a palm round Will’s cock so he can begin to stroke it through the silk, catching his breath slightly at how deliciously hot and heavy it feels. His touch is slowly rhythmic in a way that’s intended to feel pleasurable but not to overwhelm, and Will gives a small moan then tips his head back so Hannibal can begin to kiss his way along his throat. “You’re not entirely without mercy are you?” murmurs Hannibal, brushing Will’s lower lip with his own. “You wouldn’t exploit your victory over me in such a cold-hearted way.”

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As he’s speaking he begins to speed up the movement of his hand which makes Will gasp again then finally pull away. He looks flushed and rather wild – hair tangled, eyes faintly glittering – and without once breaking eye contact with Hannibal he raises his hands and begins to unfasten the robe. “That’s it,” says Hannibal softly. “Good boy. Take your time though, we have all night. Just do it… slowly; only your shoulders to begin with. Ah look at you, Will. So pale and beautiful: exactly like ivory. How do you manage to make a lack of colour appear so vibrant? Now a little more – show me your arms and chest. That’s good; that’s perfect. Can you feel how easily the fabric slides down? It hardly requires any effort at all, does it? It’s as if my gifts are in league with me and wish to see you naked as much as I do. Now lie back dearest. Flat on the bed and spread your legs.”

By this time Will is more flushed than ever, although it’s clearly not from embarrassment as much as arousal; so hot and humid that Hannibal feels he could hold a mirror over his body and it would mist up as if touched by warm breath. Sighing with admiration he quickly shrugs off his own clothes then
rests his palm on Will’s forehead to keep his head still and kneels straight over him. “How debauched you look,” he says appreciatively. “Imagine if all your colleagues could see you now: laid out on all your silk as you are, like some Grecian youth in a temple. Antinous, perhaps? Have you heard of Antinous Will? He was the lover of the Emperor Hadrian. The head of the Roman Empire and the most powerful ruler in the world, but still brought to helpless breathless submission by a beautiful young man.”

Will gives another soft sigh and Hannibal sighs with him then rubs his face along the side of Will’s cheek. His skin feels warm and satiny-smooth with a musky salty tang of sweat and excitement, and Hannibal briefly buries his face in his hair before shifting down to nuzzle his neck then scrape his teeth against the hollow in the base of Will’s throat. It’s extremely obvious that he’s scenting him, yet while Will must surely recognise this as a classic alpha gesture of ownership he shows no signs of discomfort and doesn’t attempt to pull away. “When Antinous died,” continues Hannibal, beginning to skim his lips against Will’s collar bones, “the Emperor was so bereft he named a city in his honour and encouraged the Romans to deify him as a God. For a while the cult of Antinous rivalled Christianity. What do you think of that, beloved: the lengths to which a powerful, older man would go to appease the object of his fixation?”

Will laughs slightly which turns into a groan halfway through as Hannibal’s hand begins to slide further downwards. “I think,” he says, “that you’ve just tried to cast yourself as a Roman Emperor. Grandiose, much?”

“Yes indeed,” purrs Hannibal. “I am very grandiose. Although if you think I’m aligning myself with Hadrian that means you’ve just identified yourself as Antinous.” Pausing for a few seconds he presses his face against Will’s chest so he can listen to the thrum of his heartbeat, smiling with satisfaction at how strong and firm it is. “Would you like that Will? You said earlier you’d enjoyed not having any responsibility; if you were like Antinous you’d have none at all beyond living in luxury and letting me love you. All you’d have to do in return is allow me to use you for my pleasure. Your body would belong entirely to me and I would be the only one allowed to explore it. And I would explore it Will; I would dedicate myself to knowing every inch of you, inside and out. Here for example…open your mouth beloved.”

Will immediately obeys then gives a soft moan as Hannibal rubs his lower lip then gently slides his fingers inside his mouth so he can suck them. “Or here,” murmurs Hannibal in the same rhythmic voice. He trails his other hand downwards between Will’s legs and begins to massage his hole with his thumb, very light and gentle without ever pushing inside, as Will begins to moan even louder around the fingers which are still sliding in and out of his mouth. “Would you like that mylimasis? Lying on silk all day looking beautiful while I went and fought wars on your behalf? It would mean I’d have the image of you in my mind when I was slicing my enemies into shards; you would be my idolatry and inspiration. Then I would return to our palace while their bodies were still warm on the ground and you’d be laid out on your silk; beautiful and wanton and waiting to give me your body as my reward. Sometimes I might go abroad for certain campaigns – I’d have to take you with me wouldn’t I? Keep you in a tent, heavily guarded, so I could have you whenever I needed you. Not that a guard would truly be necessary, because no one else would ever dare to touch you. They’d all know you belonged to me.” Hannibal pauses, then smiles to himself and begins to kiss his way down Will’s chest. “Only you wouldn’t really like it, would you beloved? You’d get bored; you’d want to be out on the battlefield yourself. I’d want you there too. I’d want you by my side at all times. And very soon…you shall be.”

Will gasps again then flings his arm over his face as he feels Hannibal lick a bead of sweat away from his ribcage before stoking both palms across his torso. The touch is exploratory yet worshipful and pays careful attention to each plane of bone and curve of muscle, but it’s clearly no way near enough and the gasp soon turns into a whine of frustration at being denied what he wants. Hannibal
murmurs Will’s name then makes another soothing sound in response although the truth is that he’s struggling with a temptation to stay like this much, much longer – not least because there’s something about seeing Will so divinely desperate and discomposed that’s outright addictive. But ultimately tonight isn’t about testing Will’s limits as opposed to making him feel cherished and cared for, so Hannibal allows himself a last yearning look at Will’s face before lowering his head and finally achieving his long-held ambition of cradling the base of Will’s beautiful cock with one hand so he can lovingly swirl his tongue around the head. He begins with a teasing flicking movement using just the very tip, then waits until Will is whining and writhing before progressing to slow licks and shallow kisses, then worshipfully long languorous sucks; taking his time as much as humanly possible in order to relish every single second of Will’s cock sliding across his tongue. Will immediately rolls his hips then gives a broken breathy moan and blindly reaches out a hand. He seems desperate for something to cling onto, so Hannibal takes hold of it and stokes his thumb across the knuckles; able to tell, without being told, that it’s not only the sensation that’s making Will overwhelmed but the fact that an alpha is willing to demonstrate what’s generally seen as an unthinkable display of submission on his behalf. Will moans ever louder and tightens his grip on Hannibal’s hand, and Hannibal briefly pulls away and kisses the edge of his hipbone.

“Just let go,” he says softly. “I want you to enjoy yourself. Nothing else matters.” And this much is true, because in that moment he knows he will never ever get tired of watching Will fall apart beneath his touch.

Will gasps something unintelligible in response and Hannibal looks at him, and loves him, then gently takes hold of one of Will’s legs and tugs it upright until his foot is flat on the bed. Ducking his head again he then resumes laving Will’s cock with his tongue while using the pad of one finger to massage Will’s hole in slow, slow circles to match the rhythm of his mouth. It’s not guaranteed that omegas will produce slick outside their heats so he’s expecting some resistance, possibly requiring a degree of spit and patience to get Will to the point he’s ready to take any kind of penetration. But to his delight the complete opposite is true and Will feels as smooth, wet and lusciously glistening as the inside of a guava. Hannibal’s breath catches as he rubs the small, slippery furl of muscle; and as he feels it flex beneath his touch, the proof that his boy is so attuned and responsive towards him finally makes Hannibal lose control of himself completely. Forgetting his initial plan to take things slowly, he hauls himself upright so he can press ardent kisses against Will’s cheeks and eyelids – calling him ‘dearest’, ‘my darling’ and ‘my love’ – then abruptly draws his hand back and thrusts two fingers deep inside the tight trembling body.

“Oh God,” pants Will, whose breath is now hitching into a series of frantic gasps. “Oh yes…yes.” As Hannibal withdraws his fingers he spreads his legs even wider then gives another helpless gasp as they’re slammed back in again and his cock spasms straight across his stomach with a glistening trail of pre-come. Hannibal gasps too at the sight of it then quickly lowers his head so he can flatten his tongue along the base and pull it upwards along the entire length. This time Will arches his back followed by a noise that’s nearly a wail. In fact the desperation is so perfect that it makes Hannibal yearn to hear more, so he repeats the same slow dragging movement, then does it again – and again – alternating wet strokes with teasing licks and sighing loudly the entire time so that Will can hear it and know that Hannibal considers him something delectable which he can’t get enough of.

Will gives another breathy moan and pivots his back off the bed before wrapping one leg across Hannibal and digging his heel into his shoulder blade. Hannibal promptly pushes him back down again by the hips and Will shudders and tenses then wrenches his hand free and tangles it into Hannibal’s hair, tugging it with increasing urgency as he tries to force his head down. The shyness of a few days ago is clearly long gone; although while most alphas would be offended by an omega being so demanding, Hannibal finds this display of desire in his omega to be completely perfect. Buried knuckle-deep in that sweet, needy body means he can also feel the way it’s tightening round his fingers as Will gets closer to orgasm, and Hannibal now tries to get him there quicker by swirling
his tongue across the head of his cock again before wrapping his lips round it and swallowing it down. The effect is immediate, and Will responds even more ecstatically than hoped for by gasping out Hannibal’s name as he bucks his slim hips in a slightly stuttering motion that shows he’s struggling between the urge to rock upwards into Hannibal’s mouth, or push downwards to where Hannibal’s fingers are still working him open. To help him get what he needs, Hannibal wraps his free arm beneath Will’s waist to hoist him into a better angle then flattens his tongue and sucks with renewed passion until he can feel Will’s cock sliding thick and hard against the back of his throat.

“Fuck,” gasps Will, as his whole body gives a frantic jolt; drawn tight now and hovering on the absolute edge. “Oh God…Hannibal, please, I’m going to…I’m…”

He’s frantically tugging at Hannibal’s hair now in an obvious warning that this is the time to pull away if he wants to. Hannibal sighs with pleasure in response then increases the speed of his mouth, by now completely desperate for the sensation of Will riding his fingers until he comes round them. In fact ideally he’d want nothing more than to force Will’s legs up to chest and fuck him senseless, but there’s no doubt he’ll still be too sensitive post-heat to handle a full knot – and while pain and intensity might have their place (as with so much else) that place is definitely not now. So instead he swipes his tongue along the entire length of Will’s cock then angles his wrist so he can thrust his fingers upwards; and is immediately rewarded with the delicious sensation of Will crying out as his hips give a last helpless shudder and he starts to come straight down Hannibal’s throat.

It seems to last for a while as Will writhes and gasps beneath him, but Hannibal refuses to move until Will’s finally gone quiet and he’s had the opportunity to swallow every last drop. Then he tenderly licks Will clean afterwards and gently nuzzles his stomach with his forehead. “Beautiful,” he murmurs appreciatively when he eventually pulls away. “So beautiful Will.”

Will gives no indication of having heard him, appearing instead to be lost in the sensation: eyes screwed tightly shut, damp hair tangling across his forehead and lips swollen from where he’s been biting them. So Hannibal watches a little longer in quiet reverence before giving his hand one last thrust then pulling it free so he can relish how stretched and loose Will’s hole looks from where his fingers have been fucking it. In fact the sight is so beautifully debauched that it’s difficult to look away; only he knows he has just a matter of seconds to accomplish what he wants to do, so while Will is still gasping and quivering Hannibal quickly grabs hold of his own cock and aims the head a few millimetres above that luscious gaping opening so that with a few strokes – because that’ll be enough; it’ll be more than enough – he can make himself come straight into Will’s ass in a series of hot wet pulses.

“Oh,” gasps Will, his eyes abruptly snapping open as he realises what’s about to happen. “Oh yes, yes…”

“Yes,” repeats Hannibal, low and intense. “You want that don’t you?”

“Fuck, yeah I want that.”

“Show me how much. Spread yourself open for me; use both hands. Do it now.”

Will immediately obeys, fingers sliding across slippery sweat-slick skin, and Hannibal makes a noise in the back of his throat that’s so deep it’s nearly a growl. Bending down he kisses Will in a way that’s passionate yet possessive – stabbing his tongue into his mouth, scraping his teeth against his lower lip – then leans upright again so he can scoop the stray drops of his semen from Will’s thighs with his thumb and push it firmly back into his body. Will give a small whimper, spreading his legs to give Hannibal better access, and Hannibal sighs with genuine regret that he doesn’t have a plug on hand to ensure it stays there. In fact this image is so compelling that he can’t help catching his breath at the thought of it: Will going to work in the morning, so beautiful and artless with his large eyes
and tousled hair as he talks to colleagues and lectures student while all the time his small body is filled up with his alpha’s come. The betas would be oblivious, but there’s no doubt that other alphas would detect a faint trace of it and respectfully keep their distance as a result; aware that Will has already been claimed by a far superior predator to themselves.

Hannibal now narrows his eyes and nearly snarls at the idea of these competing alphas before turning round to look at Will again, at which point his aggressive expression begins to soften. In fact Will appears rather lightheaded – delirious, even – as he attempts to pull himself back up the bed so he can collapse against the pillows and stare drunkenly at the ceiling. He looks happy and relaxed in a way that Hannibal’s only ever rarely seen him; and it means the stony expression softens even further, then eventually disappears entirely, as he watches Will start to cycle through a response set that begins with ragged panting, proceeds to something a bit like giggling, and finally culminates in a series of staccato exclamations along the lines of: “Oh God. Oh my God, that was…God. Fucking hell.”

“That’s very profound Will,” replies Hannibal with a smile. “You are a born theologian.”

“Well it was.”

“It was. I agree.”

“God,” repeats Will.

“Although what has God got to do with it really?” asks Hannibal, moving up the bed too so he can curl himself round Will and press their heads together. “I would suggest leaving Him out of the whole thing.”

“Shut up Hannibal,” says Will amicably.

“Granted, I suppose He does have a tendency to insinuate Himself where He is not wanted – here as with so much else.”

“Seriously though,” says Will, pretending to bite Hannibal’s shoulder, “do shut up. Why can’t we just have a nice, non-philosophical, non-theological post-coital moment like normal people?”

“Because we are not normal,” replies Hannibal, not sounding remotely concerned about it. Will gives a snort of laughter then rolls onto his side and rests his head on Hannibal’s chest, who begins to stroke his hair before adding: “Any other religious revelations to get out your system?”

“No, I think I’m done now.”

“Hallelujah.”

“Oh do shut up,” says Will. He draws a shuddering breath and laughs slightly, suddenly mischievous and high-spirited again. And captivating, thinks Hannibal, and beautiful (but then everything Will does is captivating; and he is beautiful all the time). Moving over slightly he now repositions himself so that more of his weight is resting on Will and he’s holding him down, aware that his boy will find the sensation of being covered by an alpha to be soothing – even though he’d never admit it. Will, in turn, immediately responds in a classically omegan way by nuzzling against Hannibal’s chest while giving small purring noises; and Hannibal sighs with pleasure while being careful not to draw attention to it in case Will becomes self-conscious and pulls away.

“It was good though,” adds Will, who seems like he’s trying to hide how overwhelmed he feels. “Uh...so good.” With visible effort he reaches his arm round so Hannibal can tangle their fingers together. “I’m not even going to ask who you’ve been practicing on.”
“No one at all beloved,” replies Hannibal blithely. “I was waiting for you.”

“Yeah right,” says Will, with obvious sarcasm.

Hannibal smirks slightly then raises Will’s hand to his mouth and kisses it, who rolls his eyes in response and looks as if he’s struggling not to start giggling again. “Has anyone ever done that to you before?” adds Hannibal with interest.

“Yes. Not an alpha though, obviously. And not like that.” He pauses for a few seconds then gives Hannibal’s shoulder a nudge with his forehead. “Sorry I didn’t reciprocate. I know I should have done.”

“Do not apologise,” says Hannibal firmly. “I meant what I said before about a transaction. I don’t touch you with the expectation of receiving something in return; watching you enjoy yourself is more than sufficient. I like seeing you lose control Will. I adore it…you have no idea.”

If Will is aware of the double meaning behind ‘losing control’ – and what it could result in if taken to its full conclusion – then he doesn’t give any verbal indication, although the way he stiffens slightly in Hannibal’s arms suggests he has a fairly good idea. “Go to sleep now,” adds Hannibal innocently. “You look exhausted; and I suppose you’ll insist on going to work tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course,” replies Will in a more serious way. “I have to. You know I do.”

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal. “There is a sculptor who needs pursuing.” There’s something in his tone that sounds weighted – thoughtful and resonant – and it’s enough to make Will glance up as if awaiting clarification. “It’s the name,” adds Hannibal, immediately noticing the look. “It has a certain symbolism. I’ve always thought so. Transformation and emergence: the process of becoming. To take one thing and shape it into something else.”

“You don’t need to sound so impressed,” replies Will irritably. “He didn’t name himself. Freddie Lounds came up with it.”

“I know. I didn’t mean him in particular; merely the concept of what it is to sculpt. An exercise in artistry, necessitating infinite time and patience. *Ho visto l’angelo nel marmo e scolpito fino a quando l’ho liberato,*” adds Hannibal softly.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Michelangelo’s words to Benedetto Varchi. In regards to creation; the virtues of patience and vision, and the necessity of waiting: *I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.* What would you do with your freedom if you had it Will; would you use it wisely?”

“Oh yes,” replies Will. Despite his tiredness the irony in his tone is unmistakable. “My metamorphosis.”

“Indeed. Generally reputed to be arduous and painful…although not inevitably destined to be so. Like your shattered teacups: it’s possible to break something to make it more beautiful.”

“You think?” says Will with a hint of sarcasm.

“I do. Take yourself for example. You see yourself as so damaged – like chips and flakes of marble, fractured beyond repair. You typify the observation that ‘Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.’ Not that your pessimism isn’t understandable of course: it’s natural that the marble suffers through the sculptor’s endeavours, even though each blow is inflicted from a place of tenderness and creativity.”
“Great cruelty requires great empathy,” mutters Will, rather bleakly.

“Yes. It does, doesn’t it?” Hannibal leans down and presses his lips against Will’s forehead. “For the sculptor seeks artistry – and beauty – and so acquits himself tirelessly on his creation’s behalf. It would be much easier to simply strike the marble to smithereens, to destroy it; but he does not. His compassion becomes inconvenient. His life, his liberty, the performance of his philosophy: all subsumed in his creation’s interests, simply because its’ potential to flourish and prosper within the world grows more dear to him than his own. Just like Michelangelo with his beloved David.” He runs his fingertip over Will’s cheekbone, neglecting to explain any further; and Will stares silently into the darkness, fully aware that Hannibal has deliberately left the analogy open – and that if Will is the piece of marble waiting to Become, it’s open to interpretation as to whether Hannibal sees his own role as the sculptor or if it’s actually Will himself.

“I’ll guess we’ll see, won’t we?” he eventually replies.

“Indeed,” says Hannibal. “We shall.”

Outside the window a winter thunderstorm is beginning to brew; pulsing like a cosmic heartbeat with its ominous growls of thunder, cracks of lightning, and gales of wind that are howling like a wolf. Right now the darkness is complete – so black and stifled it’s as if the sun has died – yet in only a few hours’ time the light will arrive again to chase the shadows away. So many contradictions and contrary movements, thinks Hannibal idly. A new dawn and a new day: the end of one thing, the beginning of something else. The event of truly seeing one another, and the fact that the last few days have only been the initial step towards a much deeper and truer understanding. And then, after that...?

Hannibal runs an appraising eye over the sky, admiring the roiling clouds, purple as a bruise, and the jagged lightning bolts that slash across the horizon like streaks of simmering silver. There’s no doubt it’s impressive, yet he’s aware that the spectacle has only limited power over him – subsumed, as it has been, by the much bigger conflagration that’s on the verge of crackling into life within the room. “Sleep now my love,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to gently stroke Will’s face. “You need your rest...There’s a storm coming.”

*****

Will dozes contentedly for several hours with his head on Hannibal’s chest, undisturbed by the thunder and lightning or the wailing wind, but reluctantly tugged into wakefulness in the early hours of the morning by the unmistakable sound of whining coming from the hallway. Initially he thinks he’s only dreamt it, but then it starts up again even more mournfully than before and he’s forced to scrub a tired hand over his face then begin to fumble on the bedside table for his glasses.

“Your pack of hairy children appear to require your attention,” says Hannibal’s voice in the darkness. “How considerate of them.”

“It’s not their fault,” says Will sleepily. “They haven’t had a proper run today.” Pulling himself upright he yawns then stretches, trying to wake himself up a little. “They’ve been going crazy all evening – I should have let them out before.”

“Yes, they have been rather over-excited,” replies Hannibal in a withering tone. “Although I’m at a loss to know what they have to complain about – they’re so incredibly spoilt.”

“They’re not,” protests Will.

“Indeed they are. They swagger round the house like tiny Emperors – I’m only surprised they
haven’t tried to make us sleep in the kitchen so they can have the bed.”

“I’m sure they’re on it,” says Will. “Give them time.” Hannibal makes a disdainful noise and Will leans over and nudges his forearm. “By the way, did I tell you I’m going to rename the big one Scipio?”

“Oh yes, very good; the defeater of Hannibal at Carthage. What a comedian you are.”

Will grins then disentangles himself from Hannibal’s arms and fumbles sleepily toward where the robe is draped over the chair. “Stay where you are,” adds Hannibal in a long-suffering way. “I don’t mind letting them out.”

“You sure?” says Will, gratefully sliding back towards the warmth of the bed again.

“I’ll go,” repeats Hannibal; not because he particularly wants to, but because he resents Will’s endless doting on the dogs and takes a certain satisfaction in denying them some of his attention. Will makes an appreciative noise and Hannibal kisses his forehead then neatly climbs over him and retrieves the robe himself before gliding out the room. As usual he moves so quietly that Will isn’t aware of him walking downstairs, although can still tell when he’s arrived because of the way the dogs renew their whining and panting shortly followed by the sound of Hannibal murmuring something in an undertone. Despite his previous impatience the way he speaks to them is decidedly gentle, and Will smiles to himself then pulls the blanket over his head and starts to contemplate sleep again. Then there’s the sound of the front door opening followed by a frantic flurry of barking; and then there’s nothing at all until Will feels a sudden hand gripping his shoulder that makes his eyes fly open in shock as he bolts upright in the bed, all traces of tiredness slipping away at the urgent instinctive sense that something bad is about to happen. Has already happened; and something more than merely ‘bad’…

“Will,” says Hannibal in a low, intense voice. “Get up. There’s something in the yard you need to see.”

*****

The lights from the patrol cars are lighting up the snow in a way that, in happier circumstances, Will supposes could be considered rather beautiful. Not just could; it is. It’s beautiful: little glistening crystals in a dozen different shades of blue like scattered gemstones or distilled drops of ocean. Spectral snow and radiant moonlight, with the tiny drops of blood scattered among it like rubies when the light is on it, but as dark as black diamonds when it’s not. Black, white and red…isn’t that from a fairytale? Snow White or something…something like that. He’s sure he’s seen it somewhere; most likely another relic from the days of the Velveteen Rabbit when phrases like ‘white as snow’ and ‘red as blood’ didn’t mean anything special, and where nothing was ever described as being black in the moonlight.

Of course it’s also possible that standing here with his hands in his pockets while mulling over the beauty of black blood in the snow is maybe (definitely) a little inappropriate – but really, what are you supposed to do when you’ve just been told that pieces of a dead human being have been found in a stack of scarlet slivers beneath your woodpile? Will supposes that he probably ought to be hysterical by now, but he doesn’t really have the energy for it. Hysteria requires wild hand gestures and watery eyes and is the sort of thing you need to be prepared to put a certain level of effort into. Besides, it’s not like his shock or fear would do any good; not for himself, and not for the sad dead pieces that have recently been taken away in an ambulance under the watchful eye of Price. But there’s also a grim sense that he doesn’t want to waste either of these things – either his shock or his fear – before they’re fully needed. Because surely, at some point, he’s really going to require both; and it makes no sense to use them up all at once.
In Will’s head his sense of shock and fear now become a series of commodities like gas or water or even – why not? – stacks of kindling from the woodpile; all of which need to be preserved and doled out like any other survival items in a time of crisis. He’s uncomfortably aware of how the CSI officers are tiptoeing round him casting their own looks of fear and shock, and he half wants to confide his new theory about the necessity of saving them before realising how ridiculous it would sound. As a compromise he tries to pay attention to what Jack’s doing, even though he’s not doing anything particularly worth attending to: just standing across the yard barking into his cell phone in the same way the dogs did when they made their gruesome discovery in the woodpile. Jack’s breath is coming out in little frozen puffs like a stately dragon, and staring at him now Will can’t help thinking how enormously disappointed Freddie Lounds is going to be when she discovers that she missed a photo opportunity that she’s surely waited years for: the day Will’s Graham’s house officially became a crime scene.

Jack barks one final time then terminates the call and begins to stalk across the yard – and which of course is no longer a yard but a crime scene – and gestures towards Will. “That was Price,” he’s saying; and Will forces himself to stop thinking about the snow and the beauty, and the disappointment of Freddie Lounds, and tried to focus on Jack instead. “The results have come back.”

“Yes.”

“You know. It’s amazing what shock will do to make people efficient. We have a tissue match.” He takes a deep breath that causes his breath to billow even more furiously then casts a cautious glance at Will. “The organs in your yard came from the Sculptor’s fifth victim.”

“Right,” says Will; and which seems like a singularly inappropriate response (because it’s clearly not right), but which is going to have to do all the same because he can’t seem to come up with anything better. He supposes he must be in shock after all – even though it’s a waste – and can’t help starting to wish that Hannibal was there to lay a steadying hand on his shoulder. Only Hannibal is long gone; having guarded Will rather ferociously until the team arrived and then, at Will’s request, discreetly driven away before they could see him and realise he’d been there all night. Admittedly the moral support would have been nice, although ultimately Will’s still glad he isn’t there because he’s not yet ready for the whole FBI to know about his personal life – and if Hannibal being there in the middle of the night wasn’t enough of a clue that they’ve been sleeping together, there’s no doubt Hannibal’s reaction would have made it clear that his investment in Will has moved far beyond the purely professional. Because Hannibal had been furious: a level of anger which, while coolly controlled, was far more intense than anything Will’s ever seen and was rivalled only by his reaction to Andrew’s appearance in the parking lot. Yet it was also combined with something else; a kind of fascination that made the dark eyes gleam, as if his chilling degree of fury was blended by a certain intrigue at the challenge that’s been laid down. Will knows he’ll be sitting up in his own house now, patiently waiting for Will to drive over as previously agreed, and the thought of it gives Will courage. Hannibal, after all, who never seems to be afraid of anything: not other people’s opinions, or body parts in the woodpile, nor even the Sculptor himself.

Comforted by the image, Will now raises his head and looks Jack in the eye for the first time. “Number Five?” he repeats slowly. “The one we found not far from here.”

“Right; the one in the field. Which was also when…”

“…We found the first business card. The WG one.”

“Right,” repeats Jack. “Number five was James Leyland; your old colleague from down south.”

“I know, I remember. It was Leyland that first made you suggest a link between the Sculptor and the so-called Nemesis.” Jack lets out a long breath. “So it’s true then; the cases are connected. I think this puts it beyond all reasonable doubt.”

“There’s a storm coming,” mutters Will, half to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing. Anyway, it was already looking pretty certain. The first five victims were all linked to the conviction of Richard Black; I already told you.”

“I know you did,” says Jack soothingly. “You did a great job.”

“But the last victims weren’t – at least there’s no link I could find.”

“True,” agrees Jack. “But we need to recognise that the Sculptor has been targeting people who he sees as responsible for putting Richard Black in prison. Richard Black, aka the Nemesis – who also murdered omegas.”

“I know Jack.”

“And it was you who did the profile who caught him,” concludes Jack heavily. “Ironic isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Well…perhaps that’s not the best word. But if it wasn’t for the reputation you got on the Black case you wouldn’t have ended up working for us.”

“No, I guess not.”

“Your last case down south,” says Jack kindly. “Their loss was our gain.”

“I would have left anyway…” replies Will, before letting the sentence trail off into nothingness because the last thing he can be bothered to do is start explaining about Andrew.

“God this whole thing’s a mess,” Jack is now saying. “I haven’t seen anything like it since the Chesapeake case.”

Without even realising it Will briefly closes his eyes, unable to stop himself reliving the conversation all those months ago with Hannibal: ‘They were tableaux. The way something was presented mattered as much to him as what it was he displayed. It was like he wanted to transmute the vulgar and banal and make it beautiful.’ Hannibal’s raptured fascination and the almost trance-like earnestness with which Will had described his impressions…it seems like a whole lifetime ago now. Abruptly he snaps his eyes open again. “Only we never caught the Chesapeake Ripper,” he says tersely. “We’ll get this one.”

“You said you were planning to go through Richard Black’s prison files with Hannibal. Have you done it yet?”

Will feels his heart sink. “No,” he says. “I was intending to but…my health. I’ve had a few problems. It put me out of action for a while.”

Jacks nods in a kindly way, although Will can’t help wondering if he’s privately thinking something critical about the unreliability of omegas and why you shouldn’t let them onto your team. Or at least Jack, as a genuine ally, is probably not thinking that…although it’s more or less a certainty that other
people will be. As if to prove the point there’s a sudden slithering movement in the corner of his eye, and on turning round he sees that Skinner is staring straight at him from behind one of the patrol cars, the yellow face flickering in the lights like a Halloween lantern.

“You mentioned before that Richard Black died protesting his innocence,” adds Jack. “Will, you know I have to ask…” He pauses and fixes Will with one of his more steely expressions. “Is there any chance the New Orleans team got the wrong man?”

“No,” replies Will, although even as he’s saying it he’s aware that his voice doesn’t sound quite so certain as the last few times he’s denied the same thing. “Richard Black was as guilty as hell. There’s no way the real Nemesis is still alive and operating in Baltimore. No way.”

“What did you say ‘Nemesis’ meant again?”

“A source of downfall that’s inescapable,” says Will in a flat, toneless voice. “In Greek mythology she was the goddess of retribution and vengeance. Black claimed the murders were a form of punishment against alphas – that by killing omegas he was delivering vengeance against a group who’d oppressed him.” Jack clears his throat in a suggestive way. “I didn’t buy it then and I don’t buy it now,” adds Will sharply. “Richard Black was just a pathetic, twisted loser who felt empowered by hurting vulnerable people then dreamt up some grandiose bullshit about alphas to try and justify himself once he got caught. That’s not what the Sculptor is. The Sculptor is something… different.”

“Well whatever the Sculptor is,” says Jack, nodding grimly towards the woodpile, “the fact he chose to make an exhibition of Richard Black’s arresting officer – to the profiler who enabled the arrest – sends a pretty clear message. We cannot downplay this Will. You understand what it means?”

“I know,” says Will simply. Pausing he follows Jack’s gaze to where the crime scene tape is fluttering in the wind before slowly turning back again. “It means the Sculptor’s coming after me.”

What he thinks, but doesn’t add, is: And when he does, I’ll be ready for him.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks again to Rimu for the wonderful art in the last update, which ended up inspiring the Antinous scene for this chapter :-)

Sorry also for the reduction in updates my lovelies; hopefully they’ll go back to weekly again at some point, but I’m afraid I’ve been super busy recently and it’s taking me longer than usual to get things finished. In this respect a big massive Fannibalistic thanks to everyone who’s reading and offering advice, encouragement and suggestions. A lot of people understandably stopped following the story after the long hiatus in December (for which I do not blame them at all – by that point I was kind of tempted to jack it in myself ;-D), and I’m consistently touched when readers have the patience and stamina to stick with my rambling monster-length WIPs. This is now on schedule to be the longest fic I’ve ever done (!) and is a tricky one to write at times, so knowing people are still engaged with it has really helped keep my energy going. Hugs for all!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thanks, hugs and heart-eyes to the very talented Rimu, Hannigram artist extraordinaire, who’s done some fabulous art for Chapter 21 that you can check out on Tumblr here and here (the second one is NSFW, so be careful where you are if you click!).

Also giving a shout out for the Toronto FannibalFest on Kickstarter - there’s a ton of great rewards for backers, so please check it out if you get a chance. I’m one of several fandom writers responding to prompts, and let it be known that I love you all so much I promise to do whatever you want (including Will as non-sassy and/or Hanners speaking in tiny, tiny sentences without a single metaphor :-D)

Wednesday 9.00am

“You don’t have to go to work,” says Hannibal, beginning to pour out a second cup of coffee. The coffee is rich and luxuriously scented and steams in an inviting way as it courses into the cup; Will’s nostrils promptly twitch appreciatively in response. “You’ve been up half the night,” adds Hannibal for what feels like the tenth time. “No one would expect it.”

This is announced in a tone of voice that’s bordering on severe, and which means Will now has to reply (also for the tenth time): “I know they wouldn’t but I want to.”

“And you will suffer all day because of it.”

“No I won’t. Don’t be so melodramatic; you’re making me sound like a masochist.”

“On the contrary,” replies Hannibal. “Maso-chism would imply some kind of gratification – and it does not gratify you. ‘Martyr’ would be a better term.”

Will rolls his eyes, reluctant to acknowledge the essential truth of this, then stretches his legs out beneath the table until their feet are brushing together. “If you say so.”

“I do say so. Remember, after all, that the fate of the martyr is to be tortured to death. Does the consecration of Jack Crawford really mean all that much to you?”

“Enough,” replies Will, giving Hannibal’s foot a nudge with his own. “I’m not going to stay all day. I’ll come…” he pauses very fractionally, “I’ll come home in the afternoon.”

“Then please be careful,” adds Hannibal, briefly catching Will’s eye to indicate his silent satisfaction at the choice of the word ‘home’. “Don’t stop off anywhere on your way back.”

“Of course,” says Will firmly. “I might not be hiding but I don’t intend to be reckless about this. Rest assured I take the threat very seriously.”

Hannibal nods in response then takes another sip of coffee before noticing how Will’s begun rummaging through a nearby pile of papers and giving a very faint smile at the sight of it. In this respect he’s found himself enormously charmed by the way Will’s been prowling round the house and scrutinizing the contents, because it’s almost certainly an early sign that he’s starting the process
of nesting in it. Not that Will would recognise it as such, given that it’s clearly unconsciously done; although not being deliberate doesn’t change the fact that doing it at all is extremely encouraging. Typical omega behaviour would generally be along the lines of scent-marking but Will, being Will, has gone one step further and seems far more territorial in his ambitions. As such he’s strewn his own belongings all around the house rather than storing them in the bedroom and seems incapable of going more than ten minutes without picking something up and inspecting it before moving it to a different location. These changes have been very small but are still rather revealing regardless; and while Hannibal would normally be irritated by books in different slots or rearranged picture frames, he’s finding the current disruptions to be entirely delightful.

Will now gets up from the table and drifts towards the counter instead, and Hannibal watches him the entire time in quiet admiration. This morning he looks as supple and striking as a dragon lily in his dark purple shirt, which not only highlights the pale skin but also complements the bruises on his hips and throat, put there by Hannibal. Normally it would be difficult for another person to hold his attention for this long – particularly when they’re doing nothing more interesting than gazing into space while occasionally readjusting their glasses with a forefinger – yet there’s just something so captivating about Will. Something *inspiring*. He has a rare quality about him which makes one want to strive on his behalf in an attempt to earn his notice and recognition: to perform feats of valour or extravagant displays of devotion, of which the more extreme the better. Some manner of *mise-en-scène*, thinks Hannibal idly; something which flaunts conventional rules and rubrics and reverses the usual order of things. A desecration in a church would be one example: contorted death in the midst of sacred life, like the archetypal Bleeding Heart. Or an entwined enigma of morality and mortality whose pieces are comprised of lifeless bodies and over which Will can fixate his beautiful dark mind. The desire to win his favour…it’s not dissimilar to the medieval ballads of knights slaying some mythological beast for the sake of laying the dripping head at their loved one’s feet, just like Tristen slaying the dragon for Isolte. Although perhaps it’s at this point that the analogy fails, because Will is not remotely suited to such a passive role. And how much better, after all, to move in equal partnership while performing such an enterprise as dragon slaying. Like two halves of a single whole – purposeful disarray and dark mirror image.

Will, oblivious to being watched, begins to deftly rearrange the knives in their wooden block and Hannibal smiles again before remembering a folktale from his childhood about a boy Prince who was blessed with certain accomplishments courtesy of a fairy godmother, growing up as a result to be so hauntingly perfect and unique he hardly seemed as if he could be real. It’s very easy to imagine a similar apparition leaning over Will’s cradle, and Hannibal now amuses himself for a few moments deciding which one it might be. Set, perhaps: the Egyptian God of chaos, storms and violence, the lord of the red land, and surely only inclined to breathe such rare gifts onto the mind, face, and figure of a favourite son like Will. If it were only possible, Hannibal decides, then he would tenderly pin Will to a piece of card in the manner of a Victorian scientist studying butterflies, because without a doubt his boy is the *perfect* specimen: so rare, exotic and enthralling, and practically begging to be held up to the light and examined with ravenous intensity. A delectable little puzzle box in fact, that’s yearning to have its pieces stripped away and made sense of. It wouldn’t be an act of violence either, because paying such fervent attention to something is the purest demonstration of devotion and love; just as with the Victorian entomologists and their pinned butterflies.

At this point Hannibal can’t help sighing to himself, because all the silent watching is reminding him of a conflict that’s becoming irritatingly familiar in the past few weeks: namely how his desire to publically flaunt Will as his property is being challenged by an equally strong impulse to stash him away somewhere secret where no one except Hannibal has access to him. In this respect he wasn’t entirely prepared for how addictive it would be to have Will in the house, and even though he’s only been here a matter of hours his presence already feels essential. Hannibal’s own volcanic sense of outrage towards the Sculptor hasn’t cooled in the slightest; but while he resents Will being imposed
on but anyone other than Hannibal himself, there’s no denying that the outcome has still been very fortunate. Will had arrived late last night, pale and wan from the strain of what had happened yet still fiercely delicate, ferociously adorable and with a luminosity that never fully dims. At first he’d protested that he was too angry and tense to sleep, but had eventually allowed himself to be coaxed into Hannibal’s bed where he’d fallen asleep in his arms while Hannibal opted to wait out the night by watching over him. At the time he’d reflected, somewhat wryly, on the ludicrousness of this impulse given that there was nothing close by to actually threaten Will – yet there was no doubt that the urge to do it had been irresistible regardless. Guarding the beloved. A territorial instinct: something primitive and possessive. Hannibal had sighed at himself for being so conventional but had still abandoned sleep in order to maintain his silent vigil, wary of anything that might occur to disturb or unsettle this most precious of burdens and moving only to soothe Will into calmness at any sign of nightmares with all the tenderness and patience of an actual mate. Look what you’ve done to me Will Graham, thinks Hannibal now, slightly amused. You’ve managed to subvert every expectation I have about myself – yet I can’t bring myself to begrudge you your success. In fact his only disappointment was being unable to cradle Will in his arms and carry him to bed like an alpha should with their omega. There’s no doubt Will would never have allowed such an action so there’d been no point in attempting it, although perhaps after they’re bonded…

“Do you mind if I take some of these apples,” says Will abruptly, so Hannibal quickly adjusts his fond expression back to a more neutral one in case Will spots it and becomes self-conscious by guessing the cause. “I could probably use some vitamins. I think I’ve been living off takeout pizza for nearly a month.”

On noticing how Will’s begun rearranging the contents of the fruit bowl, Hannibal is forced to hide the fond expression behind the newspaper as a last resort. “Of course,” he says calmly. “Take whatever you like. You know you don’t have to ask.”

Will makes an appreciative noise followed by enthusiastic crunching as he devours the first of the apples. Hannibal isn’t entirely sure how it should be possible to make something as mundane as eating an apple attractive, yet somehow Will still seems to manage it. Although perhaps it’s the enthusiasm more than the activity itself, because Will is so aloof and withdrawn much of the time that it makes his displays of energy and liveliness endlessly appealing.

“You should cut your hair,” adds Will, striding back to the table in a rather purposeful way that suggests he’s revving up to replace his inspection of the house with an inspection of Hannibal himself. “It’s getting too long.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. Much longer and you’ll be able to put it in a ponytail.” Hannibal briefly remerges from over the top of the newspaper and narrows his eyes before disappearing again. “Well it’s true,” says Will.

“At least it makes it easier for you to pull,” replies Hannibal innocently.

Will, remembering the way he was tugging it last night blushes very faintly; Hannibal promptly smirks. “Yes, well,” he says eventually. “It’s getting long.”

“Noted.”

“What time are you leaving?” adds Will, who’s now stowed the spare apples in his briefcase and resumed prowling round the kitchen. “I assume you’re going to work yourself?”

“I am, yes. In about 20 minutes.”
“I don’t suppose you have any free time this afternoon? Jack wanted me to go through Richard Black’s prison files with you.”

“As reluctant as I am to put myself at Jack’s disposal,” replies Hannibal, “I could be persuaded to be at yours. How about 11.00? I’ll take you for lunch afterwards.”

“Okay, that would be great. Shame it’s so cold though: it would’ve been nice to go to the park again.”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal, smiling faintly as Will picks up the bag of coffee beans and stows it away in a different cupboard to the one it normally lives in. “That was quite a custom for a while wasn’t it? We’ll have to resurrect it when the weather improves. In the meantime I hope you’ll accept a restaurant as an alternative.”

Will pauses for a few seconds so he can begin rearranging the contents of Hannibal’s spice rack. “Sure.”

“I’d also like to take you somewhere for dinner. Although not tonight; tonight I want to cook for you myself.”

“Thanks,” says Will, looking pleased. “I’d like that. And I can’t do tomorrow for eating out, but any other evening this week is fine.”

“Why, what’s happening tomorrow?”

“A social event for the new trainee cohort,” replies Will, promptly sounding far more miserable and martyred than he did at the prospect of going to work.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No,” says Will firmly. “I don’t want you to.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll loom about in the background then as soon as someone talks to me you’ll materialize out of nowhere and terrorize them with one of those stares of yours.” Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “Like a stalker,” says Will. “So no.”

“Why do you think I would do that?”

“Because that’s what you always do. Then you’ll get that ‘what – me?’ expression on your face when I try to call you out on it.” Will smiles slightly. “Exactly how you’re doing now.”

Hannibal catches his eye and begins to smile too. “How severe you are.”

“It’s what you did at the last FBI event. Remember? When Siemens and Skinner showed up for the first time.”

“Mmmm, that was the evening of your lecture wasn’t it? When I was very rude and turned up late. Six months ago now – somehow it seems like much longer.”

“Yeah that’s the one. It was like you were trying to scare them off.”

“And do you think I succeeded?”

“Perhaps,” replies Will, and this time there’s a slight edge to his voice. “Skinner could probably use a
refresher course.”

“Then all the more reason for me to come with you tomorrow.”

Will laughs out loud then strolls over so he can stand behind Hannibal and put his hands on his shoulders. “Okay fine,” he says. “You’ve got yourself a date.”

“Excellent,” replies Hannibal, with all the serenity of someone who’s got exactly what they wanted with minimal effort. “I look forward to it immensely.”

“Don’t. It’ll be awful.”

“Then I shall have to entertain myself by stalking you won’t I?”

Will makes an exasperated sound that’s somewhere between a sigh and a grunt and Hannibal smiles to himself then reaches round so he can tangle their fingers together. “You act like you’re joking,” adds Will pointedly. “But I know you’re not.”

“Although at least you’ll be safe,” says Hannibal in a more serious voice. “I want you to be cautious of being alone until the Sculptor’s caught. You need to be on your guard at all times.”

“I know. I intend to be.”

“Remember what I told you about superior predators,” adds Hannibal softly.

“Yes,” says Will, briefly tightening his grip on Hannibal’s shoulders.

“Yes,” says Hannibal with obvious approval. “You’re a ruthless boy aren’t you Will? And yet so patient with it...just as you are with your fishing line. Fishing is a form of hunting after all: requiring planning, persistence and patience. Infinite patience. One sets the bait and casts the lure, then waits for the prey to ensnare itself on the hook.” Reaching up his arm he twines his fingers into Will’s hair and tugs it very gently. “I wonder what your technique is like applied to other domains? Perhaps one day you’ll show me. I would like to teach you how to hunt Will; I would like that...immensely.”

One again Will doesn’t respond straight away, instead leaning forward until nearly his full weight is resting against Hannibal and he can feel the way Will’s body is tensing up as if readying itself for action. “And yet the Sculptor’s own source of inspiration is an unexpected one,” adds Hannibal thoughtfully, letting go of Will’s hair so he can stroke the side of his hip instead. “Richard Black, otherwise known as the Nemesis. An undistinguished killer with little to recommend him beyond the fact he was the means of bringing you to the attention of the FBI.”

“I know. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“You still have some theories though don’t you?”

“A few. A copycat is a possibility – but I think it’s unlikely. It’s hard to imagine someone as pathetic as Richard Black inspiring an imitator.”

“Then if not a celebration, perhaps...retribution. Did he have any friends or family members who might bear a grudge on his behalf?”

“If he did it never came up. I seem to remember there being a wife, possibly children; I’d have to check. They didn’t come to his trial though – hardly a sign of being very invested.”

“Then perhaps it’s irrelevant. What about an accomplice?”
“I don’t think so. There was never any indication he wasn’t acting alone.”

“So what are your conclusions?”

“Well, there’s the copycat aspect which would imply someone with a pathological grudge against omegas. Or, going by Black’s own version, a desire for vengeance against alphas.”

“Or…”

“Or,” says Will tersely, “we bypass a complex motive and go back to the basics.”

“Yes indeed. The simplest solution is always the most elegant.”

“Right. Which means this is about revenge: the Sculptor began this killing campaign to punish the people responsible for sending Richard Black to prison.”

“And the reason the later victims were unrelated to Richard Black?”

There’s an ominous pause. “Because he’s realised he likes it,” says Will bleakly. “He enjoys his work. Which means even after he’s gone through his Richard Black hit list he’s not going to stop.”

“Yes, very good – I agree. The Sculptor was formerly an apprentice imitating the Nemesis. Now he has aspirations to become a master artist.”

“You’ve obviously given this some thought; why didn’t you mention it earlier?”

“Because he didn’t directly threaten you any earlier,” replies Hannibal. “I was therefore less invested. Anyway there was no need for me to mention it – it was obvious you’d work it out yourself.”

“Hmmm, for all the good it’s done.” Will pauses and frowns then begins a restless tapping motion on Hannibal’s shoulder. “I’m thinking I might fly down south for a few days; see if I can find any members of Black’s family who might speak to me.”

“Interesting,” says Hannibal. “The place where the Nemesis began, as did the Sculptor – as did you. The three of you formed in the same crucible.”

Will pulls a face. “If you want to put it that way.”

“It’s not a matter of wanting to put it any particular way – it’s simply the way that it is.” Will frowns again and doesn’t reply. “And I insist on coming with you,” adds Hannibal firmly. “Andrew lives there as well after all.”

“Yeah…I know he does.”

“What about your own family? Any remnants.”

“No. Some colleagues down there would remember me but that’s about it. What about you?” adds Will, suddenly consumed with curiosity. “Are any of your family local?”

“No, not at all.”

“In the States?”

“No.”

“So where are you from originally? I don’t think you’ve ever said.”
Hannibal briefly looks inscrutable and then reaches round again and brushes a finger against Will’s wrist. “That’s rather a long story,” he eventually says, “and probably best reserved for another time.”

“As long as that?”

“Probably longer.”

“But it’s such a simple question.”

“It is, yes, but the response is complex. Or least a proper account of it would be – and if I’m going to describe it to you I’d rather provide the full version. And some time I will; but not today.”

The image of this is a rather striking one, and Will can’t help falling silent for a few moments as he tries to imagine it: Hannibal as a solemn dark-eyed little boy with an angular face and obscure impulses, growing up in some far-flung corner of Europe while remaining unknowable and unfathomable to all the adults around him. Then he briefly contrasts it with his own childhood in America: the nomadic aimlessness of it, constantly packing up and trekking off as his father trudged from one shipyard to another in pursuit of the next pay cheque. The emptiness, the restlessness, the yearning for someone to really relate to – all the hollow pockets of emptiness waiting to be filled. His wifeless father with the motherless son, working all hours and so often either silent or shouting: exhausted, preoccupied and consumed with a dated, worn-out sadness that disappeared every evening in a nimbus of diesel and resin and resignation.

“Were you happy?” he says abruptly.

If Hannibal is surprised by this sudden change in tone then he doesn’t give any indication. “After a fashion,” he replies with another small pause. “At least at times. Although it’s not always merely a question of being happy or unhappy; things are as they are, and one must adjust to the circumstances. Life is a constant process of adaptation.”

Once again he fails to elaborate, and after waiting for a response that’s clearly not going to materialise Will finally says: “I don’t agree.”

Hannibal smiles faintly. “No?”

“No. You can’t just dismiss an entire section of your life as a temporary adjustment. People are constructed by their pasts. Their history. It makes them who they are.”

“Then I’m afraid I must also disagree.”

“Why?”

“Because nothing made me Will,” replies Hannibal calmly. “I made myself. You might as well ask ‘What happened to you?’ and my answer would be the same.”

Will smiles very faintly. “Nothing?”

“Yes, indeed: nothing. The only thing that happened was me. I happened.”

Will supposes some people would be offended by this enigmatic reply (and which is less like a proper reply than a fresh set of conundrums) but he doesn’t feel dismissed by it as opposed to intrigued – not to mention rather energised by how Hannibal’s cryptic verbal parries always reinforce the fact he considers Will an intellectual equal. Leaning further down he shuts his eyes then wraps both arms tighter against Hannibal’s chest and rests his face against his hair. What he thinks, but can’t quite bring himself to add is: It doesn’t matter anyway. Your past is less important than our
Hannibal turns his head and gently brushes his lips against Will’s cheekbone. “Mylimasis,” he says in a quiet voice.

“You know what?” replies Will, tightening his grip even further. “After today I think I might take the rest of the week off. Let’s just do the Richard Black files then leave straight afterwards. Leave and come back…” the grip tightens a little more, “…back home.”

Hannibal sighs with satisfaction then slowly skims his mouth down Will’s face and jaw in a series of light feathery kisses until it’s lingering on his throat, just above the carotid artery. Will’s breath promptly hitches and Hannibal gives a small nudge with the tip of his teeth followed by a warm swipe with his tongue.

“May I?” he murmurs into Will’s skin. Will’s breath catches again and Hannibal whispers his name then delicately increases the pressure of tongue and teeth. “Your heart’s beating so fast my love,” he adds softly. “I can feel it. Feel the way your pulse races.”

Will hesitates for a few more seconds and then finally nods his permission before letting out a low moan as Hannibal begins to suck a deep bruise onto his throat. Hannibal makes a soothing noise in response then gives the skin a tender kiss of apology – and which immediately makes Will moan again, even though it doesn’t really hurt. “It’s all right Will,” Hannibal is murmuring between each scrape of teeth. “It’s all right, only a little longer now. Just let me. Just let me have you…” He’s taken hold of Will’s hands in both his own, rubbing the knuckles with his thumb in the same rhythm as he’s making the soothing noises, and to an outsider it looks as if Will is hurt or frightened and in need of comfort. Only Will knows that Hannibal isn’t trying to hurt him and that the reassurance has nothing to do with physical pain; it’s because the mark is clearly intended as a demonstration of ownership – only a few degrees removed from an actual alpha bite – and because they both know that Will is unnerved by the implications of this, but still desperately wants and needs it anyway.

Hannibal keeps tight hold of Will’s hands until he’s finished – and while it’s not immediately clear whether it’s to comfort him or to prevent him pulling away, Will realises that he’s grown so calm and accepting that the comfort is unnecessary and the desire to escape irrelevant, so the motives for being held onto so firmly no longer really matter. Once Hannibal is satisfied that the bruise is sufficiently livid he licks it a few times then nuzzles the side of Will’s jaw and face to ensure his own smell will linger on the skin for at least a few more hours; while Will, who was expecting something like this – and expecting to hate it – automatically tips his head to the side to give Hannibal better access. In fact he finds himself liking it so much that it causes a response he never imagined he’d willingly choose to do: which is to climb into Hannibal’s lap and wrap both arms around his neck in what’s practically a textbook display of an omega trying to pacify their alpha. Hannibal sighs appreciatively and Will breathes very softly against his skin then strokes his hair and gently nudges his forehead with his own – even though it’s actually pretty ridiculous because it’s the type of thing that would normally be done after the alpha has been fighting or is stressed in some way, and it’s not as if Hannibal even needs it at those times. But somehow none of that is enough to change the fact that Will feels like he wants him to have it all the same.

“Will,” murmurs Hannibal. Pressing his lips against Will’s temple, he raises a hand so he can use his thumb to caress the bruise he’s just made. “Beloved.”

“Mylimasis,” replies Will with a small smile. And even though he knows his accent is terrible and the whole gesture is, in all honesty, as corny as fuck, the way Hannibal’s normally sombre expression lights up at the sound of it makes it more than worthwhile.

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“I suppose I hardly need to tell you that we have a situation on our hands,” announces Price in a deep rumbling monotone that’s intended to be an impression of Jack. “Our supreme leader is partial to a bit of understatement isn’t he?”

“Well to be fair,” replies Beverly, “what was he supposed to say?” She frowns then pauses for a few seconds, having just remembered that she’s not usually all that concerned about fairness to Jack. “The situation is pretty exceptional after all. He’s trying to prevent a panic.”

“Yes, he can hardly tell us what he really thinks,” adds Will, who’s hiding out in the lab in an attempt to avoid the combined irritants of the journalists, Siemens and Skinner. “Which, let’s be honest, is probably along the lines of: ‘As of last night, Will is officially fucked.’”

“You’re very stoical aren’t you,” says Price sympathetically. “I admire how you’re taking all this in your stride. If the same thing had happened to me…” He shudders theatrically then leans over to rummage in his desk drawer to retrieve a tin of biscuits that he proceeds to thrust in Will’s direction. “Why don’t you have one of these,” says Price eagerly, having obviously decided that the biscuits will have to do in an absence of any more practical comfort to offer. “They’re very good. No, none for you Brian. Minion grade biscuits for you until you’ve also had a death threat from the Sculptor.”

Will gives a faint smile then takes one of the biscuits and nibbles round the edges. “They’re nice aren’t they?” urges Price.

“Yes, very nice.”

“Part of that gift basket from Hannibal,” adds Price with satisfaction. “What did he have to say about the Sculptor’s recent offering?”

Will finishes the biscuit then carefully pulls a tissue from a nearby box to wipe his fingers. “I don’t know,” he says without looking up. “I haven’t spoken to him yet.”

“I don’t suppose he’ll be very happy,” continues Price. “He’s quite protective of you, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” says Will vaguely. “I guess.”

“So where are you staying at the moment?” adds Beverly.

It’s obvious she’s worked out how uncomfortable he’s getting and is attempting to change the subject, and Will shoots her a grateful look in response. “In a hotel,” he replies, having already rehearsed this lie on the way over. “Jack’s banned me from going back to my own place until the Sculptor’s caught.”

“I should think so,” says Price with another shudder.

“What about your dogs?” asks Beverly in sympathy. “What’s happening with them?”

“Jack helped me out. He was great actually; he knows a farmer who’s fairly local and she’s offered to take them in until I can sort out something more permanent.”

“I hope none of them got hurt?”

“No,” says Will with obvious relief. “They’re all fine.” In fact he’s missing the dogs fiercely and wishes they’d been able to join him at Hannibal’s straight away, only it had been impossible to turn down Jack’s offer without explaining that he wasn’t really going to a hotel. Beverly, Price and Zeller
make a chorus of sympathetic noises, and Will gives another vague smile while secretly trying to imagine what their reactions would be if he confided that the plan is for himself (plus dogs) to stay at Hannibal’s house for the long-term. The reluctance to be open about the arrangement troubles him – and on one level he’d like nothing more than to proudly share it – only he knows that other people’s interest would create a sense of tension and possibly put the new relationship under pressure. Essentially it’s like he’s so protective of it that he wants to shield it from all scrutiny.

“Oh God,” says Zeller, abruptly cutting into this train of thought. “Code Red! Code Red!” Seeing as this is the sign for Siemens or Skinner being sighted near the lab everyone gives a series of synchronised groans – then are promptly forced to stifle them as the door swings open sooner than expected and Skinner comes slinking in like a long streak of shadow.

As usual he hovers in the doorway for a few seconds, pomposity and self-importance oozing from every pore, before announcing “Good morning everyone” in such an incredibly superior way that it sounds like a teacher addressing a classroom of students (even pausing after he’s said it as if he’s expecting an obedient chorus of ‘Good mornings sirs!’ in response). Everyone stares determinedly down at their desks in silent mutiny and Skinner takes it in turn to shoot them a look of dislike one by one before adding: “I’m here for the audit.”

“Are you really?” says Price, beginning to draw extravagant doodles on the back of his notepad. “I thought you’d be here for the beer and chips.”

Skinner looks at Price in vague surprise, as if the chair had spoken. “Ms Purnell is concerned that this one’s sufficiently thorough,” he adds, deliberately emphasising each syllable like Price is an especially dim-witted five year old. “The Sculptor’s attorney will be going through the investigation with a very fine toothcomb when the case gets to court. We can’t have any loopholes.”

“I gave you all my paperwork,” snaps Beverly with poorly-disguised irritation.

“As did I,” adds Price. “At least I’m fairly certain I did…Brian, did I give Mr Skinner my paperwork?”

“I gave it to him for you,” replies Zeller, who looks like he’s struggling not to laugh.

“Well now,” says Price. “Wasn’t that nice of you?”

“I’m well aware of that,” adds Skinner crossly. “But it’s hardly a matter of the forensics paper trail on its own. We need to ensure the personnel health checks are up to date. I’m expecting a full physical and a full psychiatric from everyone.”

Given everything that’s happened recently, Will has a sinking sensation that this remark is being specifically addressed to him. “There are a number missing from the records,” continues Skinner, promptly confirming this suspicion. “I can’t help noticing that in your case Wi…” He pauses then gives a thin smile, having obviously remembered that when other people are present he has to treat Will with the same respect as he does everyone else. “In your case, Mr Graham, both are well out of date.”

“Don’t worry Will,” mutters Price in an undertone. “Hannibal will do the psychiatric one. And I’ll sort you out for the physical.”

“Thanks,” mouths back Will, with genuine relief.

“You’d better thank me,” replies Price in the same low voice. “Play your cards right and I can make you sound like a reincarnation of Thor. I shall expect several more gift baskets in return.”
“I want them on my desk by next week,” ploughs on Skinner. “Friday at the latest. And no excuses please gentlemen.” Turning round he gives Beverly a terse nod. “No excuses Dr Katz. Remember that this is an order from the very top. You should be aware that your superior officers are keeping an extremely close eye on you.”

“Oh do stop being so melodramatic,” says Price waspishly, beginning to shuffle papers together in a frenzy. “Honestly – ‘an extremely close eye from the top.’ You’re making it sound like…” He pauses and snaps his fingers together, obviously trying to think of something outlandish. “Like that eye-shaped thing on Mount Doom,” says Price with satisfaction. “What was he called again? Brian…what was name of the eye-shaped ring lord thing that lived on Mount Doom?”

“Sauron,” says Zeller.

“More like moron,” mutters Beverly to Will.

“Friday,” repeats Skinner nastily. “Not a day later.”

“How is it that this lab is always so full of entitled middle-aged men?” continues Beverly under her breath. “There’s just so many of them. Do you think there’s a factory nearby that’s churning them out?”

“And as for you Mr Graham,” adds Skinner, jabbing his finger in Will’s direction like it’s a loaded gun. “I want an independent psych report. There’s going to be a huge focus on you as a lead investigator so we have to be watertight.”

“Hannibal can do it,” snaps Price.

“Oh could he?” asks Skinner, who seems to be enjoying himself. “What do you think Mr Graham? Do you think Dr Lecter could be considered completely independent?”

The implication of this is extremely obvious, and Will can’t help feeling an additional surge of relief that no one knows how far his relationship with Hannibal has now developed. “For FBI purposes, yes,” he replies calmly, determined to deny Skinner the satisfaction of showing how awkward this question has made him feel. “But you’re right that a judge might want something more stringent. It’s no problem – I’ll ask Alana.”

“You do that,” replies Skinner, unable to keep the brief look of disappointment of his face.

“Fine,” says Price. “So now we’ve got that out the way, suppose we all go back to what we were supposed to be doing before you interrupted us – namely trying to catch the Sculptor in the first place. You’re so preoccupied with the paperwork Mr Skinner that you seem to have forgotten we don’t actually have a suspect yet. And considering what Will’s had to deal with in the last 24 hours I’ve not convinced how professional it is for you to come here pestering him with nonsense about medical checks.”

Skinner beams a thin smile in Price’s direction turns back to Will again. “Perhaps a word in private Mr Graham?” he asks with a level of false friendliness that manages to be actively creepy. “Would you mind stepping outside with me for a moment?”

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Wednesday 10.40am

Will yearns to say no, only he’s concerned that refusing might look like he’s intimidated so ultimately ends up nodding instead, despite the fact he hates the idea of it. Skinner gives a grunt of satisfaction
in response then puts a clammy hand on Will’s shoulder to steer him towards the door; and even though Will knows it’s just a fake display of friendlessness for the sake of Beverly, Price and Zeller, he refuses to play along and promptly shakes it off again. Once out in the corridor Skinner closes the door behind them then slowly turns round, his gaunt face immediately losing its previous bland expression and twitching back to life again in a distinctly unsettling way that makes Will think of a wax mask that’s starting to melt and reveal something bristling and ugly underneath.

“I thought you’d be happy to know I’ve been forced to start that omega sensitization,” says Skinner, fixing his pale eyes straight on Will’s face. “Once a week for the next three months – stood in a containment room for forced exposure to all the pheromones that come oozing out of you lot when you’re in heat.” As he’s speaking a fleck of spittle flies from his pale lips and lands on his lapel and he irritably wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’s one of the most demeaning things I’ve ever had to do in my life.”

“Jack makes all the alphas do it,” replies Will in a bored voice. “If you decide to take it personally that’s up to you.”

“One of the most demeaning things ever,” repeats Skinner, as if Will hasn’t said anything. “And maybe omega training is the norm in a….” He pauses, his face briefly rearranging itself into an expression of pure contempt. “In a politically correct field office like this one, but it sure as hell isn’t in the others I’ve worked at. How do you imagine it’ll look on my record – coming here on secondment and being treated as if I’m some kind of sex offender?”

“I imagine it’ll look pretty bad,” replies Will in the same disinterested way.

“Damn right it’ll look bad; it’ll affect my chance of promotion for starters. I guess you must be pretty happy about that. Got exactly what you wanted didn’t you? And all because you didn’t have enough sense to stay at home when your heat was starting. If nothing else I hope you’ll show a bit more self-control next time.”

“Me?” says Will in genuine disbelief. “Me show a bit more self-control?”

“Yes: you. Why the hell else would you go out like that unless you were after the attention? Jesus man, omegas.” Skinner grimaces, hurling the word into the air as if the way it feels in his mouth is distasteful. “You know Will, I got told about you constantly before I came here: everyone was always raving about this guy Will Graham who was supposed to be some kind of prodigy and could profile like no one had ever seen. I hated the sound of your name before I even met you. If you were an alpha you’d never have got that kind of attention. Alphas can work their asses off and it’s just seen as what’s expected of them, but as soon as an omega does the same thing they get special treatment.”

He obviously doesn’t realise that until a few weeks ago only three people even knew Will was an omega, but Will cares so little about Skinner’s opinion that he can’t summon up the energy to get defensive about it. Although admittedly it proves that he’s been overly modest and professional envy was indeed the original source of Skinner’s dislike – just as Hannibal had always said. “Then I arrive here and everyone’s kissing your ass,” adds Skinner venomously. “But underneath the hype you’re just a typical omega and exactly the same as all the rest of them: never take any responsibility for yourself then play the victim card as soon as someone calls you out on it. It’s lucky that Mr Crawford’s into all this progressive liberal crap. Someone like you wouldn’t have lasted five minutes in my last field office.”

Will takes a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth, then leans back on his heels and gives Skinner a long stare from over the top of his glasses. “Fine,” he says with obvious contempt. “Is that it now? You done?”
“Yeah, I’m done.” Skinner takes a deep breath of his own then takes a step closer to Will at the same time, his haggard face beginning to twitch again as if the previously melting wax mask has been filled with insects. “The thing is Will – speaking of being done – you might be finding yourself done too when your alpha catches up with you. He was in here again on Friday, hanging out round reception.”

As Will gives a small flinch Skinner moves another step closer, his hands starting to flex in a fitful way that makes the bony fingers shudder and clench. “In fact it looked like he was having a bit of an argument with the receptionist,” adds Skinner softly. “Just like you were the last time I saw you.” Pausing again he gives the faintest flicker of a smirk, and Will can’t avoid a queasy twinge of remembrance at how he’d been lurking behind the pillar when Will handed Andrew’s letter over. “You better watch yourself there Will. I had a quick word with him before he left. Alpha to alpha: you know how it is. He’s really not happy with you.”

Through a considerable force of effort Will manages not to let his uneasiness show and instead looks Skinner straight in the eyes. Skinner stares back, the flecks of spittle on his lapel glistening like oysters in the fluorescent light, and Will gives a slight shrug before adding in a way that’s deliberately flippant: “Thanks for your concern.”

His sarcasm is obvious, and Skinner’s face promptly twists itself into an ugly leer of resentment at how Will is refusing to behave like an omega should by showing respectful submission. “You watch yourself,” he finally repeats. “Little omega. Just…watch yourself.”

Raising one of his spindly hands he gives Will an insolent pat on the cheek, careless and condescending in the way you might touch an animal or child. Will, who has much quicker reflexes, immediately darts out his own hand and grabs hold of Skinner’s wrist, clinging to it until he can feel the delicate bones grind together and Skinner flinches with pain. “All right that’s enough,” says Will in an ominous voice. “Touch me like that again and you – will – regret – it.”

Skinner glances down at the hand clutching his own with something like disbelief then screws his face into a snarl. The rows of teeth – because somehow there seem to be more than the usual two – look vaguely yellow against the whiteness of his lips. “Are you threatening me Will?”

“I’m warning you,” says Will softly. “Do not keep pushing me. Because you won’t like it when I push back.”

“An omega threatening an alpha,” hisses Skinner, and a muscle is starting to throb in his jaw from the force with which he’s grinding his rows and rows of teeth. “Well – I guess we’ll see won’t we?”

Will looks Skinner straight in the eye for a second time then takes another slow step forward, towering into his space without any sign of fear or apprehension “Yes,” he says in the same ominous tone. “I guess we will.”

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Wednesday 10.45am

There’s no doubt that the scene with Skinner has been an unsettling one, yet once he’s alone again Will still finds that he can shrug it off surprisingly quickly. In fact the sensation of discarding it feels exactly that – a natural disposal process, like a snake shedding its skin – and as he’s walking down the corridor he half expects to glance over his shoulder and see a pile of anxieties languishing on the floorboards where he was previously stood. Partly he knows this is because he’s so focussed on seeing Hannibal later, but it’s also due to the necessity of concentrating on a far more pressing issue; and which is why he now makes himself forget about Skinner and head to his office instead, where
he retrieves Richard Black’s prison files to prepare for the long-delayed task of sifting through them.

The fact the case happened so close to where he’d been living with Andrew lends an additionally unpleasant layer of association, and as Will shovels the pages into his briefcase it’s hard to stop assorted images rising to the surface of his memory. Together these eddy and swirl together in a kaleidoscope of distress and he finally has to pause for a few seconds as a churning sense of outrage and revulsion washes over him at what he’d had to go through. Then he looks at the pages again and promptly feels ashamed at the self-absorption, because of course his own suffering can’t remotely compare to that of the victims whose names are recorded with tragic permanence across the pages he’s currently holding in his hands: all dead now, yet still cruelly bound together with their killer as if even in death he’s unwilling to let them go. In this respect Richard Black’s prison mugshot is at the very top of the file and Will can’t suppress a small shiver at the sight of it as he remembers the way the cold dead eyes in the photograph had flickered over him when Will was on the stand in the courtroom.

“Bastard,” Will tells it defiantly. Then he pauses again and peers a bit closer, trying to make sense of the sudden surge of familiarity that he’s getting from the contours of the face. Although it’s difficult to pin down exactly what’s causing it, because the recognition isn’t so much from the composite features themselves as much as the way they look in isolation. Frowning to himself he slowly drags his gaze across the gaunt slabs of cheekbone and flabby lips, taking in the piercing hawk-like expression and tufts of dark brown hair as he tries to work out where he’s seen them before. But the impression is so fleeting that it’s impossible to define it with any degree of precision and he’s ultimately forced to admit that the features could belong to any number of people. Just like the Sculptor’s business cards in fact, whose twins have been shown not only to be carried by Jack and Price, but also by Dr Reynolds, Andrew’s private detective – and even by Andrew himself. In this respect not even Richard Black’s name is entirely his own, being so similar to the elusive Matthew Brown; whose presence at two of the crime scenes still hasn’t been adequately accounted for.

Will sighs again at the hours of work all this is going to entail then locks Richard Black’s leering face away in his briefcase and prepares to leave the building. The parking lot is still submerged in stacks of snow, although at least the miserable weather has succeeded in driving away the packs of journalists. Will adjusts his collar and tightens his scarf, then checks his watch to see if he has enough time to get to Hannibal’s office or whether a call will be necessary to warn him he’s going to be late. Satisfied that he can make it, Will takes his phone out his pocket then texts On my way before beginning to pick his away across the churned-up drifts of snow. The parking lot is unusually quiet for this time of morning, and he’s idly wondering whether everyone has used the weather to try and bullshit an extra day off work – and the kind of wrath Jack’s going to rain down on them in response – before turning the corner and being confronted with a sight that immediately makes every single hair stand on end. It’s not, thinks Will in panic. It’s not, it’s not…It can’t be. But it can, and of course it is. A large black Mercedes: sleek in appearance, malevolent in intent, and currently crouched in the corner of the lot like a blood-bloated spider on a web.

“Oh God,” mutters Will under his breath.

The Mercedes stares back from across the parking lot, gleaming in the pale winter sun and oddly inscrutable with its blank windshield and tinted windows; and it’s at this point Will realises that despite his ongoing pessimism about the likelihood – the certainty – of something like this happening, he still wasn’t entirely prepared for it. It’s as if a new script got written at the time his heat started and now Andrew is cheating by refusing to read it and stubbornly cling on to the old one. Because Hannibal’s confidence and certainty, combined with the legal might of Elizabeth Lewis, should somehow have been enough…it should have been enough to prevent this. The fact that Will is currently happy and cared for should have been enough – and he’s painfully aware of a helpless, childish impulse to simply wail out his frustration that it isn’t fair. On behalf of the slight, sensitive
little boy clutching the copy of The Velveteen Rabbit and dreaming of better days and happier times; that it isn’t fair on him to have a chance of contentment stolen away.

From inside the building comes the sudden shrill ring of a phone. It blares out over and over again in a shrieking drone, and even though it’s a sound Will’s heard a thousand times before there’s something about the eerie way it’s magnified in the silence that strikes him as sinister. It’s like an alarm or a warning siren: *prepare, take cover, the onslaught’s about to begin.* Deeply unnerved, Will abruptly quickens his pace in the direction of his car because it’s so close now – *so close* – just a few more steps now and he’s there. Then he sees a brief flicker in the corner of his eye, and before he even has time to properly react to it a hand is shooting out behind him, grabbing the back of his neck with a grip so tight and vicious it makes him gasp in pain.

“Hello sweetheart,” says Andrew in a low, menacing voice. “Looks like you and I have got a bit of catching up to do.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Fannibalistic thanks and hugs to the wonderful elephane who’s made some gorgeous art for chapter 21. You can feast your eyes on it here if you’d like to :-)

On a more serious note, sections of this chapter have references to domestic abuse so please be careful if that’s something you’d find difficult to read.

Wednesday 11.10am

Admittedly 10 minutes isn’t a long time to be delayed by. Yet when 11.00 has come and gone without any sign of Will, Hannibal still begins to experience the first faint stirrings of unease. This is partly because Will might have numerous faults and foibles but unpunctuality doesn’t tend to be one of them, and Hannibal’s experience is that if Will is going to be late for something he’ll generally make an effort to give some warning. In turn – and which is rather harder to admit to – the unease is also competing with a personal sense of being slighted, because while it might be one thing for Will to keep other people waiting Hannibal intensely dislikes the idea of such cavalier forgetfulness being applied to himself. Eventually he gets up and begins to inspect the waiting room at intervals, increasingly resentful at the surge of disappointment whenever he always finds it empty, before restlessly returning to the office to consider the best course of action. A phone call is the most obvious, yet knowing how much Will values his own space makes Hannibal reluctant to crowd him by chasing him up after only a matter of minutes have gone by – not to mention a reluctance to draw attention to what feels like a weakness in himself by demonstrating such possessiveness in the first place. It’s not like there’s even any real reason to be alarmed, considering that the threat of Andrew has been neutralised with the legal letter and that Will is safe in the FBI where nothing can realistically harm him. But when another five minutes have limped past with still no sign, Hannibal concedes the inevitable and picks up his phone. It rings and rings with no reply, finally culminating in Will’s terse ‘Leave a message’ as the voicemail clicks into action. The sound of Will’s voice is the final decider. Leaving instructions with his secretary in the event of Will turning up later, Hannibal gets into his car and heads towards the FBI.

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Wednesday 10.50am

In his head Will had always imagined that he’d react to a confrontation like this with fury or virulence, or even a carefully controlled ruthlessness of the type favoured by Hannibal; yet for a few nightmarish seconds he finds that he doesn’t actually do anything – not least because in the shock of Andrew’s sudden appearance he finds that he doesn’t quite know what to do. Andrew, mistaking the shock for submission, gives Will’s neck a possessive squeeze and the clammy sensation of Andrew’s skin against his own is somehow enough to help Will snap back to life again and open his mouth to demand what the hell he wants. Then he remembers what a completely pointless question this is – because, of course, it’s obvious what Andrew wants – so shuts it again and roughly twists himself free instead. Andrew gives a hiss of irritation then grabs his shoulders to keep him still, and Will fights him off with far more force than necessary before attempting to make a dash in the direction of his car.
“No,” says Andrew in the same softly venomous tone as before. “I don’t think so.”

He makes a second attempt to grab Will’s shoulders and this time Will is poised to punch him straight in the face before remembering what generally tends to happen to omegas who attack alphas; and which, considering there are witnesses all over the place, makes this a seriously bad idea. Reluctantly he lowers his fist then renews his attempts to push past with an energy that borders on violent. “Get out of my way,” he adds in something approaching a snarl. “I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

“That’s too bad baby,” replies Andrew, weaving round so he’s at a better angle to give Will’s shoulder a painful twist. “Because I’ve got a hell of a lot to say to you.”

“That’s also too bad,” snaps Will. “Because I’ve got zero interest in hearing it.” Shifting round himself he raises both hands and delivers a strong yet subtle twist to Andrew’s elbow until he gasps with pain and lets go.

Andrew takes a deep breath, obviously trying to get his temper under control, then takes a step backwards and regards Will meditatively for a few seconds before his face starts to crease into a slow, cruel smile. “Look at that,” he says mockingly, waving his hand towards a crowd of students who have gathered nearby and are starting to stare. “It seems like we’re drawing a bit of attention to ourselves. I’m not going anywhere until I’ve spoken to you, so if you want to avoid a scene I suggest you hear me out.”

Will glances over himself then flinches with a sickening plunge of humiliation at how the exact thing he’s fought to prevent ever since he’s been working here looks as if it’s about to come true. Andrew, sensing victory, smiles more broadly then gestures at a small alcove at the end of the parking lot in a way that indicates Will should follow him there. “Just a few minutes,” he adds. “That’s all I need. Or maybe you’d prefer me to hold you down and tell you in front of all of them?”

Despite the genuine fear of this happening Will still doesn’t react immediately, remaining strained and motionless instead as the powerful urge to avoid his personal life becoming a spectator sport battles with an ingrained reluctance to follow Andrew anywhere. Although admittedly it’s not like Andrew can do anything to him in full view of the FBI; in fact if a confrontation was going to happen, it’s probably better it happened here rather than somewhere secret and secluded where no witnesses were on hand and Andrew could have tried to take him by force. Then from across the parking lot one of the students mutters something to another, who promptly giggles; and the renewed, miserable swell of self-consciousness is finally enough to convince him.

“Okay,” says Will tersely. “Fine. I’ll give you five minutes. And for God’s sake keep your voice down.”

Andrew gives a thin smile in response then pivots round on his heels and strides off towards the alcove, his long black coat billowing out behind him like a stretch of shadow. Will follows warily behind then deliberately positions himself so that Andrew’s standing against the wall without any means of blocking the exit and preventing Will getting away. “Well go on then,” he snaps when it seems like Andrew isn’t going to say anything. “And make it quick.”

Andrew leans back with his arms folded and fixes Will with a stare that’s slightly unnerving in its intensity, not least because of how the low winter sun makes his eyes appear to gleam. “So…” he says softly. “Where the fuck were you last Friday?”

“Not here,” snaps Will. “Obviously.”

“That’s cute Will. You think you can just stand me up and get away with it? You didn’t even have the courtesy to leave me a note.”
“What the hell are you talking about? I left you a letter at reception.”

Andrew takes a step closer, drawing back his lips until his teeth are exposed in the manner of an animal bearing its fangs. “You ungrateful bit of omega trash,” he hisses. “Do not lie to me.”

His vehemence seems sincere, and for a few seconds Will stares back with a churning sense of confusion at what the fuck is going on. Then the image of Skinner’s leering face briefly skitters into his mind, although even now he can’t quite fathom him being so pointlessly and devastatingly vindictive as to have intercepted the letter himself – not least because the idea of being hated by someone for little more than existing and being an omega is too unsettling to want to fully acknowledge. But right now the fact Andrew didn’t receive the letter is far more important than any grudge of Skinner’s, so Will forces himself to push the image aside and instead straightens his shoulders as he tries to focus on the crisis at hand. “I did,” he repeats, in a voice that’s as low and steely as Andrew’s is shrilly vindictive. “If you don’t believe me then come through now – I’ll speak to the receptionist in front of you.”

Instead of answering Andrew leans back on his heels and runs his eyes over Will in a coolly appraising way like he’s a bit of property that needs a value putting on it. “Jesus,” he finally says. “Look at you: you look like shit. You used to be so classy, now you could pass for a charity case. Most people would say I was crazy going to so much trouble over you. I wouldn’t blame them; I’d probably say the same thing myself. Nevertheless the deal’s off – you had your chance and you blew it. You’re coming back down south with me.”

“To that dump? I’m fucking not.”

“We’ve been through this baby. You don’t have a choice.”

“And when you read the letter I left you you’ll realise that’s bullshit,” snarls Will. “Try and make an ownership case and I’ll have you in court for mistreatment – Elizabeth Lewis will take you apart.”

At the sound of the name Andrew’s face visibly twitches. “You’re lying. How the hell could you afford her?”

“Take – you – apart,” repeats Will, laying careful emphasis on each word.

Andrew flinches again then takes a step backwards just as Will takes a threatening step closer; and for a few heady seconds it feels like victory is on the horizon and Andrew really is about to back down. Only the sensation is destined to be extremely short-lived, and Will soon feels his initial rush of hope begin to wither and die as a dramatic shift suddenly comes over Andrew which causes the previous anger to visibly switch into something far darker and menacing. It begins with a quilting of muscles along the jaw then spreads to his eyes and mouth like flame licking along a piece of paper; and Will blinks a few times, unnerved in spite of himself, as in front of him Andrew’s face begins to twist into a grotesque mask of pure fury.

“What?” asks Will, and through a huge force of effort he manages to prevent the unease showing in his voice. “What the hell are you staring at?”

Andrew’s eyes really are eerie now, darkly gleaming in the same way that Hannibal’s sometimes do. “You little whore,” he says softly. “You absolutely stink of alpha.”

At the sound of the words Will feels his stomach slowly turn over. Then he longs to deny it, only knows that there’s no real point, so ultimately just goes completely rigid instead and refuses to say anything. “You’ve let someone fuck you haven’t you?” adds Andrew, and the quiet ferocity in his voice manages to be far more unsettling then when he was shouting. “Haven’t you? Who was it?”
Will still refuses answer and Andrew bares his teeth in a classic alpha snarl before drawing back a hand and delivering a vicious slap to Will’s face that’s hard enough to send him staggering backwards. “You answer me when I ask you a question!”

Will winces internally but refuses to show any signs of pain; instead drawing a deep breath before immediately straightening up and taking another ominous step forward. “You want an answer?” he says in a tone that’s as equally low and threatening as Andrew’s is. “Here’s one. Do that again and I will kill you.”

Andrew lets out a sigh so low it’s nearly a hiss and when he speaks again there’s a level of anger in his voice that’s truly chilling. “It was that doctor wasn’t it?” he says venomously. “That foreign alpha with the accent.” Will shrugs with obvious contempt and Andrew hisses again followed by another low snarling noise. “I fucking knew it. It was obvious he was after you when I saw him the first time.”

“Save it,” says Will sharply. “I don’t owe you any explanations.”

“You know I was prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt,” adds Andrew, whose face is now white and pinched with pure rage. “I heard you’d disappeared from the Sculptor crime scene with some alpha, but even then I still gave you more credit than you deserve. But my first instinct was right wasn’t it? You’re nothing but a desperate little slut.”

As if on cue Will’s phone begins to ring, shrill and insistent like a third person trying to claim their share of the conversation, and Andrew’s eyes promptly swivel down to Will’s coat pocket. “That’s him isn’t it?” he says softly. Darting forward he roughly snatches hold of Will’s phone then gives a sharp exhale of air when he sees the name on the screen. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters under his breath.

Despite the nightmarish quality of the scene, Will can’t suppress a hysterical surge of satisfaction at the way Andrew’s clearly still too afraid of Hannibal to answer the call and yell at him down the phone. Andrew, obviously aware of this himself, gives another low hiss before throwing the handset on the floor and grinding it to pieces beneath his foot.

“Okay, that’s great,” says Will sarcastically. “Feel better now?”

“How could you do that?” replies Andrew, and for a few seconds his anger seems to be replaced by something close to genuine confusion. “I mean…how could you? You don’t even like sex. You know you don’t – you were always bitching about not wanting to go into heat.” He glances up imploringly and Will realises, with a rush of contempt, that he actually seems to expect Will to reassure him that another alpha couldn’t provide something that Andrew himself wasn’t able to offer. “You just did it for the status,” adds Andrew, and this time it seems like he’s speaking more to himself than to Will. “A thoroughbred alpha like him: getting the attention made you feel special. And I bet he’s been buying you things; expensive things you couldn’t afford yourself. That’s it, isn’t it? You were just whoring yourself for the money. You didn’t enjoy it. You didn’t actually sleep with him.”

Will has a strong urge to tell the truth, but ultimately even the satisfaction of tormenting Andrew isn’t enough to make him want to discuss his time with Hannibal, which still feels too sacred and special to share with anyone else. But something in his face must have still given him away, because Andrew promptly takes another step forward and roughly tries to grab his shoulder. “You let him put his knot in you,” he hisses in a voice that’s low and white-hot with fury. “Didn’t you? You fucking whore. Show me your neck.”

“He didn’t bite me,” snarls back Will, struggling to overcome the flinch of disgust when he realises
that Andrew is sniffing him.

Andrew pauses for a few seconds then runs his eyes over Will’s face and gives a mocking laugh. “No I guess he didn’t,” he says with obvious scorn. “Had more sense didn’t he? He knows I could have him on an ownership claim. A wealthy, successful guy with a reputation to lose – he’s not going to risk getting dragged through the courts for the sake of a trashy little bitch like you.”

Will flinches slightly, distressed at what he suspects might be a shred of truth to this, and Andrew makes a growling noise at exactly the same time as he reaches out to grip Will by the throat. “He did this didn’t he?” says Andrew, viciously digging his thumb into the bruise that Hannibal made a few hours ago. “He’s had his fucking mouth all over you. You let him do this.” Drawing a deep breath he jerks Will’s head upright then looks him dead in the eye. “You know baby,” he says softly, “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this. I came here today wanting a peaceful solution. But in the end it’s exactly like it was before: you’ve brought the whole thing on yourself.”

Very slowly Will runs his eyes over Andrew’s face – taking in the gritted teeth, the rabid eyes, the way the usually oiled hair is falling over his forehead – and struggles against a wave of revulsion that’s almost visceral in its intensity. “No, I don’t think so,” he says with obvious loathing. “This ends right here. You’ve lost – just accept it. Now get out of my life.”

Andrew makes a second growling noise that’s even louder than the first, and Will darts him a final look of contempt before spinning round so he can finally get into his car and escape the whole wretched scene. And he really does expect to be able to leave, because there’s no way Andrew can attempt a forced abduction; no way he can drag a struggling shouting Will into the back of the Mercedes in front of half the FBI. At worst he’s expecting a possessive perspiring hand on his shoulder or a verbal onslaught in front of the trainees which would be humiliating but ultimately harmless. That’s it, that’s all; that’s the worst that can happen – with Hannibal and Elizabeth Lewis on his side there isn’t anything else, because he isn’t unprotected in the way he was before.

So while Will knows what he’s expecting, he’s entirely unaware of what he isn’t. Because he isn’t expecting Andrew to spend a few seconds vowing speechless silent vengeance before letting out a snarl of pure rage; and he isn’t expecting him to discreetly slip a hand into his coat pocket just as Will’s turning away. But most of all he isn’t expecting the loaded syringe that comes out of it and roughly sinks itself into the back of his neck before everything goes quiet and slowly fades to black.

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Wednesday 11.20am

Jack Crawford pushes away a pile of reports about the latest Sculptor victim then tosses them onto an existing pile that’s lurching in a precarious slope at the side of his desk. For some time now Jack’s been waging an internal war with this pile: partly because it seems to be bordering on sentient (and therefore malevolent) in its ability to increase in size at the most inconvenient times, but also because of its stubborn reluctance to ever grow notably smaller. In fact it’s rather like the Hydra or some similar mythical beast: cut off a head and two more grow back in its place. Jack glares at the pile then eases down in his chair and is just contemplating which of today’s many tasks most deserve tackling first when the peaceful silence of his office is shattered by someone pounding at the door.

The noise has an intensity to it which borders on frantic, and Jack stiffens with surprise then opens his mouth to bellow the usual imperious ‘Yes!’ when he’s saved the trouble by the door opening anyway and an alarmed-looking trainee spilling inside. Jack, who’s not used to being ambushed by trainees – that sort of thing being more usually reserved for Will – allows his surprised expression to promptly transform into one of offended irritation instead.
The trainee blinks a few times, rather like he’s surprised himself by his own daring at barging into the mighty Jack Crawford’s inner sanctum in such an impetuous way, then opens his own mouth and delivers a series of wheezing sounds. Initially it seems as if he’s been struck dumb by the spectacle of Jack glowering at him from behind his desk, but it soon becomes clear that’s he actually out of breath – and it’s this general appearance of urgency and panic, combined with the overly dramatic entrance, that begins to stir the first feelings of alarm in Jack.

“Sir!” the trainee finally gasps. “Sir! You’re needed – there’s a disturbance in the parking lot.”

“What do you mean?” snaps Jack, gloomily imagining some sort of scene with the camp of journalists that’s destined to end up splashed across the cable channels.

The trainee summons up his last breath then uses it to pant out: “Someone’s trying to take Mr Graham away.”

“What?” As he leaps to his feet the pile of reports concede the inevitable and slowly collapse in a spectacular shower of pages, but Jack ignores them completely in favour of grabbing his jacket and sprinting out the room as the trainee lumbers behind him in a painful kind of half-run. “What’s happening?” snarls Jack, frantically mashing buttons on the elevator. “Who’s trying to take him?”

“It’s a man sir. He claims he’s Mr Graham’s alpha.”

Jack makes a noise in his throat that’s close to a growl and the trainee shrinks back against the elevator walls in obvious unease at the sound of it. In fact Jack’s initial suspicion is that this is somehow linked to the Sculptor case, and as he charges across the parking lot he has his hand on his gun holster in full expectation of some deranged, destitute fanatic attempting an abduction – possibly even the Sculptor himself. He’s therefore completely unprepared to round the corner and be confronted with the sight of a tall good looking man who’s stood in front of a chauffer-driven Mercedes and wearing an overcoat that probably cost more than Jack’s actual car did. He has his arm round Will’s shoulders, who’s slumped against him with his head drooping to one side and looking alarmingly pale and glassy-eyed.

“What the hell is going on?” bellows Jack.

The man slowly turns round and looks Jack up and down before raising a fastidious eyebrow and drawling: “Look Will, the cavalry’s arrived,” in an incredibly condescending way. To Jack it seems like a well-bred voice, soaked for its entire life in money and privilege and obviously very used to getting its own way. Then he turns away from this odd stranger and stares in alarm at Will instead, who struggles to lift his head in response and seems to be trying to focus on Jack without entirely succeeding.

As Jack rounds on the strange alpha again – because of course, he’s undoubtedly an alpha – the latter gives a thin smile and tightens his grip round Will’s shoulders. “My name’s Andrew Alderton,” he tells Jack. “And I’m here to reclaim my property.”

For a few seconds Jack falters, obviously struggling to process the tsunami of unexpected information, and Andrew’s faint smile begins to broaden at the sight of it “What are you talking about?” Jack finally splutters out. “You can’t just take him away!”

“Oh the contrary,” hisses Andrew, rummaging in his pocket then brandishing a sheaf of papers in Jack’s face, “that’s exactly what I can do. He’s my omega. I own him – his legal guardian is me.”

Jack roughly snatches the contract and begins to skim through it, his expression growing visibly grim as the full gravity of the situation finally begins to dawn on him. “See?” adds Andrew with obvious
triumph. “Now get out of my way.”

“I’m Will’s Named Alpha,” says Jack sharply.

Despite his air of authority Jack’s actually well aware that this makes no legal difference. Only desperation is making him willing to try anything – and there’s no doubt that his general ability to intimidate, not to mention his role in the FBI, would be enough to make many alphas back down. But Andrew is clearly made of sterner stuff, and merely gives Jack a mocking smile in response before drawling: “You know as well as I do that means fuck all. Named alpha is just that – in name only.”

“You can’t just take him without my permission,” snarls Jack, still unable to admit to himself that this isn’t entirely true.

“Bullshit,” replies Andrew in a bored voice. “I’m 100% within my rights to take him – you interfere and I’ll have you arrested. Anyway it’s not like Will’s putting up any objections. Are you sweetheart? You want to come.”

Will stares at Jack with an expression that’s almost chilling in how haunted and despairing it looks, but once fails to make any response. Andrew again smiles then possessively tightens his grip, and as Will makes a small sighing sound Jack charges forward and grabs hold of Andrew’s arm. “Let go,” he says fiercely “Can’t you see you’re hurting him?”

“The hell I am. He’s having one of his freak-outs – he needs gentling.”

“Rubbish. He never needs that.”

“Maybe not from you,” replies Andrew with clear contempt. “But he didn’t have his alpha with him before did he?” Jack snarls again and Andrew gives a faint smirk then adds “He needs a proper knot in him,” carefully emphasising each word because he knows it’ll humiliate Will.

“Will, why won’t you say anything?” asks Jack, ignoring Andrew and trying to take hold of Will’s hand. “Talk to me. Are you scared or something?” He pauses fractionally, obviously finding the image of Will struck dumb with fear to be nearly impossible to imagine. “Has he been mistreating you?”

“Have I been mistreating him?” screams Andrew, gesturing at the bruise on his jaw from the earlier fight in Will’s office. “Christ, look at my face. He’s the one who’s been going round attacking alphas. If I wanted to I could have charged him with it and we all know what would happen to him then. An omega that goes round attacking alphas…”

“Jesus Will,” says Jack under his breath.

“Only I’m not going to charge him,” adds Andrew, roughly twisting Will to the side so he’s out of reach of Jack’s hand. “Because the person who’s really at fault is you. What the hell were you thinking letting him work here unsupervised? The fact you’re all alphas makes it worse. I mean he’s fragile; he’s always been fragile.”

“He is not fragile.”

“Course he is,” says Andrew triumphantly. “Even for an omega he can’t take proper care of himself. He’s spent the entire last year on the verge of a nervous breakdown because he’s been worked too hard. Why do you think he attacked me in the first place? And you…” Andrew pauses then jabs an accusing finger in Jack’s direction. “…You leave him in the middle of this dump with alphas sharkin in on him from all sides.”
“That’s totally irrelevant!” yells Jack, who by now is practically bristling with rage. “You can’t just show up out of nowhere and walk off with him.”

“Don’t you realise how stupid you sound?” snarls back Andrew. “Don’t you know anything? Don’t you know how dangerous it is to separate bonded pairs? I mean for God’s sake, look at the state of him! I should have you in front of a tribunal for negligence for hiring him in the first place. In fact maybe I will. When I get him home I’m taking him to a doctor and if I find anything the matter with him – and I mean anything – then I’m going to make you sorrier than you’ve ever been in your life.” Softening his voice he now shifts his free hand so he can begin running his fingers through Will’s hair. “You’re just glad to be back with your alpha again, aren’t you darling? It’s why you’ve gone so quiet. You can’t cope with any of this; you just want to be home again so I can look after you.”

Turning back he gives Jack a triumphant glance. “You know how feisty he is – don’t you think he’d be putting up a fight if he didn’t want to go? He’s completely overwhelmed and the longer you spend messing me about the worse you’re making it for him. Don’t you even recognise an omega stress syndrome when you see it? I need him out of here now.”

“Will?” says Jack, and he almost sounds like he’s pleading. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

But Will simply stares back, just as mute and helpless as before and so disorientated it feels as if he’s drowning in a fog. The fog is the colour of fire and smells like panic and fear, and it’s thick with a chaotic viscous heaviness that fills his head with cement before hardening into concrete further down his body in his legs and hands. Although even the fog can’t distract from how vital it is to tell Jack that Andrew’s lying and they aren’t bonded; only when he opens his mouth nothing comes out except a useless gasping sound.

“Shh, it’s okay baby,” says Andrew in the same tender voice. “I’m here now.” Pressing his lips against Will’s forehead he darts another triumphant look at Jack. “See? He needs his alpha. Now get out my goddamn way.”

From the expression on Jack’s face it’s obvious he’s realised that there’s nothing he can do. Even so, he’s still reluctant to let Will go without a fight. “We’re in the middle of a major criminal investigation,” he adds as a last resort. “We need him here.”

“I don’t give a shit what you’re in the middle of – that’s your problem, not mine. And it’s not Will’s problem either. Just leave him alone.”

“At the very least he needs to be contactable,” snarls Jack. “I want an address.”

“Fine,” says Andrew in a long-suffering way as if Jack is being hugely unreasonable. “Speak to my chauffeur. He’ll give you the name of the hotel – not that we’ll be there for long. Now for God’s sake stop wasting any more of my time. I want to get Will someplace quiet.”

The fog is closing in again now although Will still manages to force his head above the surface long enough to make another low gasping noise. Jack looks at him with obvious concern and Will stares silently back, completely crushed by the fact he has two alphas snarling at each other over him when the one who really matters – and who could send the other two scattering – is nowhere to be seen. As if reading his thoughts Andrew tugs him even closer then adds in an undertone so Jack can’t hear: “Look at that you little slut; seems like that doctor friend of yours isn’t around to help you out this time.”

“Call me,” urges Jack, trying to take hold of Will’s hand again. “Anytime, day or night. If you need anything.”

The urgency and sincerity of the offer is obvious and Will sways slightly with the same silent
anguish as he remembers how the shattered cell phone makes it impossible that he’ll be able to call anyone – not Jack, not the police, and not the person who matters the most. Hazily he now remembers the night when he laid on the sofa in Hannibal’s arms and described being drugged and abducted then forced to go into heat by himself. Only then it was the chauffeur who did it, and the fact Andrew’s now desperate enough to carry out his own dirty work is a terrible sign of how serious things have finally become. It scarcely seems feasible it could be happening again, even though it obviously is: and for a few seconds the only thing that stops Will giving into full despair is the idea of lying in Hannibal’s arms again at some point in the future and relating this second attempt when it’s just a story to be shared and no longer an actual event in his life. Yet there’s no denying that taking him so openly – in full view of his colleagues under a façade of righteousness, and even attributing Will’s subdued state to hormonal overwhelm at being reunited with his alpha – has a level of twisted cunning to it that makes Will want to scream. Only he can’t scream. He can’t speak; can barely even think. And it means he’s helpless to do anything to stop Andrew’s gaunt fingers digging into his arm and steering him towards the door of the Mercedes which gapes at Will like a large salivating mouth that’s waiting to devour him whole.

Once inside he slumps his aching head against the window and stares helplessly at the shocked faces of Jack and the trainees when there’s a sudden blur of movement straight ahead and Hannibal’s Bentley comes sweeping down the drive. Will gives a stifled gasp and Andrew peers out the window himself then screams out a panicked “Faster!” at the chauffeur. The Mercedes’ engine gives an angry roar and accelerates away, and for a few fleeting seconds Hannibal’s eyes meet Will’s as the two cars pass. It’s far too quick to do anything beyond gaze at each other; there isn’t even time for Will to press his fingers against the glass, even if he were physically capable of doing so. There’s only the shared devastation as their eyes meet – and in those few seconds it seems to Will like that stolen look might just be the single most painful moment of his life.

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Wednesday 11.30am

As the miles fly past Will continues to stare out the window with a growing sense of misery that’s so crushing and complete he eventually starts to feel frightened by it. In fact he knows that succumbing to despair is a dangerous indulgence he can’t afford, but for a few raw moments it’s impossible to make space for anything else: because he can cope with the humiliation of everyone witnessing the scene, and he can even cope with the problems his absence is going to cause the Sculptor investigation, but it’s the thought of being parted from Hannibal that he can’t quite recover from – not least because Dr Hall’s warning about the chaos of post-heat hormones is replaying in his head and he keeps tormenting himself with the idea of Hannibal hearing from Jack about his lack of resistance and think that he chose to go with Andrew willingly. Then he feels a sudden wetness round his eyelashes and it’s at that point he finally realises how close he is to crying.

“Congratulations sir,” the chauffeur is now saying to Andrew. “That went remarkably well.”

“It did, didn’t it?” replies Andrew is a satisfied tone. “I knew it would. Even so, I want to get abroad as quickly as possible – those FBI bastards aren’t just going to let him go without a fight.”

“But surely they have no legal claim? They can’t force you to give him back.”

“No, but they could make things inconvenient for me. It’s the FBI for God’s sake, there’re all kinds of obstacles they could throw out. The sooner we’re out the States the better.”

The chauffeur makes a humming noise of agreement. “Do you want me to take you straight to the airport?”
“No,” says Andrew regretfully. “They’d never let him on a plane like this.” Reaching over he gives Will a rough tug so he loses his balance and slumps sideways until his head’s on Andrew’s knee. “This one’s not going to be good for anything for another day or two, are you baby?”

Will’s still too sedated to make any objection to this, yet despite his strong sense of disgust it seems like it might just be the best thing that could have happened because of the striking way it manages to dilute the despair and replace it with something far more useful: a searing, white-hot sense of outrage. “How about that Will?” adds Andrew, picking up one of Will’s hands then waggling it up and down it as if he’s a puppet. “You’re completely out of it. Looks like I gave you too strong a dose. It’s entirely your own fault; if you’d just come nicely like I asked we could have avoided all this.”

“Does he need medical attention?” asks the chauffeur, glancing at Will through his rear view mirror. “It should be starting to wear off by now.”

“He’ll be okay,” says Andrew, casually tugging up one of Will’s eyelids so he can check his pupils. “It’s because he’s stuffed full of heat suppressants. They fuck about with the chemicals in the sedative; if he hadn’t been on them he’d have needed double the dose. To be honest I probably should have put a bit less in the syringe but I needed to be sure he couldn’t fight back.”

Will, triumphant in the secret knowledge that he’s not full of heat suppressants, seizes on this as the first rays of hope that the effects are going to wear off soon. In fact he’s already feeling marginally stronger and clear-headed than half an hour ago; although the threat of being put on a plane means it’s vital Andrew doesn’t realise this, so in an effort to keep the pretence going he gives a small moan then writhes against the seat as if he’s in pain.

“If you throw up in this car baby,” says Andrew conversationally. “You’re going to regret it. Don’t think I won’t make you clean it up.”

“To then hotel then sir?” asks the chauffeur.

“Yeah. I’ll have to get him into bed and get some fluids into him. Jesus Will, nothing’s ever simple with you is it? Drama, drama.”

“Would you like me to book the flights for you as well sir? When would you be expecting to leave?”

“Friday; he’ll definitely be back to normal by then. Did you get the handcuffs like I asked?”

“Yes sir, they’re in your suite.”

“Good,” says Andrew firmly. “I don’t care if he’s unconscious, I still don’t trust him.” Leaning down he takes hold of Will’s shoulder and gives it a rough shake. “We’re going abroad for a while my little love: nice and quiet where none of your FBI pals can bother us. Then once we’re there you’re damn well going to behave yourself and give me what I paid for when I laid out all that money for you in the first place. And don’t even think about sulking over it. From now on your only job is to make yourself look nice for me and be as charming as a rude little bastard like you is capable of.”

“I’m sure he’ll learn sir,” says the chauffeur with obvious amusement. “I seem to remember he was quite intelligent for an omega.”

“He’ll learn if he knows what’s good for him,” replies Andrew firmly. Reaching down again he gives Will’s shoulder another shake that’s even rougher than the first one. “I gave you too much freedom before didn’t I? You can bet I won’t be making that mistake again.”

Despite Will’s weakened state the urge to grab hold of Andrew’s arm and twist is almost overpowering. Only he knows that starting a fight while he’s still so vulnerable is pretty much the
worst thing he can do; far better to lull Andrew into a false sense of security then spring an attack when he’s least expecting it and Will’s got his strength back. In this respect the best thing would be to try some omega appeasement behaviours, but the idea of showing even a hint of affection is so repulsive that Will can’t bring himself to even consider it. Distress might work almost as well as an alternative – and would admittedly require far less acting ability – because alphas are supposed to be hardwired to respond to unhappy omegas. Although surely not all alphas…impossible, for example, to imagine Hannibal falling for something so obvious. Nevertheless until the effects of the sedative wear off Will is effectively helpless; although at least if Andrew thinks Will’s given up, he’s more likely to let his guard down.

“In fact you can forget about any kind of freedom,” continues Andrew, giving Will’s hair a painful twist. “Maybe I’ll take you to some country where they care even less about omega rights than they do here; I could put you in a collar and keep you in the basement and no one would give a shit. In fact maybe I will. It’s the least you deserve after what you did. So understand this you little whore: once those drugs have worn off you’re going to come clean and give a full explanation of exactly what that bastard’s been doing with my property. Then after that you’re going to work very, very hard to make it up to me. Are you getting it now or do I have to make it even clearer? Because I own you Will. Your old man handed you over to me when he signed that contract and from now on you don’t so much as cut your fucking hair without asking me first.”

“Do you have any destinations in mind sir?” asks the chauffeur calmly.

“Somewhere hot,” replies Andrew, beginning to scroll on his phone with one hand while gripping onto Will with the other. “I need a bit of sun after all this goddamn snow. Although admittedly that’s not much good for Will – his skin’s so fair he burns right up.”

“I don’t suppose he’ll be going outside all that much,” replies the chauffeur with a discreet little cough.

Andrew laughs then twines his fingers into Will’s hair again so he can give it another sharp tug. “No you’re right about that. The only thing he’ll be doing when he’s out there is staring at my bedroom ceiling.”

“I assume he’ll be travelling on your passport sir? Or do I need to arrange some extra documents?”

“No he’ll go as my omega,” says Andrew. “And speaking of which, that’s just reminded me of something...” Putting his phone down he gives Will a sharp tap on the side of the face. “Are you listening baby? I bet you are. So, I guess it’s only polite to warn you that as soon as possible I’m taking you straight to a clinic to get you tagged. You’ll like that won’t you Will? It means you’ll never get lost again; I can track wherever you by logging into my laptop, just like you were a dog with a microchip.” Will, unable to hide his horror, screws his eyes tightly closed and Andrew gives a mocking smile before taking hold of his face by the chin. “And speaking of dogs,” he adds softly, “I bet the omega clinic would love to get their hands on yours. Clinics always need animals to experiment on don’t they? So get this through your dumb little head – you give me even the tiniest bit of trouble before we leave and I’m selling your mutts to a vivisectionist.”

Will’s breath gives a sharp hitch and Andrew laughs out loud then taps his face again. “I thought that would get your attention,” he says happily. “You know I’m a man of my word, so you better make sure you behave yourself hadn’t you? For their sake as much as your own.”

“We’re nearly at the hotel now sir,” says the driver in the same calm voice. “I’ll pull up by the entrance shall I?”

“Perfect,” replies Andrew, abruptly letting go of Will’s face so his head drops down. “You’re going
to have to help me get him in. He’s got worse since we left, I’ve not sure he’s going to be able to walk. No wait, one minute…” Rifling in his briefcase he retrieves a small silver flask and proceeds to sprinkle the contents onto Will’s clothes until they reek of whiskey. “There,” says Andrew with obvious satisfaction. “If anyone asks we tell them he’s drunk.”

“Very ingenious sir,” replies the chauffeur who, like Andrew, is starting to laugh. “And very believable too. Drunk omegas are the absolute worst – I’ve never met one that could hold its alcohol.”

“I want you to keep an eye on him while I book the clinic appointment,” adds Andrew, slinging his arm round Will’s shoulder to keep him upright. “I’ll be back in about 20 minutes. Don’t leave him on his own.”

“I’d be happy to go for you sir.”

“No, it has to be me in person – there are forms to sign.”

The chauffeur nods then wraps his own arm round Will’s waist. “I’ll put him in your bed for you sir. Is there anything else?”

“The handcuffs, obviously. And put him in the recovery position in case he throws up.”

“Of course,” says the chauffeur, cupping Will’s hipbone and holding on just a little too tight. “Do you want me to have him undressed for when you’re back?”

“Absolutely not,” snaps Andrew. “Don’t you dare touch him. And no, I’m not into necrophilia. Look at the state he’s in – it’d be like fucking a corpse. He’s not going to be any use to me for at least a few more days. And don’t think I haven’t noticed you staring at him. I meant what I said: lay a hand on him and I’ll break it off.”

“Yes, I admit I’d forgotten how good looking he is,” replies the chauffeur, quickly removing his palm from Will’s waist and holding onto his coat instead. “It’ll be nice for you having him back sir. An alpha needs an omega.”

“I don’t know if nice is the right word,” says Andrew irritably. “I’ll have to see what he’s like when the drugs have worn off. Although at the very least he’s out of options now – and he knows it. He might finally realise he’s better off playing ball.”

The hotel Andrew’s chosen is in the very centre of the city, and as Will’s being dragged from the car he can’t help being struck by how surreal the surroundings seem in terms of how completely and utterly normal they are. Because surely a scene as terrible as this one should take place in an environment to match? A landscape for nightmares with rubble and bones and blasted wasteland; not people and cars and life carrying on as normal. The only suitably macabre note comes from across the street where the city museum is displaying a banner emblazoned with the skeletons of various prehistoric creatures. As the eyeless sockets of the skulls stare out mournfully Will gazes blindly back, fantasizing about them as a sort of silent witness to what’s taking place, when there’s a sudden sharp squeal of brakes and flurry of horns as a taxi cuts straight in front of them, quickly followed by Andrew swearing at the driver and tugging Will out the way just as the chauffeur tightens the grip on his other arm. Will himself moves hazily, leaden and sedated as a sleepwalker, although in the corner of his eye is still vaguely aware of a dark Bentley gliding past that makes him draw in his breath because its darkness and sleekness remind him so sharply of Hannibal’s. Wait for me, he thinks with a raw surge of urgency. I’m coming back to you – I’ll find a way.

At the image of Hannibal Will can feel his resolve strengthen again as in his mind he becomes aware
of a pair of dark eyes that stare into his own as a smoky voice softly murmurs: “The Sculptor thinks he’s the superior predator – because he doesn’t yet know the truth about you.” Then Andrew is giving him another rough tug towards the sidewalk and the Bentley is gone, along with the bones and the people and the cars, and all Will can see anymore is the large mirrored panel of the hotel door. It’s a lot of effort to lift his head but he still manages to do it anyway: slowly absorbing the images in the stretching surface of glass where he sees Andrew on one side, the chauffeur on the other, and in between them something palely limp and defeated looking…with his own Dark Reflection standing just behind.

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Wednesday 10.00pm

Long after the students have left Jack remains in his office with nothing for company except a new pile of reports and several cooling cups of coffee: angry and preoccupied and staring moodily into space as he replays the events of this morning in his head for what feels like the fiftieth time. Whenever he goes through it he always tweaks it in some way like a screenwriter with a particularly unsatisfying script – a new bit of dialogue here, an extra piece of action there – to see if the outcome could somehow be altered, but each version ultimately ends the same way with Will being driven off wearing that silently despairing look on his face. Jack frowns again at the memory then fretfully scrubs his hand across his face. Realistically he knows there’s nothing he could have done without breaking the law, yet despite Will not making any verbal objections to being taken the whole thing has left him with a bad feeling. In this respect the ownership contract was irrefutable, yet it seems extraordinary that Will could have been bonded all this time without ever saying anything. Jack frowns again then sighs out loud, having finally made an amendment to his mental script that might just have had some value if he’d thought of it at the time: to have demanded to check Will’s neck for evidence of a bite mark.

From outside the office comes the sudden sound of footsteps, which start off faint but draw closer and closer in a way that suggests he’s destined to be disturbed for the second time that day. Jack lifts his head in response then sighs irritably. In fact history seems determined to repeat itself almost point for point, because once again there’s the eventual sound of running, a frantic pounding, and then the door crashing open before Jack’s had a chance to invite the visitor in. Although this second interruption has an important difference, as it’s not a student that’s doing the knocking but one of his own agents: a tall, wiry man with a shock of curly hair whose reddish colouring and inquisitive face always remind Jack of a fox.

“Sir!” gasps the man who, just like the student before him, is clearly out of breath. “You’re needed immediately. We’ve got a situation.”

Jack longs to snap that Will being taken away is more than enough of a situation, but knows this would be overly dramatic – and ultimately pointless – so just raises a weary eyebrow instead. “Well go on,” he says crossly when more information isn’t immediately forthcoming. “Has everyone forgotten the protocol today?” Then he takes a look at the expression on the man’s face and any further complaints promptly dry up in his mouth as he feels a sudden deep surge of foreboding.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” replies the agent in a tone that faintly bordering on awe. “There’s been a murder sir: a terrible murder. Dr Katz said we weren’t to tell you until we were sure, but now…now we’re sure.”

“Sure of what?”

The man swallows audibly then darts his tongue over his lips. “The perpetrator.”
“The Sculptor?”

“No sir. Not the Sculptor.”

“Then who?” snaps Jack impatiently. “It can’t be that bad.”

“It’s bad,” says the man. “It hardly seems possible and we were all hoping we were wrong but the forensics were indisputable. There’s no doubt about it.” Taking a deep breath he finally looks Jack straight in the eye. “Sir… the Chesapeake Ripper’s come back.”
Chapter Notes

Courtesy of the extremely talented Patties92 the fic now has the most incredible new cover art, which you can check out [here](#) if you’d like to :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Wednesday 11:00pm**

The scene in the lab is one of suspended animation: an eerie aura of shock and unease in which everyone’s trying a bit too hard to appear calm in a way that only manages to make them seem more panicked. In fact the sense of dread is so palpable that the air itself is crackling under the force of it and causes people’s limbs to move in a jerky mechanical way like puppets with broken strings and their voices to come out in suspenseful whispers as if they’re afraid the wrong person might overhear them. *As if they think the Ripper’s listening*, thinks Jack grimly; because of course this is the real reason for the jerky limbs and the frozen faces. It’s been so long since a Ripper murder that he’s forgotten their capacity to instil terror and revulsion amongst even the most hardened investigators, but right now the evidence for both these things is so clear it may as well be labelled and bagged up along with the forensic samples. *Exhibit A: The power of fear.*

Looking at it now Jack thinks the lab resembles an ER after a major incident, but when he wakes up in the middle of the night and remembers it later he’ll decide it was more like a War Room from an old black and white movie of the fifties: fraught panic concealed under a carefully cultivated pretence of control that needs only the smallest tug to make the frayed edges unravel. This should probably mean that’s Jack entitled to unravel under the strain of it too; only he knows that his team depends on him not to succumb to the same force of feeling as the rest of them, so he pushes his own unease aside and strides up to Beverly instead, uncomfortably aware the entire time of how loud his footsteps sound in the otherwise quiet room. In fact the quietness is adding to the general air of menace because even the ravages of a Sculptor murder would still see the lab more animated than this. The silence, in contrast, feels stilted and unnatural and fills Jack the same sense of sombre foreboding that you’d expect to have at a funeral.

Beverly immediately glances up at the sound of his too-loud footsteps and Jack catches her eye and asks in a terse, emotionless voice: “You sure it’s him?”

Beverly looks just as strained as everyone else and when she speaks the thread of weary resignation twining through her voice is unmistakable. “As sure as we can be.”

From across the lab promptly Zeller drops a beaker that shatters to the floor with a defeated splintering sound; and while it isn’t especially loud, it’s still enough to cause everyone’s head to swivel round in alarm as if the sad little shatter is a herald of further catastrophe. Jack’s head swivels too until he catches himself and manages to readjust his expression to a more neutral one before determinedly turning back to Beverly again. “How sure is that?”

Beverly’s hair has been swiped off her face with a clip and she reaches up now to rub her temples from where the tug of it is clearly hurting her. “There’s only minimal trace evidence,” she says, “but I’m not holding my breath that we won’t be able to eliminate it. In a way that’s a sign in itself; it’s why I’ve always hated Ripper scenes.” She pauses then gives a small wince, obviously aware that
there are far more compelling reasons to hate them. “He never leaves anything behind.”

Jack absorbs all this then stares into the distance for a few seconds, silently weighing up the possibilities as he remembers Will’s theory about the Sculptor murders. “Any chance it’s a copycat at work?”

Beverly goes silent herself as her expression takes on the same air of thoughtfulness as Jack’s. “You mean someone imitating the Ripper?” she finally says. “I guess it’s possible. But he’d be a damn good one if he is. Too good for me to be able to spot.”

“Hmm.”

“You’d need Will to tell you something like that.”

Jack gives a curt nod before realising that he’s started to adopt the same fraught façade of calm as everyone else and has to make a conscious effort to relax by softening his tone and coaxing his shoulders out of their anxious hunch. “I want the full report on my desk as soon as you can,” he says. “And get someone to call up the PR team. The press are going to…” Beverly catches his eye again and Jack sighs out loud, temporarily abandoning any attempt at stoicism. “The press are going to go berserk.”

“I can’t say I blame them,” replies Beverly tersely. “The Sculptor and the Ripper? It’s the ultimate worst case scenario.”

Jack’s face begins twitching like water coming up to the boil. In fact he longs to snap at Beverly that this insight is a singularly unhelpful one, but manages to bite it back and swing round on his heels instead so he can vent his frustration on one of the interns who’s hovering around like an anxious fly in an attempt to get his attention. By now the expression on his face is one of simmering irritation and the intern takes one look at it and visibly starts to wilt. “I’ve some messages for you sir,” he says faintly as Jack’s brows begin to descend across his forehead like two ferocious furry caterpillars. “The Tattle Crime is asking if you’d care to make a statement.”

Jack sucks in his breath with an angry exhale and Beverly gives the smallest hint of an eye-roll. “Sir?” prompts the intern when no answer seems likely to materialise.

“Oh I don’t know son, what do you think?” says Jack with obvious sarcasm. “What sort of statement would be most suitable? How about the way the best profiler we’ve ever had got himself legally kidnapped the exact same night the Chesapeake Ripper decided to come back?”

The intern swallows audibly then casts a helpless look at Beverly as if hoping she’ll intervene. “You said you had more than one message?” says Beverly kindly.

“Yes ma’am…I mean sir. I mean Dr Lecter is here to speak with you sir. He’s in your office.”

Jack gives a long snort like an angry bull then scowls rather fearsomely at the intern until he looks as if he’s on the verge of bursting into tears. “You may as well go Jack,” says Beverly briskly, beginning to shuffle papers together on her desk. “There’s not much else to do here at the moment. I’ll send the report to your office as soon as it’s finished.”

Jack grunts in response then spends a few seconds debating whether he should stay before concluding that at least Hannibal might provide a much-needed dose of authentic calmness as opposed to the unnatural, panicked kind that’s currently saturating the lab. The intern, assuming he’s due for another reprimand, swallows audibly then begins sidling towards Beverly like a child hiding behind its mother; and the sight of it promptly makes Jack feel guilty for the show of temper and
decide that he probably ought to leave until he’s had a chance to process this disastrous development
and behave a bit more calmly. So he takes a deep breath to get his irritation under control then gives
the intern a friendly nod followed by a clap on the shoulder for Beverly in appreciation of her hard
work before heading back to his office again, his footsteps once again sounding far too loud as they
echo down the deserted corridors. Someone’s left the window open and in the corner of his eye he
can see the crazed flickering of moths as they fling themselves against the light fittings, accompanied
by the occasional weary thud as their small bodies crash into the metal. They seem like an emblem
for frustrated helplessness and Jack sighs out loud while trying not to feel unsettled at the way the
shadows loop and swirl along the floor: heaving and pulsating in places from the flickering light,
almost as if there might be figures hiding in them.

Although the door to his office is open there’s no sign of Hannibal, and Jack is just starting to
wonder whether he got tired of waiting and left before realising, with a jolt of surprise, that he’s
actually been sat silently in a chair the whole time. In fact he’s so incredibly fixed and motionless that
it strikes Jack as slightly eerie: like living taxidermy, or some kind of sinister museum specimen that
could come to life without warning.

“Hello Jack,” says Hannibal without turning round.

Jack is immediately aware of his unease promptly amplifying without fully understanding why, but
he does his best to ignore it and pulls out his own chair instead. “Hell of a night,” he says matter-of-
factly.

He hasn’t turned on the overhead light, which means the small desk lamp is the only source of
illumination and makes the entire room a murky blend of shadows and half-formed silhouette.
Hannibal’s face is mostly obscured in darkness and when he finally leans forward his eyes gleam in
the reflection of the lamp in the manner of a Halloween lantern, almost as if there were candles in his
skull. “That’s an interesting choice of epithet,” he says softly.

“What?”

There’s a brief pause as Hannibal slowly runs his glittering eyes across Jack’s face. “Hell.”

Jack gives an uncomfortable shuffle in his chair and Hannibal allows the silence to stretch out before
leaning a little further forward. “Do you have anyone particular in mind?” he asks in the same soft
tone. “Who are the recipients of this particularly hellish night? The victim, the investigators – perhaps
even the killer himself? Not that there’s much difference in it. We are, as they say, each our own
devil – and we make this world our hell.”

Jack shifts again then clears his throat. “Are you all right?” he asks hesitantly. “You seem…”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Jack clears his throat for a second time. “You seem a little…”

“A little what, Jack?” asks Hannibal with a scrupulous politeness that somehow manages to be far
more unnerving than actual aggression would. “What do I seem like?”

Jack, who by now has reluctantly admitted to himself exactly what this is about, sighs and gives a
final uncomfortable shift before forcing himself to look at Hannibal directly. “Angry.”

“Angry,” repeats Hannibal, slowly drawing out each syllable. “Yes. I suppose you might say that.”

“Because of what happened with Will?”

Hannibal leans even further forward until his face is fully in the light and only a few inches away
from Jack’s. “That’s right,” he says softly. “I’m extremely angry over what happened with Will.”
Jack can’t help reflecting, rather hazily, that Hannibal almost never blinks and how intimidating this manages to be because it’s so unnatural. It’s rather like a snake or some other reptile: rigidly cold-blooded and unwavering and permanently poised to pounce. “I know,” he says heavily. “I’m not exactly overjoyed about it myself.”

“No?” asks Hannibal in the same softly hypnotic tone. “And yet you let it happen.”

“I did not,” protests Jack. “I tried everything I could. But the guy had an ownership contract – what was I supposed to do? You know as well as I do that those things are irrefutable; he could have had me arrested if I’d tried to intervene. Besides,” he adds, rather stubbornly, “Will had all the symptoms of a fugue state. It happens a lot when they get separated from their alphas; it might have been dangerous to his health to stop him going.”

Hannibal makes a faint noise of contempt then reaches out to take hold of the paper knife on Jack’s desk – an antique one that’s long and sharp and shaped like a dagger – and begins to idly turn it over in his hand. “And did you have any proof of that?” he says without looking up. “Or were you just going by what the alpha told you?”

“I could tell it just from the state of him,” snaps Jack, whose guilt is starting to make him feel defensive. “He was completely mute. And so pale – it was obvious he was having some kind of episode.”

Hannibal remains staring at the blade, seemingly rather fascinated at the way it glints and shimmers in the low light of the room. “And did it never occur to you?” he asks softly. “That he might have been sedated?”

Jack, to whom this hadn’t occurred, promptly bristles even more. “He didn’t look sedated so no: I didn’t think that. I mean he was coordinated, he could walk and he was clearly following what was being said – how many omegas could do that if they’d been drugged?”


“He didn’t look like he’d been drugged,” repeats Jack with a hint of stubbornness. “The main sign something was wrong was how quiet he was and that’s a classic sign of omega stress syndrome.” Briefly envisaging the scene he sighs out loud again as the stubbornness dissolves into frustration. “But even if he was drugged it doesn’t change the fact his alpha had an ownership contract. Of course I wasn’t happy with him just taking Will but what could I have done? What would you have done?”

Hannibal’s head snaps upright so quickly that Jack immediately wishes he’d stayed staring at the knife, simply because being fixed with those smouldering eyes is so unsettling. “I can tell you what I wouldn’t have done,” replies Hannibal in a tone that’s actively menacing despite how soft and controlled it is. “Which is just stand by and allow Will to be abducted.”

“He wasn’t abducted,” says Jack fretfully. “That’s the whole problem: his alpha was completely within his rights to take him. I mean they’re bonded for God’s sake.”

Without moving his eyes from Jack’s face Hannibal slams the tip of the blade into its holder with a quick slicing motion that makes Jack jump. “They are not bonded,” he says.

This time his voice is shot through with such an obvious thread of menace that Jack swallows audibly and darts his tongue over his lips. “Will told you that?” he finally says, cursing himself all over again for not having the presence of mind to check Will’s neck. Hannibal continues staring without making any reply and Jack adds, even more defensively than before: “Will never tells me
anything. I had no way of knowing it wasn’t true.”

Without moving his eyes from Jack’s face Hannibal reaches out then takes hold of the knife again: in his long fingers the blade moves with an odd sort of grace, weaving and flashing so deftly it almost looks as if it’s dancing. “Isn’t the purpose of your job to question everything?” he says softly. “Surely you owed Will at least that much. He’s worked himself to the point of collapse on behalf of you and this entire institution, and in return you allowed him be taken away by force right in front of you – with no better excuse for your inaction than because he’s an omega.”

As he finishes speaking he lets the knife go completely still then dips his head to gaze at it for a few seconds before snapping upright again and fixing Jack with another look that’s so intense Jack can feel his mouth go dry. Hannibal’s face finally adjusts itself into a very faint smile and Jack opens his mouth then closes it again before jumping violently as the telephone starts to ring and breaks the silence apart with a noisy screaming sound.

“Answer the phone Jack,” says Hannibal in the same tone of tender menace; and Jack blinks a few times then forcibly pulls himself together and fumbles for the receiver. Hannibal continues staring at him the entire time and Jack barks out a series of terse replies to the person on the other end while staring numbly back and secretly wondering how it’s possible to be so unnerving without ever once raising your voice or even moving from your chair.

“That was the CSI team,” he says when he hangs up. “Just what we need; there’s been another one.” Hannibal makes no response and Jack gives another uncomfortable shuffle. “The victim was a male alpha; a chauffeur by the sound of it. He was wearing a uniform and had a set of Mercedes car keys in his pocket.” Hannibal continues staring in silence and Jack winces slightly, aware of how discomfort and awkwardness are making him babble but finding it almost impossible to stop. “He was out on a cigarette break and someone snapped his neck. Some signs of mutilation as well; they’ll know for sure back at the lab, although the injuries don’t sound severe or extensive enough for the Ripper. Or the Sculptor either, for that matter.”

“Then surely not a matter for the FBI?” asks Hannibal, who now sounds faintly amused.

“Not usually no, but it was close to where they found the Ripper victim. We need to check if they were linked in any way. Besides, any post-mortem mutilation is a red flag.”

“What do you think Jack?” purrs Hannibal. “Do you think they were linked?”

“I don’t know,” stammers Jack. “It’s too early to say.”

“I suppose it is,” replies Hannibal serenely. He runs his eyes over Jack’s face again then abruptly gets to his feet – and where the sight of him towering above the desk while swathed in shadow is sufficiently sinister to make Jack shrink back against his chair again. In fact most of his height is in his legs decides Jack, rather hysterically, because when he’s sat down he doesn’t look especially tall whereas when he’s standing he has a striking ability to intimidate using nothing but posture alone. “You really need Will to help, don’t you?” adds Hannibal with an obvious twist of disdain.

“Alright; I get it,” snaps Jack, injecting a deliberate note of firmness into his voice to disguise how unsettled he feels. “You’ve made your point.”

“I agree,” says Hannibal, who still sounds eerily calm. “The point has been made…at least for now.” He pauses then gives Jack a small quirk of the mouth, as if taking pity on him. “I apologise if my manner seems a little brusque by the way. Only I’ve found myself unsettled by this recent turn of events.”
“I understand,” says Jack, promptly overcome with a fresh wave of guilt for not doing more. “We all feel that way.”

“And I want you to let me know immediately if you hear anything from Will.”

“Of course I’ll be touch. And you do the same.” Hannibal runs his eyes over Jack’s face, who quickly finds himself adding: “Please.”

Hannibal dips his head in acknowledgement then takes a step backwards so the shadows swallow him up again. “I expect it to be sooner rather than later,” he adds, and in the darkness of the room it’s not immediately clear where his voice is coming from. “Will is extraordinarily resilient. We may be missing him at the moment but I don’t anticipate he’ll stay lost for very long.”

“I hope you’re right,” says Jack with obvious feeling.

“And then he can examine your case for you,” replies Hannibal. “The chauffeur on a smoking break and the Ripper victim; an unlikely couple, admittedly, but I suppose if there is a link he’d be the one to find it.”

Jack sighs then drags a tired hand over his face. “You really think he’ll be back soon?”

“He’d better be,” says Hannibal lightly. “For all our sakes.”

The more paranoid part of Jack’s brain can’t help giving a small twinge at the hint of threat in these words, although the more rational part dismisses it almost as quickly as a sign of Hannibal’s general anger rather than a literal warning. “I did what I could,” he says wearily. “No one wants him back more than I do.”

At the second part of this sentence a look of sadness briefly flickers across Hannibal’s face, although once again he makes no reply. “Well, I better get back to work,” adds Jack, gloomily tugging the new pile of reports towards him. “The case isn’t going to solve itself.”

“You work too hard Jack,” says Hannibal’s voice from somewhere in the depth of the shadows. “You should take a break.”

“You mean like that guy?” asks Jack, attempting levity in a final effort to ease the tension. “Breaks seem to be a bit of a hazard round here. For that chauffeur a smoking break equalled a broken neck.”

Hannibal makes a humming noise in response before everything goes quiet once more; and Jack’s just starting to feel unsettled again because he can’t work out where he’s gone when there’s a sudden clicking sound as the door opens and he turns himself into a silhouette from the light of the hallway. “You should come round for dinner,” adds Hannibal in a tone that’s marginally more friendly than before. “A celebration – for when Will is found.”

“Oh yes,” says Jack earnestly. “That would be great.”

“Something with a Southern influence I think,” replies Hannibal, “considering that it’s where Will comes from. Cajun cuisine has all sorts of possibilities and I’ve recently found the perfect meat for several dishes.” There’s a fractional pause and as Jack smiles contentedly at the thought of it Hannibal smiles too then adds: “Ready smoked.”

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**Wednesday 11:30pm**
Once Hannibal’s left Jack finds himself having to resist the urge to check he really has gone, rather like he’s some kind of shapeshifter or supernatural being, before reproaching himself for being so stupid and making another cup of coffee that, like all the ones before it, is destined to remain undrunk. After that he rings the lab to see how much longer Beverly’s going to be with the report – and is told, in no uncertain terms, to back off and be a bit more patient – then finally settles into his chair again and takes some time to review the strange scene which just took place. On the whole he decides that his feelings about it fall into several categories: the first, and most obvious, being profound irritation at allowing himself to be so intimated by another alpha. Undoubtedly some of this submission was fuelled by guilt for not protecting Will, but Jack still scowls over it for a few more minutes as he reassures himself that of course he could have argued back if he’d wanted to; and then, for good measure, decides to reapportron some of the irritation towards Hannibal for taking his anger out on Jack in the first place.

“Arrogant,” announces Jack to thin air, having conveniently forgotten that he can be more than a little arrogant himself on occasion.

Having brought this line of thought to a satisfactory conclusion Jack’s frown now slowly starts to recede as he turns his attention to the second and far more positive impression: which is how heartwarming it is to see someone so invested in Will. Out of respect Jack’s always tried to relate to Will as a colleague first and an omega second; but while he’s proud of never allowing his more primal alpha instincts to take over, he’s also honest enough to admit how it’s often led him to go too far the other way and view Will in a neutral, almost asexual, role that ignores how he has the same needs for protection, care and companionship as any other omega. In this respect Hannibal was closer to being rattled tonight than Jack’s ever seen him, and an awareness of the cause makes Jack feel more inclined to forgive him for being so overbearing. In fact the idea of Hannibal having that much concern for Will’s wellbeing is encouraging, and Jack now allows himself a small sentimental smile at the idea of it as he begins to reconstruct the earlier behaviour as a sign of fierce devotion rather than typical alpha grandstanding.

Whether this interest is actively romantic is rather harder to determine, although Jack’s initial sense is that it isn’t, considering Will already has an alpha and Hannibal always seems far too aloof and reserved to ever want to bond with anyone. Nevertheless he can’t resist examining the possibility a bit further and now begins giving it a few cautious prods to see how much more information it can be persuaded to give him. Certainly Will had been very keen to disappear from the Sculptor scene with Hannibal when it looked like his heat was starting – although he’d also been adamant he wanted to take some suppressants and had been back at work the next day, so maybe nothing happened after all? Hannibal, in turn, seems to watch Will almost constantly when they’re in the same room, although he also pays close attention to pretty much everyone, so it’s hard to know whether it’s significant or not. Jack supposes they both have extreme intelligence in common, as well as a similar dry sense of humour and matching degrees of insight, complexity and intensity... although are those really the kind of qualities that contented relationships are built on? Jack puzles over this for a while, unable to fully decide. Admittedly Hannibal’s behaviour tonight suggests an interest that’s more than platonic, but Jack’s often seen alphas become just as strongly attached to younger omegas in an absence of any overtly sexual feelings. In this respect the notion of Will arousing an avuncular, almost fatherly response in the capacity of mentor and protégé is slightly easier to imagine – not least because the urge to protect (which admittedly seems mostly unwanted, not to mention unnecessary) is something Jack has to constantly struggle with himself where Will’s concerned. Nevertheless the idea of Will having a comrade to look out for him is a pleasant one, and Jack decides that from now on he’s going to make a point of inviting Hannibal to all the task force meetings at which Will is likely to be present – and which promptly makes him smile even more, because it’s premised on the idea of Will returning to them sooner rather than later.

Having drawn these conclusions Jack now leans back in his chair to bask in the fledgling sense of
optimism and takes a leisurely sip of his coffee – only to have to bolt straight upright again as his desk phone starts shrieking for a second time. The noise it makes in the silent room gnaws on Jack’s nerves just as badly as before, and in spite of himself the previous smile starts to dissolve as he’s filled with a sudden sinking feeling that more bad news is probably imminent. Warily he tugs the phone towards him then lifts the receiver to force it to be quiet.

“Mr Crawford?” says the man on the other end. “Mr Jack Crawford?”

“Special Agent Crawford,” snaps Jack, wiping stray drops of coffee from his jacket with his free hand. In fact he doesn’t usually bother pulling rank in such an obvious way, but has already found himself getting irritated by the voice’s oily, insinuating tone.

There’s an offended pause. “I apologise,” says the man. “Agent Crawford.”

“Well go on then,” prompts Jack with poorly-concealed impatience. “What do you want?”

There’s another pause and Jack can easily imagine the way the man is pursing his lips like a sulking baby at being reprimanded for getting Jack’s title wrong. Somehow he has that type of voice: the type that would whisper about you behind your back then mime wounded innocence when called out on it. “This is Lieutenant Byers from the Baltimore PD,” comes the eventual reply. “I suppose you’re familiar with us.”

This is announced in a smugly expectant tone but Jack’s in no mood to stroke the man’s ego by giving him validation from the FBI so merely barks out “Yes,” with sufficient force to quell a lump of granite.

“All right then,” replies Byers after another pause. “Fine. Can you confirm that you’re the Named Alpha for a Mr Will Graham?”

Of all the things he was expecting – Rippers and Sculptors and smoking chauffeurs with broken necks – the chance of an update on Will ranks pretty much at the bottom of the list, and Jack’s so surprised he nearly drops the phone. “Yes!” he gasps. “Yes I am. Do you know where he is?”

“We’ve got him here,” comes the reply, and this time Jack is overcome with a sudden ludicrous impulse to try and hug the receiver. “He was found a few hours ago wandering about downtown. He was extremely disorientated; the officer who booked him initially thought he was a Drunk and Disorderly.”

“But that’s wonderful!” exclaims Jack. “I never thought he’d turn up so soon.”

As he finishes speaking his laptop starts to beep with a preciseness that’s faintly comical – almost as if it’s as excited as Jack is – and looking down he can see that Beverly’s report on the Ripper murder has just arrived. Jack naturally knows this should take priority over Will’s whereabouts, but even as he’s reaching out to open it he experiences a guilty twinge that makes him lower his hand again in favour of focussing on this deliriously unexpected good news. Besides, it’s not like another few minutes will make any difference. Lieutenant Byers gives an offended cough at the sense he’s being ignored, and Jack averts his eyes from the screen then hastily adds: “How is he now?”

“Not great. A doctor’s checked him over – she thinks he might be having some kind of omega stress syndrome.”

“But he’s okay?” persists Jack. “Not injured?”

“Not seriously. He has bruising on his face and his right thumb was dislocated. He also had blood under his fingernails – which wasn’t his. But otherwise, yeah; he’s okay.”
The statement seems clear enough on the face of it and yet the way it's announced – overly dramatic with an unspoken air of insinuation – immediately makes Jack suspect there’s more going on than Byers is admitting to. “Is that it?” he says sharply. “Are you sure there’s nothing else?”

“Yeah, there’s nothing else. Only he seems… I don’t know…”

“What?”

“He seems kind of fragile.”

In spite of his relief Jack can still recognise omega prejudice when he hears it, and – considering the earlier scene with Andrew – has had more than enough for one day of people patronising Will. “He is not fragile,” he snaps.

“No?” asks Byers with an obvious spark of interest. “You think he’s pretty strong then?”

“Of course he is, don’t be ridiculous.”

“How strong?”

Jack scowls then begins to impatiently drum his fingers against the desk. “What kind of question is that?”

“I’m just curious,” says Byers, whose tone has descended into a singularly unpleasant blend of smarminess and relish; a used car salesman who’s getting ready to tell you your credit’s expired. “Do you think he’s capable of being violent?”

Jack blinks a few times, immediately overcome with another surge of foreboding, and in the resulting silence Byers adds: “To be honest I meant mentally fragile more than anything else. Is that your experience with him? That he’s unstable?”

Jack’s surge of foreboding immediately doubles, although for Will’s sake he remains determined not to show any hint of it. “No,” he snarls. “He’d hardly be working here if he was.”

“Pretty unusual to have an omega in law enforcement,” adds Byers nastily. “They’re not really robust enough. Not like alphas. You’d have thought the strain of it would get to them.”

“Look, I want to speak to Will,” says Jack, who’s now completely out of patience. “Put him on the line.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible Agent Crawford.” By now Byers sounds as if he’s actively enjoying himself. “Not at the moment.”

“Why not?”

“Look, I don’t want to trample on your jurisdiction,” begins Byers; and Jack can immediately tell from the smug, self-congratulatory way he says it that this is exactly what he intends to do – and what’s more is going to derive a huge amount of satisfaction from getting one over on the FBI. “Only a homicide took place tonight and we think he might be involved.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“There’s no easy way to say it,” adds Byers, whose voice is now so oily Jack half expects to feel it seeping through the receiver to leave a slimy trail across his ear. “But from our end it’s starting to look unmistakable.”
“What’s unmistakable?”

Byers draws in a deep breath then lets it seep out again in a low gurgle like a draining sink. “What’s looking unmistakable, Agent Crawford, is that the Chesapeake Ripper and your Will Graham might just be one and the same person.”

What follows is several seconds of complete quiet that spark with distress and disbelief, when from very far away Jack finally hears a voice trying to deny it – and it takes a few shocked seconds to realise it’s actually his own. “No,” the voice is saying. “I don’t believe it. Not Will. No way.”

“How much do you really know about him?” continues Byers, and each word seems like an executioner bringing down an axe for one fatal blow after another. “Wouldn’t you say that he’s always had the capacity in him for something like this?”

As Jack’s voice continues to automatically disagree Jack himself watches, almost trance-like, as his hand mechanically reaches up to open Beverly’s report and slowly scroll down the pages. It seems to be taking far longer than it should but he persists regardless: past the crimes scene photos, past the pathology findings, on and on, one after another, until it gets to the victim profile…at which point he feels every single hair on the back of his neck stand up.

“Will Graham’s alpha was found dead this evening,” continues Byers, and it’s as if he somehow knows that Jack is staring at this information at the exact same time. “All early reports confirm it was a Ripper murder. I guess that’s where your team went wrong isn’t it – you started with the killer and assumed the victim was random, whereas we started with the victim and worked backwards from there. Mr Graham’s denying it of course, but he was sighted at the crime scene by five separate witnesses, had obviously been in a fight, and not only had the means to do it but also the motive and the opportunity.”

As Jack feels the blood drain away from his face Byers gives a softly venomous sigh, and when he speaks again it’s with all the celebratory relish of a conjuror pulling a rabbit from a hat. Only it would be a dead rabbit, thinks Jack, a bit wildly. Something malformed and monstrous; the audience would cry out in horror. “So unless someone can explain all of those things,” adds Byers with the same soft air of triumph, “then I think it’s safe to say we’ve currently got the biggest crime scoop of the century sat right here in our station house. Forget about the Sculptor Agent Crawford – this is going to go down as the night I caught the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Chapter End Notes

Props to the eagle-eyed MoreToAdore and gaara89 for spotting that the fic had come full circle to the 6-month mark in chapter 1 ::D In this respect, ugh, very sorry but this particular plot thread’s going to need a bit more time than expected so I’m afraid the chapter count’s gone up yet again. Next update on the way ASAP! xxx
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to the one and only marlahanni, who’s been incredibly generous in doing lovely art for my fics and has just made a fabulous cover for this one that you can check out here if you’d like to :-) 

Thursday 12.30am

When he thinks about it afterwards Jack realises that has no real memory of ever getting to the police station. The memories he does have are more like imprints of emotion than a reconstruction of deeds actually done: the urgent resolution to go, for example, or the growing sense of panic that swelled inside him like a tumour as he left the FBI. And he remembers the fear, dread and doubt of the moment of the phone call and all the moments afterwards with crystal precision – but the details of the journey itself are an absolute blank. In fact he could have driven into a crowd of pedestrians several times over for all the difference it would have made; although he obviously managed it somehow, because he’s now found himself standing in the foyer while someone who’s easily recognisable as Byers gleefully boasts about how he’s captured the most notorious serial killer of modern times…that person, of course, also being Will. How is it even feasible? Will, with his large troubled eyes and his glasses and permanent air of restless sadness, all the time the Chesapeake Ripper? Jack mentally tries to parse the two personas together and finds it impossible.

Someone’s thrust a Styrofoam cup of coffee into Jack’s hand and he now stares at it numbly while Byers drones away on one side and a police liaison officer yaps on the other while outside a pack of journalists multiply together like swarms of bacteria. Even over the droning and the yapping Jack can still hear them: the frenzied shouts, the roar of news vans and the whirring of cameras which are far too many to count – each one tireless and ravenous in their attempt to force the two personas together in a way that’s Jack’s unable to, then broadcast Will-as-the-Chesapeake-Ripper to every table top and newsstand in the world. In this respect perhaps bacteria aren’t the best metaphor? Vultures might be a better one…great black flocks with ragged feathers which gather together to pick over the bones of the dead. In the back of his mind Jack has a sudden memory of Will describing ‘a murder of crows’ at one of the Sculptor crime scenes and gives an involuntary shudder.

“Two of my guys are in with him,” Byers is now saying. “They know what they’re doing.”

Byers looks exactly like Jack imagined him: oily and porcine with sweat stains beneath both armpits and several inches of bristly stomach attempting to fight to freedom from between the gaping buttons of his shirt. “Stubborn little son of a bitch,” adds Byers with obvious disdain. “But they’ll break him eventually.”

“I want to see him,” snarls Jack for what feels like the fiftieth time.

As Byers gives a slow smile the buttons finally admit defeat and rupture open with a sad little ping as the rolls of stomach billow through them. “My men are dealing with it.”

Jack draws in an angry breath and has to resist the urge to bare his teeth. “You said he didn’t have an attorney with him?”
“Didn’t want one. He used his phone call to contact some doctor.”

“Oh?” says Jack, immediately intuiting this to be Hannibal. “Did they speak?”

“Naw, there was no answer.” Byers smacks his flabby lips and briefly looks pleased. “He was obviously disappointed about it. First time he actually seemed upset.”

“Well if he doesn’t have an attorney,” says Jack with triumph, “then I definitely want to see him. I’m his Named Alpha.”

He allows the rest of the sentence to hang suggestively in the silence and Byers – who, in the thrill of the capture has obviously forgotten that omegas fall under the same legal capacity as minors or vulnerable adults in that they’re not supposed to be questioned alone – gives a twitch of frustration that makes the rolls of stomach quiver and heave.

“You’re don’t have much experience with omegas do you?” adds Jack, determined to rub it in.

“Okay, fine,” snaps Byers, who now looks visibly angry at being unable to refuse Jack for a further time without breaking the law. “He’s through here.” Standing aside he gestures Jack towards what’s obviously a fire escape. “We’re going the back way to avoid the journalists,” he adds when he sees Jack’s look of surprise. “We’ve had to move him twice after a group of them broke in and swarmed the building.”

“How the hell did they find out about it so quickly?”

Byers gives the faintest hint of a smirk, which immediately confirms Jack’s suspicion that he leaked it himself in a desire to be glorified as the heroic soul who ensnared the Chesapeake Ripper. In fact this is incredibly easy to imagine: no doubt he’s already mentally rehearsing the interviews he’s going to give; the preening photographs he’ll pose for as the Police Chief shakes his hand and pins a medal on his greasy chest. Jack gives him a look of contempt and Byers smirks again then stalks ahead in silence through a series of narrowly winding corridors until they reach a door labelled Interrogation Room A. Despite having visited countless such settings in the past there’s still something about this one that strikes Jack as unbearably haunting and grim; rather like the set of a dystopian horror film in which unspeakable acts are being committed behind each steel door.

“He’s in there,” announces Byers. The gloating tone is unmistakable now: a hunter who’s preparing to show off his trophy room to someone far less accomplished and successful. Then he brandishes one of his paw-like hands towards another door on the left, and on peering through Jack’s heart promptly gives a painful clench at the sight of Will on the other side of a two-way mirror: sat at a dirty-looking desk and looking rather drowned by a prison jumpsuit that’s much too large for him while staring defiantly straight ahead. In fact he’s so defiant that Jack can’t help wishing he was being slightly more subdued and omega-like, seeing as how the current steely expression is making him look grimly resolute – and therefore, potentially, more cold-hearted and guilty. Jack sighs to himself then peers a bit closer, unable to tell whether it’s Will’s extraordinary poise and self-possession that’s hiding a secret inner fear or whether he really is as unmoved as he seems.

“He’s acting tough now,” adds Byers as if reading Jack’s thoughts. “But he’ll snap before too much longer. They always do.” Reaching into his pocket for a bunch of keys he unlocks the first door then stands aside to allow Jack through. “Go on then, Agent Crawford.”

Jack ignores him and rudely pushes past, blinking slightly as his eyes readjust to the harsh fluorescent lighting after the dimness of the corridor. Will glances up straight away and Jack stares silently back and takes in his face and posture before he’s filled with a powerful surge of relief that the aloofness really is an act after all and deep down Will is badly frightened but simply doing a good job of hiding
it. The relief is because it helps confirm what Jack desperately wants to believe – that Will is intrinsically incapable of doing anything so terrible as what he saw in Beverly’s report several hours ago. In this respect Jack’s convinced that when he stares into the eyes of the real Chesapeake Ripper (and surely one day he will?) then there’ll be no trace of fear there at all. There’ll just be…nothing. Just two pool of blackness.

The two detectives – one older and one younger – glance up at the same time as Will does before nodding respectfully (unlike Will) in honour of having a high-ranking FBI agent in their midst. Jack pays no attention to the nods and instead lets out an angry grunt. “Take those handcuffs off him,” he says sharply.

The younger detective makes an incredulous noise (clearly interpretable as ‘are you kidding me – that’s the goddamn Chesapeake Ripper right there’) and Jack takes a threatening step forward. “Take them off.”

The older detective gives another nod to the younger, who hesitates for a few seconds then leans across the table to unfasten the cuffs: wary and over-cautious the entire time as if Will is an unexploded bomb and one wrong move is liable to set him off.

Jack grunts again then pulls out one of the plastic chairs, wincing slightly at the ugly scraping noise it makes as its feet grind against the floor. “All right then Mr Graham,” adds the elder detective once Jack’s sat down. “Will…can I call you Will?” Without waiting for a reply he leans forward over the desk himself. “Now that Agent Crawford’s here how about we go through it one more time?”

From his tone it’s clear that what he really means is they’re going to go through it again, and then again – on and on, to infinity and beyond – until he finally gets the version he wants to hear. Will sighs to himself then follows it up with an elegant little shrug that involves rolling a single shoulder. “I’ve already told you what happened.”

“Suppose you tell us again.”

“He stuck a syringe in my neck and took me away by force,” says Will, at which point Jack promptly lets out a sighing noise of his own. “When I woke up I was in a hotel suite.”

“Woke up? You mean you were unconscious.”

“As good as,” snaps Will. “I was drifting in and out. Andrew…” He spits out the name with obvious contempt. “Andrew and his chauffeur were talking in the next room.”

“What about?”

“They were planning how they were going to take me abroad; Andrew thought the FBI was going to try and make it difficult for him. Then the chauffeur went outside to have a cigarette, only he never came back. Andrew was furious – he thought he’d broken his shift early and gone home.”

“So you took your opportunity?”

“If you mean the opportunity to escape,” says Will sharply, “then yes – of course I did. What would you have done? The fact the chauffeur had left meant half the opposition.”

“And then you…what? Go through it with me again.”

“I overpowered him,” says Will with quiet satisfaction. “He couldn’t believe it when he saw me coming towards him; he was so surprised he didn’t even fight back. I slammed his head against the wall to knock him out then made a run for it.”
“So how’d you get those injuries?” says the elder detective sceptically. “Your face is all bruised up.”

“That happened before. I couldn’t walk properly when we arrived and they had to carry me. My head got knocked against the wall…knowing Andrew he probably did it on purpose.”

“What about your hand?”

“I told you: he’d handcuffed me.” Will pauses then shrugs. “I didn’t have anything to pick the lock – the only way to slip them is to dislocate your thumb.”

Jack sighs heavily and gives Will a pat on the shoulder. “Please don’t touch the suspect sir,” says the younger detective, then sees the way Jack’s glaring at him and promptly goes quiet again.

“The thing is Will,” adds the older detective. “We’ve just told you that your alpha’s been murdered in horrific circumstances and you don’t seem remotely upset about it. Don’t you think that’s kind of odd?”

“He wasn’t my alpha,” replies Will in a flat, emotionless voice. “We weren’t bonded. And you’re right; I’m not upset. I’m glad he’s dead. He was a…” He pauses fractionally, opposed on principle to calling someone a ‘psychopath’ purely for effect when he’s knows that it’s not technically true. “A sadist,” he adds eventually. “If I hadn’t gotten away he would have killed me eventually. Maybe not straight away – but there’s no way I would have survived him.”

The younger detective exchanges a loaded glance with the elder one then clears his throat. “You’re not exactly helping your case Mr Graham.”

“Why?” snaps back Will. “Because I’m not sat here lying to you about how devoted we were? Sure, I could pretend to be out of my mind with grief but it wouldn’t take much digging to find out it wasn’t true. I’ve done enough interviews to know lies like that always get exposed in the end and it would be incredibly easy in this case – anyone who knows Andrew could tell you I hated him.” The younger detective shuffles uncomfortably, obviously aware that Will’s put him in his place without fully understanding how it happened. “I’m telling the truth when I said I hated him,” adds Will, “and I’m telling the truth when I said I didn’t kill him.” He pauses then throws a defiant glare at the younger detective. “I’d buy a drink for whoever did, but it wasn’t me.”

“You had his blood on you.”

“Of course I did. I hit him hard. And yeah – perhaps I would have hit him a couple of more times if I’d had the chance but my priority was escaping. I had no way of knowing the chauffeur wouldn’t come back.”

“Look at it from our point of view Will,” says the older detective. “You’re describing all this very calmly like you were in control of yourself the whole time, but when you got picked up you were completely out of it. The cop thought you were drunk – what gives?”

“You heard what the police medic said,” replies Will looking faintly humiliated. “Omega stress syndrome.”

“Care to explain that?”

“Not really.” Jack clears his throat and gives Will a stern look. “What?” demands Will. “I’m not being uncooperative, there’s nothing to explain.”

“You’ve been on suppressants a long time,” says Jack, who’s now looking almost as uncomfortable as Will is. “That syndrome is something that can happen when the omega is distressed or
disorientated and the alpha isn’t close by. These guys want to know why you had a reaction like that if what you’re claiming is true and you had no emotional connection to Andrew.”

“It wasn’t Andrew,” snaps Will. “It was…it was someone else. It was being parted from someone else. If it was even that at all – personally I don’t think it was. I mean for God’s sake, he’d just stuck a syringe full of sedatives in me. The effects hadn’t fully worn off.”

“Excuse me if I find that a little difficult to believe Will,” says the detective nastily. “If you were as sedated as all that how’d you manage to overpower him? The guy was an alpha. He was big.”

“It’s called mind over matter,” replies Will sharply. “And if you didn’t have such an obvious bias against omegas as fragile and pathetic you’d find it a bit easier to get your head round. Run a blood test on me if you want the proof.”

“Oh we’ll do that Will – don’t you worry.”

“What do I have to gain by lying about it?” snaps Will. “I wish it hadn’t happened; I sure as hell wouldn’t have been wondering round the streets given the choice. How is this even relevant?” He gives the man a look of contempt. “Do you think the Chesapeake Ripper often has a stress syndrome when he’s killed someone?”

“It’s a clear extenuating circumstance,” replies the detective as if Will hasn’t said anything. “You’d get a lighter sentence.”

“So which is it? Either I’m a stressed-out omega or I’m the Chesapeake Ripper – you can’t turn me into both.”

“Do you really want to know what I think Will?” says the elder detective, leaning in across the table. “I think you were faking it the whole time. I think you’re very smart and a good actor, and you knew that running from the scene would draw suspicion to yourself.”

Will stares round the room in an exaggerated way. “Wasn’t very successful then, was I?”

“It would have looked even worse if you’d just absconded; you know you would have been picked up eventually. This way you get to play the omega card.”

“Which I’m not actually doing – unlike you. If I was going to kill him I’d hardly do it on my own doorstep. I told you he was planning to take me abroad; if I had wanted to kill him I’d have bided my time and done it there.”

“I gotta admire your nerve Will,” adds the elder detective in an overly-inviting tone as if he’s trying to tempt Will into agreeing with him. “You kill this guy in a way that draws maximum attention to yourself then you use it in your defence: ‘Of course it wasn’t me – I would never have been so obvious.’” He pauses then gives a low whistle, like he’s mentally reviewing all the other crimes he believes Will’s responsible for. “You’d killed numerous people in the past, so you knew exactly how to get the job done. I think Andrew Alderton belittled you and in the resulting rage you lost control of yourself.”

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Will and Jack still can’t help glancing at each other as if to say is this asshole for real? “That’s based on a theory of serial and violent crime that’s at least at a decade out of date,” says Will tersely. “If I was the Chesapeake Ripper then I’d be killing a victim who was known to me for a very specific reason, and my MO…” The younger detective immediately looks baffled and Will gives an irritated sigh. “My modus operandi would be completely different.” The younger detective still looks confused and Will begins to wave a hand
around to emphasise his point; the whole thing actually feels faintly ridiculous, like running a seminar for some particularly dim trainees. “My emotional reasons for killing him are very different from when I kill my usual victims,” adds Will. “It changes my design. And that would clearly show in the way the crime was committed.”

“Will’s right,” says Jack. “You guys are talking about the Chesapeake Ripper as if he’s some small-time criminal that you’re used to booking at the weekends after a domestic fight gone wrong. This guy is…” He pauses then looks bleak. “This guy is like nothing any of us have ever seen after a decade of working in Behavioral Sciences. All you know about him is what you’ve read in the papers.” For a few seconds he goes quiet again, clearly thinking ‘And now he’s come back – and I’m the one who’s supposed to catch him.’ “You’ve got nothing concrete to tie Will to this murder,” he adds firmly. “Nothing beyond an unpleasant coincidence and him being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“He was sighted near the scene by several witnesses.”

“Well, of course he was!” bellows Jack. “Alderton was killed close to the hotel; the same hotel Will was escaping from.”

“We found numerous fibres close to where the FBI removed the body.” He pauses and darts Jack a malicious look as if implying the team overlooked them deliberately. “They had particles of Mr Graham’s DNA on them.”

“Why would you expect anything else? He and Alderton had been together for hours. When we do our own analyses I expect we’ll identify half the samples on the body as Will’s. I spent quite a while with him myself – they’ll probably find traces of my DNA.”

“Not just on the body Agent Crawford; close by the body. That’s more consistent with someone fleeing the murder scene. And how do you explain the death of Mr Alderton’s chauffeur?” The detective pauses then gives a sarcastic smile. “Another one of your ‘unpleasant coincidences’?”

“The chauffeur wasn’t a Ripper killing. The cause of death was a broken neck.”

“The body was mutilated.”

“If the Chesapeake Ripper mutilates a body you know about it,” snaps Jack. “The injuries were no way near severe enough. It was most likely some junkie off his head on meth.”

“Kind of fits what you said then doesn’t it Will,” adds the younger detective with obvious triumph. “The chauffeur wasn’t the main target so the, whaddyacallit…the MO was different.”

“Actually it’s the complete opposite,” snaps Jack. “Will’s talking about if he were The Chesapeake Ripper; in which case the chauffeur, as his anonymous victim, would show more typical Ripper injuries and Andrew, as his personal vendetta, would be the anomaly. As you know it’s the other way round.” He pauses then looks bleak again. “As far as the actual Ripper goes then God knows; but from a behavioural perspective the wound pattern on the bodies are not at all consistent with it being Will. Besides, the timelines don’t add up. The chauffeur was found later but was killed nearly half an hour earlier – what was Will supposed to be doing during all that time?”

Will, who up until now has been silent, abruptly leans forward across the desk and looks the elder detective straight in the eye. In fact his movement is so quick and sudden it manages to be vaguely unsettling and causes the others to stop talking immediately and cast nervous glances at him. “You know, you’ve got your strategy all wrong,” says Will quietly. “You’d have been better off just charging me for Andrew. At least that’s somewhat plausible. But you got greedy: you wanted the
glory of being able to say you caught the Chesapeake Ripper. So you’re going to force the facts to fit – and that’s where your case is going to fall apart.”

As both detectives shift uneasily in their chairs Will finally leans back again and Jack gives a snort of contempt. “They don’t have a case,” he says scathingly. “There’s nothing to put you at the scene beyond circumstantial evidence.” Turning back to the detectives he lowers his voice in a way that’s deliberately threatening. “Every second we’re wasting in this room the Chesapeake Riper is still out there. Do you even understand what that means? Will is the best chance we’ve got of catching him and instead of letting him do his job you’re accusing him of a crime he had nothing to do with. How many cases have you heard of omegas killing alphas, let alone as violently as that? It never happens. If you had any sense at all you and your idiot boss would let him leave right now with me.”

“Absolutely not,” says the younger detective firmly. “Chief Byers would never allow it.”

“To be honest Agent Crawford,” adds the elder one, “I’d be very interested to know if even you believe what you’re saying. Do you honestly think he had nothing to do with this? Or do you just not want to admit that your professional judgement was so misplaced?”

Jack’s eyes briefly flicker and the detective gives an unpleasant smile at the sense of having scored a hit before reaching out to flip the tape recorder off. “Well I guess that’s enough for one day,” he says, stretching his arms behind his head with a weary crack of tendons. “Will, put your hands flat on the table. We need to cuff you again to escort you to the transportation van.”

“What do you mean transportation?” snarls Jack. “Where the hell are you taking him?”

“Chief Byers wants him moved to a psychiatric facility. We don’t have the capacity to keep him here. The cells are full of alphas – it would start a riot.”

“For God’s sake!” explodes Jack.

Both detectives ignore him and instead begin to reapply the handcuffs with a certain grim relish before grabbing hold of Will and hauling him to his feet. Although they do this far more roughly than necessary Will still tolerates it without any obvious signs of fear or complaint and as a result manages to look both deeply dignified and strangely absent – almost like mind and body are finally starting to separate from one another. The tangled hair and shadowed bruises make him seem as palely haunted and elegiac as an El Greco saint preparing to be martyred; and Jack takes one look at him and is consumed with the same surge of unhappiness as when he was stolen away the first time and Jack was similarly powerless to stop it.

“I’m sorry Will,” he says now: both because he is, and because he doesn’t know what else to say.

As Will catches Jack’s eye the mask finally slips and for a few seconds leaves him looking young and vulnerable. “Can you tell Hannibal where I am?” he asks quietly. “I tried to call him but his phone was switched off.”

“I’ll do that,” promises Jack. “First thing.”

“Thanks,” says Will in the same low voice.

“We’ll get you out of here,” adds Jack, despite not having any clear idea about how this is to be done. “Before you know it you’ll be out…” But it’s already too late and his words fall into empty air as Will is dragged away then swallowed up in the endless stretch of darkness in the corridor.

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The lack of natural light and the stale taste of the air makes Will suspect that his cell lies in the very bowels of the building: somewhere subdued and muskily subterranean where the ceiling is dewy, the floor is spotted with mould specks, and the walls are streaked right through with damp as if the bricks themselves are crying at the sight of so much misery. The bed looks damp too – everything looks damp – and for a while he can’t bring himself to touch it and props himself against the bars instead until his legs begin to ache. Then he paces round like an animal in a cage before eventually giving in and lying on the mattress – after which he simply stares at the ceiling as his spine grows stiff and his eyes grow heavy and time ceases to pass in the usual way with hours and minutes and gets marked instead by the sound of keys rattling and doors slamming closed and shadows drifting across the stone wall to indicate the slow drag of the moon somewhere in the outside world as it gradually creeps away and the sun takes its place.

The neighbouring cells help mark time too by coming alive at intervals with the sound of sobs and screams. In fact they do it so often it’s as if the inmates to find a certain comfort in it, although it still never occurs to Will to do either of these things himself; preferring instead to stay submerged in his thoughtful stoical silence. Sometimes an orderly arrives and dumps a tray of food next to his bed, and eventually a routine develops where they give a frustrated sigh and remove the untouched contents of the first and switch it for a new one only to have to perform a similar exchange a few hours later. The frequency with which they arrive – and the variety of new faces – suggests to Will that they’re coming on purpose to get a glimpse of the notorious Chesapeake Ripper and it’s hard not to wonder about their reactions when they confer in the staff room afterwards: whether they’re disappointed he’s not more savage-looking, or intrigued for the same reason, or if he simply meets their expectations in that he’s ostensibly normal rather than obviously monstrous – and which is no doubt equally true of the actual Ripper, wherever he might happen to be. Occasionally an image of Andrew’s shocked, furious face drifts into his mind and whenever it happens Will feels the same surge of quiet satisfaction in reliving the moment when Andrew realised he’d finally lost. The images usually end up morphing into Hannibal’s face instead, or occasionally Will’s own Dark Reflection; but none of this really seems like thinking as opposed to experiencing, with Will himself just a silent spectator to this theatre playing out in his head. Most of the time, he decides, he seems to be thinking about not thinking.

Although Will doesn’t have total confidence in Jack he feels that Hannibal can still be relied on, so after a while it seems that the meaningless passage of time is simply in service of waiting for the moment he finally appears. Fortunately this happens even sooner than expected or hoped for, and Will gradually grows so focussed on it that he ends up sensing his presence before he actually sees him. It begins with the door of the cell block opening, then a powerful impression that Hannibal is close by followed by a light tread of footsteps – and then before he’s even near enough for Will to smell the expensive cologne or hear Hannibal say his name, he’s leapt off the bed and flown across the cell. It’s hardly a large distance but the impatience of separation makes it feel like miles, a fact not helped by how stiff and painful his legs are from being motionless for so long. Then there’s a brief sensation of moving like a sleepwalker where his body doesn’t want to cooperate, only that his mind is so focussed and resolute that no amount of pain or spasm can stop him getting to where he needs to be.

Hannibal’s eyes are gleaming in their usual intense way and when he reaches the cell he twines both arms through the bars to gather Will towards him before searching out his mouth to hungrily kiss him on and on and on; and in that moment it feels like less like a normal embrace to Will and more like flaying away the last layers of concealment and secrecy before one person merges into the other. In fact his need to touch Hannibal is all-consuming and he runs his palm down his spine then roughly tugs him against the cold metal until they’re pressed together and he imagines he can feel Hannibal’s heartbeat pulsing against his own: so fierce and fiery and fully alive. Hannibal sighs in response and
slams his lips against Will’s again, stabbing his tongue into his mouth as if Will is necessary in order
to breathe just as Will tangles his fingers into his hair then tugs. In fact Will is aware of trembling
now from the inside out and when he feels Hannibal quiver too it’s almost too much and he gives a
low moan: lost in the sensation of Hannibal’s tongue pushing against his, of shared breath and warm
skin and hearts that beat with the same chaotic rhythm.

“Will,” murmurs Hannibal, elegantly extending each letter as if he’s savouring the sound of them; as
if it’s a sacred word – the words of a prayer. Moving back a little he stares very intensely into Will’s
eyes without moving or blinking and Will stares back with an even greater intensity before finally
opening his mouth in an urgent attempt to try and explain the unexplainable.

“Shhh,” replies Hannibal, soft and hypnotic. “Not yet. Just give me a few more moments beloved –
just a few.” Leaning in again he brushes his lips along Will’s jaw. “Tip your head back.”

Will sighs then obeys and Hannibal kisses the tender hollow at the base of his throat then breathes
along his skin, pausing occasionally to scrape his teeth across Will’s neck while murmuring snatches
of something rapturous in a foreign language. Will sighs again then closes his eyes and Hannibal
skims both hands across his shoulders then along his waist and hips before finally seeming to gain
control of himself and pulling away.

“I missed you,” whispers Will, whose eyes are still closed. “I missed you so much.”

“I know you did. I missed you too”

“You don’t,” says Will rather desperately. “You don’t know.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately but instead strokes Will’s cheek and rubs his lower lip with his
thumb before gently gripping his chin so he can examine the bruises that dapple the edge of his face.
“He did this?” asks Hannibal, trailing a finger across them.

“Yes,” replies Will tonelessly.

“Ill-advised,” murmurs Hannibal. “What did you give him in return, mylimasis?” At the sound of the
question Will quivers slightly, although as he opens his mouth to reply Hannibal promptly presses his
fingers against it. “These places have recording devices everywhere,” he adds in the same low tone.
“I advise you to be very careful what you say.”

Will darts his head down a little, nipping Hannibal’s fingers as if he’s going to bite them then giving
them a quick swipe them with his tongue. “Why?” he says. “The police already know what
happened.”

“N-o-o,” replies Hannibal softly. “They don’t.”

This time Will pauses and flicks his eyes towards Hannibal’s before looking away again. “I knocked
him unconscious,” he finally says. “In the hotel…I hit him than escaped.”

Hannibal stares at Will for a few seconds with a very faint smile. “Good boy,” is all he says. “I knew
you would. He underestimated you didn’t he? Just like the rest of them. He thought he’d captured
something tame and all the while he was holding a tiger by the tail…A little wild animal with fangs
and claws.”

Will catches Hannibal’s eye for a second time then pushes his arms through the bars so he can knot
his fingers into his hair. Then he sighs again and screws his eyes closed; briefly seeming like he’s
unaware of his surroundings and looking strikingly lithe and agile in the delicately sensuous way he
curves his body against the edge of the metal. “A beautiful lack of concern there my love,” adds
Hannibal approvingly. Without moving his eyes from Will’s face he resumes the rapturous stroking motion along his hips and when he speaks again there’s a distinct thrum of energy in his voice that wasn’t there before. “I congratulate you. Most people in your position would be inconsolable but you shrug your shoulders then cast it one side and move on. That’s good Will: never be governed by your emotions. Relish them, exploit them, or recruit them, but don’t allow them to control you.”

“You mean like you?” says Will, tugging Hannibal’s hair a little harder.

“Exactly like me,” replies Hannibal with another slow smile. “So now he’s dead and your battle was the last time you saw him alive. Tell me, won’t you; I’m curious to know – is he haunting you?”

“No.”

Hannibal smiles again then coils his head to one side in a curiously serpentine gesture so he can brush his lips against the side of Will’s ear. “No,” he says softly. “I don’t suppose he is. The real spectres are the living, not the dead. We haunt ourselves – never forget that Will. Drifting through the remains of our lives consumed with all the burdens and regret we never found the strength to dispose of.”

Will sighs a little louder at the sensation of a warm cheek pressed against his own; the sting of a sharp cheekbone. Gently he begins to nuzzle the side of Hannibal’s throat with delicate kisses, faint as whispers, then twines both arms around his neck and holds on. Hannibal strokes Will’s back with one hand while cradling his head with the other, and a few moments of silence follow before Will adds in a voice that’s quiet yet courageous: “I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. I don’t know how to get out of this.”

“You know,” replies Hannibal, equally quietly. Instead of explaining any further he begins to run his fingers through Will’s hair. “Why didn’t you contact me sooner?”

“I tried,” says Will. “I wanted to. I…” Then he finds himself trailing off, unable to properly express the complex combination of shame, pride and independence…not to mention the irony of the one person he’d wanted to vouch for him also being the one person who knows he’d be entirely capable of killing someone. Hannibal briefly tightens his grip in Will’s hair in wordless solidarity and Will presses his head against his shoulder, relieved at not having to make the effort to explain.

“Yet here we are discussing Andrew,” adds Hannibal as if he’s reading Will’s thoughts. “We haven’t even mentioned the Ripper.”

Will gives another sigh that’s louder than any of the others then shifts his head to Hannibal’s other shoulder. “Jack believes me. At least…I think he does. He seemed to.”

“And do you think everyone else will believe you?”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal smoothly. “I know you’re not the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“I don’t know for certain it was the Ripper who killed Andrew. I haven’t seen the photos.”

“No,” agrees Hannibal. “Although it was certainly someone with a similar style.” He smiles to himself for a few seconds before tightening his grip around Will’s back. “A copycat perhaps? Just as in the Sculptor case.”

Will briefly pulls away as if he wants to say something before just shrugging instead then burying his face in Hannibal’s shoulder once more without making any further attempt to explain. It means his
head is tilted downwards and when he glances at the floor he notices a red line that’s painted about a foot beyond the bars. Gesturing at it now he can’t help giving a rueful half-laugh before adding: “Aren’t you supposed to stay behind that?”

“Probably,” says Hannibal without making any attempt to move.

“I wish I was out there,” replies Will in the same wry tone. “Or even that you were in here.”

“You’ll be out of here soon enough,” says Hannibal softly. “I promise you that and you need to trust me.” Raising his hand again he rests it against Will’s jaw, caressing his cheek with a single thumb as they gaze into each other’s eyes and draw in one another’s breath. “Then when you are, I’m going to lay you out somewhere beautiful and make love to you – after which we’re going to discuss these recent events in exacting detail and with perfect clarity. Just like old times Will,” adds Hannibal with another Sphinx-like smile. “You and I, sat in a room, discussing the details of a crime and trading confidences. It’s going to be very illuminating – I guarantee it.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately and Hannibal draws him a bit closer then adds, seemingly from out of nowhere: “Do you know what makes me such a good therapist Will?”

Will pulls back slightly, obviously surprised by the abrupt change in tone, and Hannibal’s faint smile starts to flicker around the edge. “It’s because I know how to recognise a person’s desire,” he adds, drawing out each word with slow precision. “And then, after that, how to help them act upon it. A person can only be truly fulfilled when they obey their natural instincts Will, because to continuously deny oneself and repress one’s true nature is the greatest act of self-violence that it is possible to commit. We owe each other nothing less than actualisation: to embrace our purest natures and reject the deluded version which society clamours for.” Pausing slightly he strokes his eyes across Will’s face, loving and languorous as if committing each feature to memory. “To do so is therapeutic, beloved; even if the process is painful and frightening at first. Even if it torments you – even if it feels like it’s going to push you past your breaking point.”

Will stares back, cool and unflinching without giving any hint of what he’s thinking, and Hannibal stares back with equal intensity and the same inscrutable smile. “Do you want to know why?” he adds, trailing a single finger across Will’s forehead. “It’s because that is when you will no longer be haunted. You will force yourself beyond what you think is possible to endure and emerge at the other side completely and fully alive; and that living ghost I described before will no longer apply to you. You once explained it to me as your Dark Reflection. Do you remember; the way you broke all the mirrors in your house? One day you’re going to find a way to take solace in him and to do so you have to learn to look him in the eye. It’s a feature of all the best narratives after all – a true Hero’s Journey. A plunge into the Underworld to face your darkest, greatest challenge…then arise afterwards, blood-smeared and triumphant.”

Will still doesn’t reply and in the resulting silence Hannibal can feel the way his breath has quickened through the delicate thrum of his ribcage. “In the meantime,” adds Hannibal, resting his cheek against Will’s and beginning to stroke the back of his neck. “You must use this ordeal as the opportunity it is. In fact you’re doing it already; even quicker than I thought you would. See how strong and determined you are? It’s just like I always told you Will: you had to stop thinking like a victim and begin to think like a predator instead. That, after all, is what’s going to help you catch the Sculptor.” Smiling slightly he dips his head until his mouth is ghosting along Will’s ear. “And who knows what else besides?”

As he finishes speaking the silence is shattered by a grim scrape-scrape-scrape from the end of the corridor to signal the guard unlocking the door, and at the sound of it Will immediately stiffens before tightening his grip on Hannibal. “I don’t want you to go,” he says quietly.
“Beloved,” murmurs Hannibal. “I don’t want to leave. But you know I’m going to be with you anyway.” Pausing slightly he clasps Will’s skull in the palm of his hand. “Right inside your head.”

“Sir!” shouts out the guard, beginning to break into a run. “Sir! Step away! You’re not supposed to get that close to the bars.”

“I’ll return as soon as I can,” adds Hannibal in the same low voice. “And remember what I told you.”

“Sir!” yells the guard, who now sounds both fearful and angry. “You need to leave right away sir.” Finally reaching the cell he grinds to a halt then brings his hand crashing down onto Hannibal’s arm. Hannibal remains extremely still without flinching then slowly swivels round and stares at him with such undisguised menace that the guard looks uncomfortable and awkwardly removes it.

“One more moment please,” adds Hannibal in an icy voice. “If you’d checked your visitor’s list you’d realise I have clearance.” Turning back to Will his rigid expression softens slightly. “Soon,” is all he says. “As soon as I can.”

“Wait for me,” Will hears himself asking.

“Of course,” replies Hannibal. “How many times have I told you that I’m prepared to wait; that anything worth having is worth waiting for?” Leaning forward he presses his lips against Will’s forehead then reaches up to smooth his hair into place and straighten his collar. “There you go,” he adds in a low voice so the guard can’t hear. “You look quite presentable: all ready to blend in again. Go on Agent Graham – prepare to cast in your colours with the force of law and order and persuade them how righteous you are. You’ll be entirely successful because no one is ever going to guess the truth about you...No one except me.”

Will stares back, eyes wide and lips slightly parted, and Hannibal makes a low noise deep in his throat that’s almost a growl. “My love,” he says. “How beautiful you are – all that dark desire.” He trails his fingers along Will’s wrists, over his hips and waist, and then suddenly tugs him forward and buries his face in Will’s neck. “I can smell it on you,” says Hannibal. Then he turns round and is gone.

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Thursday 08.00pm

Once he’s alone again Will resumes his silent staring into the corridor before finally returning to the bed and lying very quietly without moving as he turns his situation over in his head. Yet no matter how patiently or ingeniously he arranges the pieces the results invariably come back as desperate, and for the first time since arriving he’s briefly overcome with an urge to indulge in the same hopeless screaming as the occupants of the neighbouring cells. In fact the sense of entrapment is even more unbearable now that Hannibal’s left, and in an attempt to overcome it he closes his eyes and takes a series of slow, steadying breaths as he tries to focus his mind on any available distraction: snatches of poetry, song lyrics, even random phone numbers or license plates – anything that’s neutral and banal and can help to subdue the growing sense of panic. It’s not going to end like this, Will promises himself. You won’t let it. Because somehow, surely, there has to be a way?

So just like before when lying in Andrew’s car – only several hours ago now, yet already more like several years – Will once again refuses to give into fear or despair and instead begins to marshal his assorted inner resources like a general commanding troops into battle. The name of this particular battle is Freedom, but this is such an enormous and complex campaign that he decides to start with a smaller one instead. In this respect he has a vague memory of an interview he once read with an athlete where she’d described how she pushed herself beyond her body’s pain threshold. She’d kept
repeating the importance of micro-goals: focus on the long-game and the task becomes overwhelming, but concentrate on a smaller, more attainable target and the sum of the parts becomes greater than the whole. An artificial deadline triggers the limbic system – and the limbic system means primal, visceral power – so Will forces himself to ignore the daunting enormity of the fight to escape the cell and focusses on Step One instead: to contact Hannibal again and then, after that, arrange access to a really good attorney.

Once again time has lost any real sense of meaning although the way the lights abruptly cut out, combined with the silence from the neighbouring cells, suggests it must finally be night time. In fact the silence is so complete that’s it slightly sinister – rather as if his neighbours have been sedated – and actually becomes its own kind of distraction after a while because it’s so incredibly eerie. By twisting across his pillow Will can just about see the corner of the skylight and the frosty sliver of moon confirms that it’s even later than he thought. The dead of night, thinks Will unhappily. But even then he doesn’t grow particularly alarmed: and it’s only after he’s arched his back against the mattress and let out a sigh that he hears a soft rustling sound in response from the depths of the corridor which immediately strikes him as odd. In fact the noise is extremely subdued, like dead leaves or tiny footsteps, and is initially hard to notice at all until he really concentrates on it. But then it happens again, and then again, once rustle after another; and it’s at this point that Will finally realises he’s being watched.

It starts off very subtly at first. So subtly, in fact, that there’s no clear evidence of it at all beyond a prickling, primal instinct that makes his skin crawl with a certainty that something is staring at him. Then it becomes a bit clearer as he gradually grows aware of the slow exhale of breath from somewhere beyond the bars. Turning his head against the mattress Will strains into the darkness, unable to detect anything at first beyond realms of curdled shadow until his sharp vision notices something gleaming from a few feet away; and which he initially assumes is glass reflecting in the moonlight before realising, with a sick plunge of unease, that it’s actually a pair of eyes.

As Will watches the eyes begin to elevate in a way that suggests their owner is standing up then slowly – very slowly – begin to slide towards him until they reach a shaft of moonlight and turn into the face and body of a man in an orderly’s uniform. He’s fairly young; younger than Will is, although with a jaded air of ruthlessness and cunning that somehow make him seem much older. His face is thin and well-shaped with a distinctive slant to the forehead and cheekbones, and as Will stares at it his memory gives a jolt of recognition that this is actually a face he’s seen before and has had numerous causes to question. It can’t be, he thinks numbly, it can’t possibly. Only a quick glance at the name badge on the man’s uniform confirms that it can and it is, and that his initial suspicion is both entirely and horribly correct. And it’s then that Will is finally forced to acknowledge the shocking truth of his situation: that if Jack’s suspicions are correct then there’s a possibility that right here, in the bowels of the earth and with no allies nearby, he’s about to come face-to-face with the Sculptor.

Matthew Brown stares back at Will with a curious expression on his face as his head swivels from side to side in an eerily mechanical way. Without averting his eyes he slowly reaches into his pocket and removes a bunch of keys before creeping closer towards the door of Will’s cell. In the depth of the blackness his dark shoes are impossible to see, and the white uniform combined with the lack of feet make him look as if he’s gliding – like one of Hannibal’s living ghosts.

“So here you are Mr Graham,” he says softly as he begins to unfasten the lock. “You’ve no idea how long I’ve been waiting to meet you.”
Thursday 04.30pm

In the hospital foyer Hannibal pauses at the door then casts a fastidious glance at the way the rain is sluicing down to drown the world in streams of gunmetal grey. To someone walking past he looks as if he’s hesitating, although the reality – as with so much of what he does – is that it’s entirely deliberate and there are actually very specific reasons for the pause. The first of these is that the rain’s ferocity has provided inspiration to indulge in one of his most recently-acquired habits: namely to start imagining, whenever he’s confronted with a new or striking bit of scenery, what it might be like to see Will in it. In this respect Hannibal feels that Will suits the rain because he has a wild and roaming temperament that’s perfectly at home striding through storms – not to mention the type of feathery hair and pale complexion that look excessively charming when wringing wet. Nevertheless Will being at home in the rain doesn’t change the fact that Hannibal is not; and which is why the second reason for the pause is to allow for a level of sulking at how he’s going to have to wade through it all to get to the visitor’s carpark. Hannibal allows himself a small irritated sigh towards the weather for being so unreasonable then turns up the collar on his coat; and it’s at this point that a young man passing by with a stack of folders promptly does a double-take at the sight of him before creeping back again and tapping his shoulder. Hannibal, resentful of being touched without permission, spins round immediately and the younger man gives a bashful smile then coos “Good afternoon Dr Lecter” in an excessively respectful way before peering over the top of the folders like a Southern Belle fluttering her eyelashes from over her fan.

Hannibal has no idea who this individual is – and even less interest in finding out – so darts his eyes over him then gives a non-committal smile in response. In fact a quick glance tells him all he needs to know: namely that the status of trainee doctor is obvious from the young face and slightly harassed air whereas the status of colossal idiot is equally obvious from his fumbling fingers, credulous voice tone and the lamentable lack of organisation in his files. Hannibal, who bypassed this awkward phase entirely when a student himself and has not grown more sympathetic towards it over time, now tends to relate to people like this almost as if they’re a foreign species; and on deciding that the man can be of no possible further interest promptly turns round to the doorway again.

“Lousy weather,” says the doctor to Hannibal’s back.


“So…what brings you here?” persists the doctor, awkwardly shifting the stack of files to his other arm. “Another seminar?”
Hannibal finally turns round and allows his wintry smile to plummet a few degrees lower at the realisation that not only is this person an idiot with a fondness for stating the obvious but also – possibly an even greater crime – one of the numerous fawning audience members who tend to hang around after Hannibal’s lectures and always insist on bringing their idiocy with them in the form of moronic questions. “No,” he replies crisply. “Visiting only.”

The doctor’s pink face begins to twitch with excitement. “Oh I get it now,” he says. “You’re doing your FBI liaison aren’t you? You’re here to see…” He hesitates then lowers his voice in a needlessly theatrical way. “Him.”

Hannibal stares back serenely without either confirming or denying who ‘he’ might be and the younger doctor adds, almost wistfully, “I haven’t been allowed to see him myself. I guess it makes sense they’d only send their most senior people.”

“And which will no doubt be yourself one day,” replies Hannibal with a degree of fake sincerity that’s positively lavish. “So please don’t let me delay you any longer.” He pauses then throws a small, cynical glance at the files – already looking mutinous and clearly poised to break free from their stack and escape across the floor. “I’m sure you have numerous things you need to attend to.”

As if responding to voice command the files promptly concede the inevitable and begin to topple over in a rather gleeful way and Hannibal silently congratulates them before turning back to the door again in what’s clearly a firm but polite gesture of dismissal. “You’re not staying then Dr Lecter?” adds the doctor with obvious disappointment as he bends to scoop them up. “Back to the FBI already?”

“I am – as soon as the rain eases a little.”

“I’ve got an umbrella in my office,” offers the doctor, who’s now almost blushing with pleasure at the thought of being some practical use. “Do you want to borrow it? I could go and get it for you – I’d be happy to get it if you don’t mind waiting?”

Hannibal, who like a cat loathes getting wet, is actually quite content with this solution so rewards the doctor with a slightly warmer smile; and who promptly simpers in response before pelting towards his office to retrieve the umbrella. He nearly skids at the bottom of the stairwell and Hannibal can’t help throwing a look of appalled fascination in his direction before neatly folding himself against the wall to wait – as subtle and carefully coiled as a cobra in his long dark coat – and slowly running his eyes over the assorted bodies in the foyer to see if there’s anything remotely deserving of his interest. Initially it seems as if there isn’t, and he’s about to turn back to the rain again in preference when his attention is finally caught by a large man who’s just appeared by the reception desk to begin a noisy conversation with one of the senior psychiatrists.

“So what gives?” demands the man. He has the swaggering, shambolic gait of a bear and every time he waves his hand it looks like the clumsy swipe of paws. “How come that little shit still isn’t talking? They told me that a few hours in here and he’d be singing to the rooftops.”

“It’s not really that simple detective,” replies the psychiatrist with obvious impatience. “Each one is different. And this one is…well, he’s extremely self-possessed.”

Very carefully Hannibal now begins to focus in on the speakers, although neither a flicker of movement or change of expression indicates that he’s paying them even the slightest bit of attention. “Bullshit!” roars the first man. “I’m tired of you quacks making out like there’s something smart or complex about these scum. Self-possessed my ass; he’s just stubborn is all. Stubborn and arrogant. You should have seen him sat there last night lecturing the cops on serial killers – he thinks he’s better than me.” The psychiatrist gives a polite little cough and the first man scowls ferociously and
adds: “He also thinks he’s above the law.”

“Yes, I agree with you there: he probably does.”

“Well I’m sick of it. If I have to see him one more time with that goddamn haughty, superior expression on his face I’ll slap it straight off him.”

Hannibal – who’s reflecting rather fondly that even if this did happen the man would only discover another, slightly smaller superior look straight underneath the first one – slowly pulls away from the wall and pretends to inspect a row of pamphlets that are spread out on a nearby table. “I want a confession,” snarls the detective in a louder voice. “I’ll beat it out of him if I have to.”

“You will not,” snaps the psychiatrist. “Nothing like that goes on in this institution.”

“Jesus doc, relax. Obviously I was joking.” He scowls again then pauses to unwrap a piece of gum and flings it bad-temperedly into his mouth, briefly looking more bear-like than ever in the way his jaws grind up and down. “Let’s face it, it’s not like the 80s anymore: there’s no way you can get away with beating down a suspect without those civil rights nuts jumping on your ass. There’s also the fact he’s an omega, which makes it even worse.”

“Well I hardly think his gender matters,” says the psychiatrist, beginning to irritably tap his feet.

“Of course it matters, don’t be so dumb. Have you actually seen him? He’s just this pale skinny little thing – looks like he wouldn’t hurt a fly. The jury’s going to wind up feeling sorry for him.”

“Not if you can make a solid case against him.”

“I bet those glasses aren’t even prescription,” muses the first man, half to himself. “They do that shit on purpose to make themselves look less threatening. I bet you anything he looks and acts totally different when he’s on his own.”

“Possibly.”

“No – definitely. Don’t get suckerized in by any of that ‘I’m just a sad ickle omega’ routine.”

“Actually he hasn’t been doing that; quite the opposite in fact.”

“Only because he knows I’m onto him,” says the first man stubbornly. “You just wait. As soon as I’ve left he’ll go full omega on every doctor in here. He’ll use you to practice for how he’s going to act in the courtroom.”

The psychiatrist frowns then waves his hand around in an obvious gesture of irritation. “Well as I said before detective: if you can make a strong case against him then his appearance hardly matters.”

“And how am I supposed to do that when you lot can’t do a damn thing with him? I bet you’re all falling for his bullshit as well – no doubt when I come back next time he’ll be sat in the director’s office with his feet on the table and you’ll be in his cell in a jumpsuit.”

“I hardly think it’s a case of…”

“He’s devious,” says the first man firmly. “I spoke to one his colleagues at the FBI. An alpha, Agent Skinner – nice guy. He got into all kinds of trouble with his boss because he was set up by that little bastard downstairs, so I’m warning you now: do not let your guard down.”

“A warning really isn’t necessary,” says the psychiatrist, who’s obviously offended. “I have ample
experience with violent patients.”

“Oh yeah?” demands the detective. “Then why haven’t I seen any results?” Without waiting for a response he shifts his gum to his other cheek then adds with a snarl: “I’ll tell you why – it’s because he’s not some big, ugly alpha with his knuckles dragging on the floor. If they’re an omega and they’re pretty then they think they can get away with goddamn murder: quite literally in his case. No wonder he’s running rings round you all.”

“As I’ve already told you detective,” replies the psychiatrist, who’s obviously tired of the conversation. “As I’ve already told you several times: you do your job and I’ll do mine.”

He deliberately turns his back on the other man and begins talking to the receptionist instead, and the former gives a noisy snort of disgust before rounding on his heels and beginning to stride towards the exit – at which point Hannibal glides away from the table then neatly steps into his path at the exact moment he shambles past.

The man rears backwards immediately, miming indignation and seeming for a few seconds as if he might be choking on his gum. “Hey!” he says. “Hey! Watch where you’re going buddy. What’s the hell’s the matter with you?"

Hannibal slowly swivels his head to deliver one of his more blankly inscrutable stares and the man falters for a few seconds at the sight of it then takes a step back. “Yeah…well,” he adds awkwardly after another pause. “I guess I could have been more careful myself.”

“It’s quite all right,” replies Hannibal, graciously accepting the implied apology despite having orchestrated the whole encounter in the first place.

As he watches with amusement the man begins to shuffle up and down on the spot, clumsily lunging from one foot to another in what’s a classic display of one alpha unconsciously submitting to another. “Say,” he adds eventually, peering a little closer at Hannibal. “Don’t I recognise you?”

“Possibly,” replies Hannibal with a modest little flourish. In the corner of his eye he can see the trainee psychiatrist heading towards them (eagerly brandishing the umbrella in both hands as if it’s Excalibur) and can’t resist taking a few seconds to privately congratulate himself on the impeccable timing. In this respect he’s seen enough of this idiot alpha to know that he’s the swaggering, egotistical type who likes to ingratiate himself with people he thinks have high status; and sure enough the bear-like expression immediately begins to relax when he sees the deferential way the doctor offers over the umbrella. In his head he’s clearly deciding that Hannibal is someone who’s worth getting to know – which in turn is going to make Hannibal’s next task almost ridiculously easy to accomplish – and Hannibal allows himself a last private smirk before adding: “Likewise, you seem rather familiar yourself. Haven’t I seen you in the papers?”

“You sure have,” says the detective smugly. “You’re looking at the guy who caught the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal opens his dark eyes very wide then does a convincing display of being impressed. “How interesting,” he says.

“Yeah, I guess you’ve heard about him huh.”

“Hasn’t everyone?” replies Hannibal airily. “Not to your level admittedly, although I imagine you have a much greater incentive.” He pauses then gives a flicker of a smile. “To keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”
“Yeah you’re not wrong,” replies the detective cheerfully. “There’s nothing I don’t know about him. It’s always that way in law enforcement: a battle of wits, y’know? Like Al Capone and…what was the guy’s name?”

“Eliot Ness.”

“Yeah, him.”

“A true clash of the titans,” says Hannibal with his best possible poker face. “As it happens I do some liaison work for the FBI so I’m aware of the case – although I couldn’t claim your level of expertise.”

“FBI huh? So you must know all about that crazy omega they’ve had running around.”

Hannibal slowly drags his eyes across the man’s face for a few seconds then adds in the same scrupulously polite voice: “And your name is?”

“Byers. Chief Lieutenant Len Byers.”

“A pleasure to meet you Lieutenant Byers,” says Hannibal with another Sphinx-like smile. “You know if you could spare the time I’d find it extremely useful to speak further about some of your insights.” Byers emits a second smug grunt that’s even louder than the first and Hannibal’s faint smile broadens before he leans in a little closer and adds: “I don’t suppose you happen to have a business card?”

Thursday 09.00pm

Having only ever seen him as a grainy figure that flickered round the edge of crime scenes, Will’s first thought about Matthew Brown is that he’s much taller than he’d imagined him to be. Broader too, with even the slack and badly-fitting orderly’s uniform failing to hide how wiry his limbs are or the way his muscles twist across his chest. His skin is extremely pale in the clammy unhealthy way of something starved of sunlight and forced to live in the damp and the dark, yet his features overall are surprisingly good – strong and well-shaped – with the only thing preventing outright attractiveness being the air of crafty callousness and an overall coldness in his expression that at certain angles look more like a wax mannequin than an animated human face. Although it’s not as if any of this really matters – none of it matters at all – and it’s hardly important whether he’s tall or slim or attractive or ugly as opposed to the fact that he’s there. And it seems so unbelievable that he is, even though it’s happening, because such an elusive quality has been built up around him through the numerous discussions with Jack and the endless sifting through reports and photographs that it scarcely seems feasible there could be an actual man crouching behind it all in an orderly’s uniform and a bunch of keys who was under all their noses the entire time and hiding in plain sight.

It’s for this reason that after the initial wave of shock has worn off Will finds that his main response to the spectre of Matthew Brown in his cell is a powerful curiosity that stokes his investigative instincts and briefly overrides the fear in an attempt to understand what’s really going on. Admittedly there’s nothing concrete to link Matthew to the Sculptor case beyond his repeated appearance at the crime scenes and the vague similarity of his name to Richard Black’s – and which Will was admittedly always inclined to dismiss as a coincidence up until now. Yet looking at that twitching face staring fixedly at his own he’s still overcome with an urge to simply blurt it out – *Are you the Sculptor?* – except that Hannibal’s remark about recording devices is in the forefront of his mind and he knows Brown’s hardly likely to just stand there and admit it. Then he also wants to ask about Richard Black and the Nemesis murders, despite knowing it’s pointless for exactly the same reason,
so in the end he doesn’t say or do anything beyond casting his eyes round the cell for something that might possibly come in use as a weapon – and realising, of course, that there’s nothing – as Matthew Brown takes a slow step forward, darting his tongue across his lips then tilting his head to one side in an eerily reptilian way that makes Will want to shudder.

“I’ve waited so long to meet you Mr Graham,” he repeats. “*So long. It’s such a shame. Because now you’re finally here, and I can only stay a short while.*”

This statement is followed by a small pouting motion of the lips and forehead, rather as if he and Will are on a long-awaited date that’s been prematurely cut short, and the bizarre assumption of intimacy means Will can’t help saying “Why do you care about meeting me?”, despite not being sure if he really wants to know the answer.

Matthew Brown raises his eyebrows again like he’s surprised Will would want to ask something so stupid before slowly rearranging his mouth into another pouting motion. The overall effect is distinctly unsettling – like some kind of robot or metal manikin that’s being controlled remotely and ineptly by unseen hands. “Because I’ve read about you,” he says, and there’s a clear touch of impatience in his voice. “Obviously.”

*Obviously,* thinks Will wryly. Equally obvious is the choice of reading material, and in the end they both say the same thing at exactly the same time: “The TattleCrime.”

This synchronised response causes Matthew Brown’s face to crease into a smile, clearly delighted at what he’s taken as a sign of mutual understanding. “Exactly,” he says. “I knew from the beginning there was something special about you.”

The way he says ‘special’ makes Will’s skin crawl and confirms beyond doubt that what this really means is that he’s taken Freddie’s constant hints about Will’s instability at face value – almost as if he’s seen the Dark Reflection lurking beneath the endless lines of newsprint and felt it answer an echoing strain in himself. “*Special,)*” repeats Matthew, appearing to enjoy the way the word feels in his mouth. “Even the Sculptor saw it. After all, you’re the one he chose to send his business cards to.”

Will’s head jerks up sharply at this, immediately struck by how he’s referring to the Sculptor as a separate person whose only link to himself is that the two of them happen to share a similar view of Will. In fact the distinction sounds so clear in the way he says it that Will’s initial instinct is that he isn’t the Sculptor at all before remembering the recording devices and reminding himself that of course it *doesn’t* mean that. In fact it doesn’t really prove anything beyond the fact that if Matthew is responsible for the Sculptor murders, he clearly has no intention of admitting it. Nevertheless it still feels odd, and can’t help jarring with Will’s sense that the *actual* Sculptor would want to take credit for his work. “Is that why you started showing up at the crime scenes?*” he asks, trying to make his voice sound casual.

Instead of replying Matthew smiles again then takes a slow swaying step to the left just as Will does the same, moving in parallel as if they’re engaged in some sort of yearning *danse macabre.* The motion causes their silhouettes to splash across the ground like spilled ink that soaks and mingles together at the edges and on noticing it Will automatically moves away, reluctant to concede any kind of commonality.

“And now you’re here,” adds Matthew softly, “and it shows I was right about you: I was right about you all along. *You and me…we’re hawks Mr Graham. But hawks are solitary and that’s their weakness. Have you ever seen the way smaller birds will mob a hawk sat on a line? Enough of those smaller birds get together and they chase the hawks away. Imagine if the hawks started working together.*”
Hawks my ass, thinks Will irritably. What the fuck are you even talking about? Then he stares back without speaking as Matthew takes another step forward, and then another, his stealthy footsteps seeming overly loud in the silence of the cell. In fact he’s easily close enough now to touch Will – all he’d have to do is raise one of those pale spidery hands. His eyes are gleaming in the slivers of moonlight and when he darts his tongue across his lips his teeth gleam wetly too until for a few seconds that’s all Will’s really aware of: eyes-hands-teeth, getting closer all the time. “Strength in numbers,” murmurs Matthew in the same eerily crooning voice. “Unity through purpose: you and me sat on our line, just like the hawks. Do you see Mr Graham? Do you understand? People don’t understand much about me, or about you. But at least we understand each other.”

He’s started smiling again now in a way that makes his small teeth glisten like fangs; but while Will sees it and hates it, he still can’t help feeling how even the surreally nightmarish quality of the situation isn’t enough to override his deep disappointment that Matthew hasn’t said anything more meaningful about the Sculptor murders. In fact he scarcely seems concerned with them at all beyond the Sculptor as someone who shares his own unhealthy preoccupation with Will; and considering Will’s sole interest in him is in relation to the case the lack of reference to it feels like an enormous anti-climax. How much do you really know? thinks Will. And what do you know about Richard Black? Then he catches sight of Matthew’s expression and promptly feels a new wave of unease crash over him, because although it’s only a matter of seconds since he last glanced at it it’s already as if a different person has walked into the cell. In fact if his manner before was soft and insinuating – flirtatious, almost, in the determination to make a good impression – then he’s now adopted a cold, glinting expression round the eyes that make him look like he’s ready to ignite. And Will immediately knows without being told that just as he’s disappointed in a lack of reference to the Sculptor case, Matthew is furiously disappointed himself that he’s just delivered a speech he’s probably been mentally rehearsing for months (possibly years) and Will hasn’t shown the slightest interest in either it or him.

As if to confirm this Matthew takes a final step forward and hisses in a tone that’s distinctly less friendly than before: “Is that all you’ve got to say to me Mr Graham?”

Considering Will hasn’t said anything he’s briefly confused at how to respond to this, so ultimately just frowns instead. Matthew frowns too then darts his pales eyes downwards over Will’s throat before dragging them up to his face again. “So are you going to tell me who that alpha was?” he adds, immediately proving Will’s sinking sensation that he’s noticed all the bruises. “The one who was visiting you earlier?”

Will regards him coolly with the same blankly impenetrable stare and Matthew draws his lips off his teeth and snarls: “He was all over you: all over you the entire time. And you let him.”

For a few seconds he sounds like Andrew and Will experiences a renewed surge of loathing that makes his fists visibly twitch with an urge to spring at that sickly leering face and pound it to pieces across the flagstones. Admittedly it’s not like he seems capable of posing a genuine threat to Hannibal, but the fact he was spying on them the whole time – lurking in the shadows and silently resenting someone trespassing on what he obviously thinks is his territory – makes Will’s vision blur with a sense of outraged protectiveness that’s white-hot, cold-blooded and utterly ruthless. If you ever go near him, he thinks, then I’ll kill you, you bastard. I’ll fucking kill you.

Matthew, obviously mistaking Will’s silence as submission, gives a final crooked smile then begins to glide towards the door again just as soundlessly as he arrived. “Think about what I’ve said,” he adds. “Everyone knows the truth about you now Mr Graham so you’re going to be here a long, long time. I could help you though – if you make it worth my while. You know we belong on the same side.” It sounds like a chant or a mantra: an article of faith. Matthew Brown and Will Graham, bound together ‘til death do us part, and the unspoken implication of it makes Will give an involuntary
flinch of disgust. “We’re a team,” adds Matthew with a calm sense of certainty that manages to be far more disturbing than anger would have been. “We belong together.”

He carefully locks the cell behind him then makes as if he’s about to leave before abruptly swivelling round again and pressing his face against the bars so he can stare at Will directly with his weirdly gleaming eyes. The suddenness of it is unnerving and in spite of himself Will takes an automatic step backwards. “And do me a favour Mr Graham,” adds Matthew softly. “Tell that alpha to stay away. Don’t let him visit you again; don’t even contact him again. He’s a distraction and if he knows what’s good for him he’ll leave you alone.”

He runs his eyes over Will for a few more seconds and then finally slips away, almost seeming to dissolve into the blackness in the slithering way he moves. Will stares after him, repulsed and unsettled, then waits until a few minutes have passed before darting forward so he can check and re-check the shadows beyond the bars. There’s certainly no signs of rustling breath or gleaming eyes this time round, although even then he can’t fully accept that Matthew has gone and keeps expecting him to leap out the darkness again like some kind of nightmarish horror movie figure: the kind with a mask and a machete that no matter how many times you kill them refuses to ever fully die. And maybe the analogy isn’t all that misplaced after all, because while Will knows that nothing in their conversation proves Matthew Brown to be the Sculptor, it undoubtedly means his name’s just shot several places higher up the suspect list.

In fact it takes Will a long time to calm down – far longer than he would have liked – and nearly an hour has passed before he’s able to stop patrolling the cell and lie down on the mattress again. But sleep still stubbornly refuses to come and he ends up gazing numbly into the swirling swathe of blackness instead as he resumes his previous planning with a renewed sense of urgency that somehow – oh God, somehow – he has to find a way out of this. Then he flings himself on his side and stares at the wall, trying as hard as he possibly can not to acknowledge the fresh sense of fear that’s hovering above his head and poised the entire time to pounce and smother him. Because the incarceration is bad enough, and the cell is bad enough, and being parted from Hannibal is unbearable…but right now what’s really crushing him is the way that someone like Matthew Brown could not only accept the lie of the Chesapeake Ripper so incredibly easily, but needed nothing beyond a few articles on a website to understand the notes and nuance of the Dark Reflection and therefore get a sense of what Will is truly capable of. It’s like being stripped and flayed: the awareness that the darkest, hidden parts of himself are fully visible in all their dripping, grotesque deformity to those like Matthew Brown who want to see them.

And it’s then, finally, that he really does feel like screaming.

*****

Friday 05.30pm

Within the silence and solitude of his house Hannibal inhales deeply into a glass of Merlot and takes a leisurely sip. The wine is a good one: distinctive, aromatic and the same deep red as blood when it catches the light, and taken together it undoubtedly demands admiration. Yet Hannibal’s appreciation remains subdued in spite of it, because he can’t ignore how its scent and flavour are being soured by the knowledge of how much more enjoyable it would be if Will were there to share it with him. In fact Will doesn’t care at all about wine and the peerless taste and provenance would be completely wasted on him; only Hannibal doesn’t care about that either, and if anything actively enjoys the thought of indulging Will with wine that costs more than some people’s monthly rent without him even being aware of it. In this respect the wastage is more captivating than it’s annoying because Hannibal is a virtuoso at turning life’s most humble staples – food, drink, clothing – into glittering vehicles to showcase his power, position and flair and using such things to subliminally seduce and
dazzle Will is unlikely to ever lose its appeal. Hannibal now smiles to himself, silently mulling this over. Omegas are supposed to be receptive to displays of wealth and status in their alphas as a sign of security both for themselves and any future offspring; whereas Will (of course) always seems stubbornly resistant to it. But then this never seems to matter either and simply makes the challenge of trying to win him over all the more enjoyable.

Hannibal takes another sip of the wine then pauses for a few seconds, imaging what Will might be doing if he was here right now. Most likely he’d be pacing around the room: pensive and perfect and probably stopping every so often to run his hands through his hair or gnaw absent-mindedly on a thumbnail while remaining oblivious to all the signs of money and influence that surround him. He might stay still long enough to catch Hannibal’s eye and smile slightly – Hannibal, who always collects these expressions of Will’s and stows them away for savouring, now smiles very slightly himself at the thought of it – although he’d be on the move again shortly afterwards. He’s so fluid and loose-limbed that he always seems more comfortable roving around and leaning against furniture than he does sitting stiff and straight-backed in a chair; and while the habit would be unbearably irritating in anyone else, in Will’s case such restiveness is rather charming. Closing his eyes Hannibal now follows the progress of this imaginary Will as it prowls around the room, pausing only to tousle its hair to make it look more windswept then adding a determined curve to its mouth and eyebrows. You’re not designed for confinement are you, thinks Hannibal fondly, finally satisfied with how wild the imaginary version now looks. You should be roaming free.

As if on cue the phone abruptly starts to ring beside him, its shrill bell sounding almost shockingly loud in the otherwise silent house. Finally, thinks Hannibal, immediately darting out to lift the receiver with a quick swipe of the hand. He’s fully expecting it to be Jack and sure enough there’s the familiar impatient exhale on the other end before Jack’s rumbling voice starts up like the revving of an especially low-pitched engine. “Glad I caught you,” he says, obviously not in the mood for a proper greeting. “You’re never going to believe what’s happened.”

Hannibal, who already knows, adopts an attitude of carefully cultivated surprise and agrees that yes; he’s almost certainly not going to.

“Oh, you were never totally sure were you? That little voice in the back of your head whispering that he might just possibly have done it.” He pauses for a second time, just enough to let Jack start to feel uncomfortable. “Is that why you didn’t do more to help him?”

“I did what I could,” replies Jack stiffly. “Be fair. I’m the head of Behavioral Sciences, not the Attorney General – I couldn’t just walk out the police station with him, no matter how much I might have wanted to. But yeah, of course I didn’t want to believe he was the Chesapeake Ripper. The irony is that Will said it to the cops himself: he told them they’d have been better off just charging him with the Alderton murder. Trying to pin him as the Ripper was where they went wrong.”

Clever boy, thinks Hannibal approvingly. Out loud he says: “So they’re going to release him?”
“Oh yeah they have to, no doubt about that. The precinct is in complete chaos though; that’s the other thing. You’re not going to believe this either, but…” He lowers his voices, briefly sounding rather over-awed. “The Ripper took out the guy in charge of the whole investigation.”

“The one who’s been in all the newspapers?” asks Hannibal, idly inspecting his fingernails.

“That’s the one,” says Jack with poorly-disguised venom. “Byers. Sonofabitch; I couldn’t stand him. Not that he deserves that,” he adds hastily. “But let’s just say it couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. The state police are supposed to work with federal investigators, not try to get the jump on us. I was planning to put in a formal complaint.”

“Oh well,” says Hannibal, who’s started to smile again. “I don’t suppose you’ll have to bother now will you?”

“He pushed procedure to the absolute breaking point just to try and make a name for himself,” adds Jack irritably. “In fact Will thinks the real Ripper was angry with him because of all the press coverage. I think…”

“And where is Will now?” interrupts Hannibal, who’s not remotely interested in what Jack thinks.

“That’s the thing – he’s disappeared again. The police were as petty as hell about it: just signed him out with no apology or anything. When I got to the hospital he’d already left.” Jack sighs heavily, obviously reviewing old grievances. “That alpha of his smashed his phone at the FBI so I can’t call him either and he can’t call me. After that fiasco with the Sculptor he told me he was staying in a hotel but I’ve no idea which one. I want you to let me know immediately if you hear anything.”

“Of course,” says Hannibal, who has no intention of doing anything of the kind.

“Poor Will,” adds Jack with obvious feeling. “God knows how all this is going to affect him. He’s going to need all the support he can get.”

“Of course,” says Hannibal sincerely, even though he’s already lost interest in the conversation because his sharp ears have just detected what he’s been waiting for all evening: a faint knocking coming from the hallway. “I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me now Jack,” he adds. “I had a call earlier from a patient in crisis and I really need to go. But do let me know if you hear anything from Will.” Then he drops the receiver and cuts Jack off mid-flow so he can get downstairs without any further delay: holding his breath the entire time and hardly daring to hope that the longed-for outcome might have happened so quickly.

The lock has swelled slightly in the rain and Hannibal hisses with impatience before wrenching it open and searching out in the darkness for what he wants more than anything else to see. In fact the shadows are so thick that at first it seems as if no one is there and the knocking was just an illusion borne from urgency and longing; but then the porch light clicks on as a figure steps forward and Hannibal is finally able to take in the pale haunted face and the large eyes and the slim shivering body that’s soaked through from the rain. Then he draws a sharp breath in spite of himself, because – I missed you so badly, thinks Hannibal, I missed you more than words can express.

So without saying a word he holds open his arms: and Will, without saying a word, goes straight into them.

*****

Friday 06.30pm

Will is initially too tired and strained to talk very much, so Hannibal makes no attempt to force him
and opts to offer silent solidarity instead by tenderly stroking his face and the back of his neck. Then he runs Will a bath and sits on the side so he can wash his hair for him and sluice the prison dirt from his body with Florentine soap; murmuring occasional words of praise and encouragement the entire time while caressing Will’s shoulders with the same delicate precision as a cat cleaning its paws. By the time he’s finished Will seems half asleep and doesn’t have the energy to retrieve any clean clothes from the bedroom so Hannibal wraps him up in one of his own shirts instead: partly because he knows the way his scent lingers on it will have a calming effect on Will, but also because it’s too big for him and makes him look charmingly coltish and willowy in how his slim legs protrude beneath the fabric and seem to run on for miles. Will is clearly irritated at being fussied over to this degree but seems too overwhelmed from the trauma of the last two days to make much objection to it – although finally rebels when it looks like Hannibal’s going to try and hand-feed him by standing defiantly at the far end of the kitchen and delivering a glare from over the top of his glasses.

“Enough,” he says crossly. “Stop treating me like I’m fragile.”

Hannibal leans back against his chair then regards Will with a very faint smile. “Why?” he says. “When it’s so good at provoking you into being your normal self? This is the first time you’ve shown any energy since you got here.”

Will goes quiet for a few seconds, clearly struggling to hang onto the remains of his irritation, before catching Hannibal’s eye again and eventually giving up. “So you were doing it on purpose?” he says, trying not to smile as well. Hannibal adopts a mock-virtuous expression and Will smiles a bit more then drags a hand through his hair. “You’re so manipulative. You just can’t help yourself can you?”

“Probably not. Although it’s hardly the only reason – you’ve had an extremely difficult few days.”

“Yeah,” says Will tonelessly.

There’s a sudden edge of fretfulness to his voice that wasn’t there before, and while it’s too subtle for most people to detect Hannibal glances up immediately. “Will,” he adds, when no other response seem likely to appear. “What’s the matter?”

Will doesn’t answer straight away, instead staring sadly down at the floor as he traces a pattern against the tiles with his foot. “I’m not sure,” he finally says. “I just…I don’t feel too great.”

“Tell me.”

“It started this morning,” replies Will, who’s still staring at the floor. “I keep getting sick. My temperature’s gone up.” He pauses a few seconds then takes a deep breath before finally lifting his head and looking genuinely anguish. “Do you see? I’m scared that during the heat you might have…I’m afraid I could be…”

Hannibal sighs then holds out a hand and Will heads over rather dolefully and allows himself to be pulled against Hannibal’s chest. “You’re not,” adds Hannibal, aware of a complex sense of disappointment as he says it that he wasn’t entirely prepared for. “Your scent would have changed if you were; I’d have noticed it immediately. Besides, we were very careful.” Pulling away slightly he cups Will’s face with one hand. “Look at you: you’ve gone white. The idea really horrifies you doesn’t it?”
“Horrified is a bit strong but...yeah. It’s not exactly something I want.”

“I know you don’t, but I promise it’s not a concern. What you’re describing is most likely due to stress – or possibly a side effect from the drugs he gave you.”

Will nods, obviously relieved, then pulls away himself and scrubs his hand over his face. “Thanks,” he says. “I appreciate it.”

“Why? It’s not as if I’ve done anything.”

“For not being offended. Most alphas would be.”

“Yes, but I’m not ‘most alphas,’” says Hannibal with a small smile. “Besides, I understand where your fear is coming from.”

“You don’t really,” replies Will with a hint of irritation. “It’s different for alphas.”

“I agree: it is. But I know you dislike the idea on principle because you don’t want the responsibility – it’s not a difficult concept to imagine and is doubtless a position that many omegas would share.”

“I guess,” says Will, who’s starting to sound agitated again.

“Only it’s something else with you isn’t it?” adds Hannibal as if reading Will’s thoughts. “Something more…unique?” Will flinches slightly and Hannibal immediately tightens his grip to prevent him pulling away. “I know it’s not only the responsibility,” he continues, resting his cheek against Will’s hair. “I think what you’re truly afraid of are the traits you believe a child of yours could inherit from you.”

Will opens his mouth as if he wants to say something before closing it again half way through. Then he goes completely quiet and simply nods in response before roughly disentangling himself and stalking towards the living room in the sort of restless, aimless way that suggests he’s not particularly interested in going there as much as he wants to avoid the conversation. Hannibal follows behind, completely undeterred by the obvious dismissal, then settles himself on the sofa and holds out a hand in silent invitation for Will to join him on it. Will immediately develops a sudden fascination with the painting over the fireplace and pretends not to notice, but after a minute or two finally relents and walks over rather cautiously; hesitating to begin with as if battling an urge to bolt away again before eventually sitting down then stretching himself out so his feet are on one end of the sofa, his head is on the other, and the middle of his body is draped across Hannibal’s knee.

“That’s better,” says Hannibal, taking hold of Will’s hand and twining their fingers together. “More comfortable, at the very least.”

“Hmmm.”

“You look exhausted though. Why don’t you go to bed?”

“In a minute,” replies Will, returning the pressure against Hannibal’s hand.

“You know I always feel a sense of achievement when you do this,” adds Hannibal fondly. “You’re so aloof most of the time and it makes your affectionate moments all the more worthwhile. Like winning the trust of something that can’t be tamed…something wild and wary that lives by its wits.”

“So I’m an animal now?” says Will irritably.

“No, not at all: I only mention it because it fits with what we were discussing before.”
Will gives an irritable shuffle then abruptly pulls his hand free. “Look, just drop it can’t you?” he snaps. “I really don’t want to…”

“You don’t have to,” says Hannibal, lightly pressing a forefinger against Will’s lips. “I don’t expect you to discuss anything; I simply want to express it myself – your concerns about what kind of legacy you might give to a child.” Will sighs in response and Hannibal reaches down so he can smooth his hair out of his eyes from where it’s begun to tangle there. “All that pure empathy,” he says softly. “It destroys you in so many ways doesn’t it? It makes you distance yourself from people and cause them to see you as remote and unapproachable, when all the time you’re just trying to protect yourself. I remember seeing you leave from a crime scene once: you had tears in your eyes, you were so disgusted and devastated by what you’d had to put yourself through. Of course it makes sense that you’d fear condemning a son or daughter to the same experience.”

Will gives a small nod, briefly looking anguished once more, and Hannibal takes hold of his hand again and rubs his thumb across Will’s knuckles. “But there’s another aspect of it too, isn’t there?” he adds in the same quiet voice. “The one that frightens you even more. It’s the one I believe would make you choose another omega as a partner if you could: a person who’d already had a child with someone else so you could experience parenthood vicariously without having to risk setting another Dark Reflection loose into the world. Because that’s what really bothers you about having your own child isn’t it? What you see when you look in the mirror.” Sighing slightly he leans down and presses his lips against Will’s forehead. “Your beautiful mind: it saddens me that you can never see it as anything other than monstrous. Remember what I told you in the hospital Will – the only way you can stop being haunted by it is to look it in the eye.”

Will quivers beneath his touch, appearing for a few seconds as if he might be on the verge of crying, and Hannibal sighs again at the sight of it then puts a finger beneath his chin and gently tilts his face upright. “You’re so disgusted with yourself at the moment aren’t you?” he says and there’s a clear note of compassion in his voice which isn’t usually there. “Even more so than usual. I suppose you were able to disregard it in prison because you were in survival mode, but now the price of your freedom is self-reproach. I want to discuss that Will; and in a moment we shall. First, however, I’m afraid you’re going to have to humour me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve missed seeing your face and now it’s here I find that I don’t want to do anything else except look at you.”

Will squirms self-consciously then wrinkles his nose. “Perhaps I don’t,” adds Hannibal, smiling down at him. “What a gargoyle you are.”

“You’ve seen me all evening.”

“No,” says Will with an obvious trace of sadness. “I’m really not.”

“You are to me,” says Hannibal. Closing his eyes he begins to trail his fingers across Will’s face, light and deft as a blind person reading Braille, and Will sighs in response then leans into the touch without moving or speaking until a sudden sharp clicking sound makes him jump – just before the lights go out and the entire room is plunged into blackness.

“A power cut,” says Hannibal drily. “And speaking of darkness as we were; the universe has
impeccable dramatic timing.”

“I guess,” replies Will in an unusually quiet voice. “It still doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” says Will. “Because it’s you. Even if I can’t see you I’d still know it was you; I’d always know.” Hannibal makes a soft noise of agreement and Will pulls himself upright so they’re facing one another then raises a hand so he can begin to carefully trace the outline of Hannibal’s features: along the forehead and down the bridge of his nose followed by a delicate brush along both eyelids and a slow caress of the jaw. “Cheekbones,” adds Will, trailing his fingers back up again. “I’d know those anywhere.” Hannibal makes an amused sound and Will strokes them a second time. “Alpine, almost – like someone’s chiselled them out. And your mouth.” He moves his hand further down and rubs Hannibal’s lower lip with his thumb. “I like the way it curves. It’s distinctive but somehow…it’s serious too. Even when you smile you still look sad.”

“Not always,” says Hannibal, kissing Will’s fingertips.

Will leans forward to kiss Hannibal properly, sensing out his mouth in the dark while continuing to stroke his face with one hand and exploring his neck and chest with the other. “Fine-boned and fierce,” he adds, pulling away slightly so he can press his lips against Hannibal’s throat. “You’re all angles and sharp edges.”

“And you are silk around a steel core,” says Hannibal. “Something soft and lissom concealing an unbreakable centre. Interesting how the loss of vision heightens the other senses isn’t it? The way I can smell you now…how I can feel you.” He skims his fingertips along Will’s collar bones then down his ribs and Will strokes his face in return while murmuring his name.


Leaning forward he begins to kiss Will’s neck, pulling away occasionally to whisper something soft in a foreign language. “I don’t know what that means,” says Will, beginning to slowly rock his hips against Hannibal’s before tipping his head back to provide better access for the kisses.

“I know you don’t – and by design.” Hannibal pauses for a few seconds then gently presses their foreheads together. “There are certain messages I want to give you that I’m not certain you’re ready to hear. So I tell you them by stealth instead.”

“Tell me now.”

“No, not now. But one day I promise I’ll tell you properly and then you’ll fully understand.”

“Cryptic aren’t you?” says Will, pretending to nip Hannibal’s ear with his teeth.

“Perhaps you’re right,” murmurs Hannibal, slowly sliding a hand beneath the shirt. His touch is exploratory yet worshipful and Will quivers and gives a small moan at the sensation of warm, firm skin caressing his own. “Clarity is something to strive for after all,” adds Hannibal, resuming the soft line of kisses along Will’s throat. “And I did promise it the last time we spoke. In fact in that respect I have something I want to ask you. Would you do that for me?”

“How can I know until you’ve asked it?”

“Then I’ll do it now. It’s only one thing I wish to know beloved, just one…” As Will moans again Hannibal gently cradles his head with his other hand to keep him still then ghosts his lips against his ear and adds in a voice that low and hypnotic: “The thing I want to know Will is…why did you
choose the Chesapeake Ripper? Why him? Why not the Sculptor?”

Beneath his hands Will immediately goes rigid, every muscle tense and quivering as if poised to bolt, and Hannibal makes a soothing noise and kisses his face and throat in an attempt to calm him while also gripping his back to prevent him pulling away.

“You knew all along didn’t you” replies Will finally, and his voice sounds hollow and numb with shock. “You knew the entire time.”

“Yes mylimasis. I knew the entire time.”

“How? How did you know?”

“Because I know you,” replies Hannibal in the same soft tone. “I know you killed him Will. I think you were merciful and did it quickly; most likely it was self-defence – perhaps you didn’t initially intend to do it at all. But I think you lashed out harder than you meant to in that hotel room and as a result were left not only with a dead body on your hands but full awareness of what society would do to an omega that harms an alpha.”

Will’s breath hitches sharply and Hannibal makes another soothing noise then skims his palms up and down his spine. “Ah Will…what a cunning boy you are. It was incredibly bold and ingenious of you: to deflect attention from yourself you moved the body then arranged the crime scene to make it resemble another killer’s work – and as we see you were entirely successful. It was a huge gamble of course, and you were unfortunate that Lieutenant Byers was so over-zealous, but you knew that even if they did charge you as the Ripper the case against you would fall apart eventually. Either the Ripper would kill again or they’d be unable to link you to the original crimes. And so it proved – no doubt much, much faster than you dared to hope for.”

As Will trembles again Hannibal inhales deeply against his skin then brushes another slow kiss along the edge of his ear. “I understand it beloved,” he adds in a voice that’s soft and smouldering. “I understand all of it. There’s only one thing remaining, and I want you to tell me – I’m curious to know. What made you choose that particular source of inspiration? I want you to describe it Will: with so many killers at your disposal, why did you choose the Chesapeake Ripper?”
The power is still out so in the end Hannibal builds up a fire and they sit side by side in front of it so Will can stare fixedly at the way the flames shimmer and writhe. By now he seems incapable of looking Hannibal in the eye and when he dips his head his face gets bathed in the blaze each time like one of the damned from a La Bonne painting that’s forced to bear numerous torments while remaining dry-eyed and quietly desperate. In fact his whole posture is reminiscent of countless different crime scenes – the sense he’s painfully immersed in something while simultaneously trying to separate himself from it – and yet from Hannibal’s perspective remains infinitely more fascinating than any of the others, given that the crime in question is his own. But Will still doesn’t speak or move, and for a long stretch of time the only noise at all is the faint crackle of flames and a whisper of synchronised breath as Hannibal stares at him and silently urges him on with the same intensity as Will is staring at the glow of the fireplace.

“I knew I would kill him,” says Will finally, and his voice sounds numbly mechanical as if he’s trying to detach from the meaning and is merely a conduit for a flow of words that really belong to someone else. “His life for mine: I knew one day it would come to that.” He pauses and frowns, his pale face illuminated by the flames in a way that’s distinctly eerie. “Him or me.”

Hannibal nods in wordless approval then leans back so he can get a better view of the small nuances of expression that are flickering across Will’s eyes and mouth. “What you told the police,” he says with interest. “How much of it was true?”

“All of it was, up until the confrontation itself.” Will frowns again then gives a bitter, humourless laugh. “The fewer lies you tell in a situation like that the better.”

“Sometimes one needs to lie in order to create the truth.”

“Yeah, well, it was the only option I had. Obviously the whole thing was designed to sound as convincing as possible.”

“And you succeeded didn’t you,” replies Hannibal with the faintest trace of a smile. “In front of Jack Crawford as well; who would have thought you could be so fluent in deceit?”

Will shrugs then draws his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms round them. As a pose it’s almost child-like, and Hannibal can’t help feeling slightly mesmerised by the contrast between the vulnerability of his body language and the steely ruthlessness of what he’s actually saying. *So subdued yet fierce*, thinks Hannibal appreciatively. Rather like a tiger cub that’s been raised by humans; something wild, beautiful and solitary that’s learnt to be tame, and even affectionate, yet remains primed to turn savage and wounding at a moment’s notice because it can’t repress its true nature.

“The only thing I lied about was how quickly the sedatives wore off,” adds Will in the same low voice. “Andrew worked out the dose assuming I was still on heat suppressants and it gave me a huge advantage – everyone thought I was weaker than I was. But otherwise it was all true about the chauffeur disappearing then being able to slip the handcuffs. In fact it was him vanishing that made the difference; it’s what made the whole thing possible. I knew he wasn’t coming back, I could tell from the way Andrew reacted. But I would never have wound up killing him without that. And I honestly can’t decide if it was the best piece of luck in my life or the worst.”
“The best of course,” replies Hannibal serenely. “Fortune always smiles upon her favourites – and you are a true child of fortune.”

Will finally turns his head and throws a quick glance at Hannibal, although seems to lose interest halfway through and just gives another small shrug before turning back to the fire again. “It was so weird him disappearing that way,” he adds. “Almost like it was fate. Jack told me he was found dead outside. They thought it was something to do with drugs: a mugging gone wrong.”

“I know, he told me something similar. And so this fortunate intervention occurred and you made the most of it.” Hannibal pauses then gives another faint smile. “Precisely as fate intended.”

“Maybe,” says Will in the same toneless way. “It’s hardly like I had a choice.”

Hannibal waits a few seconds until the silence has stretched on long enough to make Will grow visibly anxious and uncomfortable, then moves forward and carefully repositions himself a little further down the hearthrug until they’re close enough to touch. “Sometimes fate must be cruel to be kind,” he says softly. “After all, merely escaping from Andrew could never have instilled the same catharsis as destroying him. It needed the intimacy – it needed your bare hands.”

Exactly as intended Will appears to shrink slightly at the sound of these words and Hannibal continues to watch without attempting to touch him until he shows some sign of being able to tolerate the contact. In fact from Hannibal’s perspective the entire exchange is designed to induce a very specific effect, and as he scrutinises Will’s internal battle it’s impossible not to review their earlier prison conversation about what might be considered therapeutic. Therapy only works when we have a genuine desire to know ourselves as we are, not as we would like to be, thinks Hannibal with interest. It’s for your own good, beloved. A plunge into the Underworld to face your darkest, greatest challenge…then arise afterwards, blood-smeared and triumphant. “It’s not like it was before Will,” he now says out loud. “You’re no longer suffocating in oblivion; now you are obliged to question your motives – to cultivate your urges as the inspirations they are. Because it wasn’t just your Dark Reflection that was haunting you, was it? It was the inevitability of there being a man so bad that killing him felt good.”

Will quivers again then closes his eyes before letting his head droop to the side until it’s resting against Hannibal’s shoulder. “I know,” he says quietly.

Hannibal sighs with satisfaction then lightly kisses Will’s forehead as a reward for being so courageous. “Of course you do,” he replies, and from the closeness of his lips it’s as if the words are being murmured straight into Will’s skin. “I told you so many times: to constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict.”

“Although I hardly diminished the violence, did I?” says Will bitterly. “I magnified it.”

“Naturally you did. ‘William’: it’s such an appropriate name for you isn’t it – the war deity and warrior. We established that some time ago, I believe, and now you have the extra battle scars to prove it. Tell me, how did you organise…” Hannibal pauses delicately then brushes his lips against Will’s forehead again, “your kill?”

Will gives a small flinch, obviously unsettled by the choice of the word, although when he speaks again he still sounds determinedly calm. “Andrew was furious when he saw me walking out the bedroom,” he says, and Hannibal is pleased to note the quiet satisfaction in his voice. “It was like he was in shock for a few seconds; he honestly couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Actually that’s another lie I told the police, because I said I got the bruises when I was carried into the hotel and I really got them then when he tried to attack me. It was so easy to fight him off though – easier than I ever imagined it could be. It was like someone else just took me over.”
“I know,” replies Hannibal softly. “Perhaps someone did.” Will winces again then glances down at where his hands are clasped across his knee and as Hannibal follows his gaze his faint smile begins to broaden. “Remember what I told you?” he adds. “All the things one can accomplish with one’s bare hands. Tell me…did you appreciate the intimacy of it?”

“Yes,” says Will in the same low voice.

“Yes,” repeats Hannibal. “It wasn’t as frightening as you imagined, was it?”

“It wasn’t – no.”

“The closeness of it all,” adds Hannibal with something like relish. “The intimacy. It’s something that’s always been central with you: the way your yearning for intimacy threatens your self-control and how you long to give yourself over to the rapture of losing it. The ecstasy of it – indulging all your darkest desires. They merge in ways that are corrupted, don’t they? And yet remain so beautifully and artfully displayed.”

“Beauty and horror,” says Will tonelessly.

“Of course; just as I’ve always said.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately, instead staring very intently into the fire as he bites his lower lip. “I could tell immediately that his neck was broken,” he finally adds. “And that’s when I knew I was in serious trouble. Even self-defence wouldn’t have cut it; kill an alpha when you’re an omega and you’re in an institution for life.”

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal, whose voice is now as low and smouldering as the smoky remains of the fire. “And so you…improvised.”

“Yeah,” says Will tonelessly. “I improvised.” He pauses again then tucks his face a bit closer against Hannibal’s. “I knew I didn’t need to worry about my DNA being found on the body because I’d have an innocent explanation for it being there. So I didn’t need gloves or protective gear, nothing like that. I just slung his arm round my shoulder then took the service elevator to the ground floor. It was ironic really, because that was exactly how he took me in – if anyone saw us I was going to use the same excuse he’d used with me and pretended he was drunk. But in the end I didn’t see anyone. I went out the back way where all the delivery vans would normally be. It was dark by that time, completely deserted. It was perfect.”

“Perfect,” repeats Hannibal. He smiles to himself then raises his hand so he can begin to run his fingers through Will’s hair. “You didn’t leave him in the hotel though did you? It was such a singular choice of scene; why did you take him where you did?”

“Because the museum was the last thing I saw when he dragged me out his car,” says Will with a sudden trace of sadness. For a few seconds he falls silent again, briefly screwing his eyes closed as he remembers how the skulls on the poster had seemed to act as silent witnesses with their empty sockets and grinning teeth. “There was a weird kind of symmetry in it. Plus it was incredibly easy to break in.”

“Naturally,” says Hannibal with obvious admiration. “Once again fortune favours the bold.”

“I just picked the lock on one of the side doors,” adds Will before sighing then closing his eyes again. “It was so quiet inside – so quiet, as if there was no one else alive in the world at that moment except me. It was almost like being underwater…just silence and the way the rain looked against the windows. Have you ever seen those windows they have in the main hall? They’re so big they
practically take up the wall. The moonlight was streaming through them so there was nothing but silent space and this eerie silver rain. I already knew what I wanted because of a poster I’d seen when Andrew dragged me out the car – this big exhibition of prehistoric animals. I pulled him over to one of the skeletons and...yeah. I guess you saw the photos. You know what I did to him.”

Hannibal flexes his neck slightly, lith and leonine as a large jungle cat, then gathers Will a bit closer and presses his face against his hair. “So tell me,” he says softly. “Did your heart race when you murdered him?”

There’s no immediate response and Hannibal lingers, watching and waiting and biding his time in mutual silence before Will replies in a voice that’s subdued yet still resolute: “Yes.”

“And how did you feel?”

Will’s head promptly drops down at the question, elegantly exhausted as a wilted flower, yet when Hannibal entwines their fingers together he immediately holds on and returns the pressure with a firmness that’s unmistakable. “I never felt as alive as when I was killing him.”

“Then you owe him a debt. How shall you repay him?”

“I already have.”

“Y-e-s,” replies Hannibal, and there’s a low hum of energy in his voice that wasn’t there before.

Will opens his mouth then closes it again, clearly struggling with what to say next, before pulling himself upright and resuming his fixed staring into the depths of fireplace. In fact his entire posture is radiating strain and discomfort, yet despite looking like he wants to escape he still makes no attempt to let go of Hannibal’s hand. “You know what I’m going to say don’t you?” he adds without turning his head.

“I think I can guess. In fact I think it relates to my original question – why you chose the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Right,” says Will with a trace of frustration. “Then why ask at all if you already know?”

“Because I want to hear you explain it,” replies Hannibal softly. “I want to hear it in your own words.”

Once more Will doesn’t answer immediately, instead falling silent for several seconds before abruptly getting to his feet then resettling himself on the floor behind Hannibal so he can drape himself across his back and rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. In fact his discomfort is so obvious that it’s clear the gesture is to avoid eye contact, and when Hannibal brushes against his forearm the softness of the skin makes a dramatic contrast to the rigid quilting of muscles underneath – so tense and taut by now that they almost seem ready to snap. “His violence is so refined,” adds Will quietly. “So physically elegant. It’s as if the victims are a canvass for him to transform an object of revulsion into one of beauty.”

“And how did that feel for you Will?” asks Hannibal in a voice that’s equally low and intense. “Assuming that mind-set? You don’t see the world the same way he does – and yet you were so
quick to assume his point of view.”

“It’s hard to explain,” replies Will with obvious agitation. He falls silent again then buries his face in Hannibal’s shoulder. “It’s really hard. In relation to Andrew I mean…it doesn’t make all that much sense.”

“Try,” says Hannibal silkily. Very gently he tightens his grip on Will’s neck then dips a thumb beneath his shirt collar so he can stroke the delicate skin there. “ Somehow the right words will present themselves.”

“I can’t…I…”

“You can,” purrs Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s neck even more tenderly than before.

Will takes a deep lungful of air then lets it all out in a long exhale. “Okay,” he says, “okay, this is going to sound bizarre – I know it will – but when I was in the museum I saw an exhibit that somehow seemed to capture it.”

“Excellent. Then begin from there and expand.”

“So…” says Will, and he sounds as if he’s choosing each word with great care. “Have you ever heard of a kangling?”

“I have, yes. An instrument made from a human thigh bone.”

“Right.”

“A means of honouring the dead.”

“Exactly,” says Will, and once again he sounds incredibly strained. “I hated Andrew; you know how much I hated him. But to just kill him like that… I never imagined – I never wanted to imagine – that I could kill someone unless the circumstances were extreme. I mean like a survival situation: if they were directly threatening my life or someone else’s. He wasn’t doing that, not anywhere close…and yet it was so easy to kill him. It frightened me how easy it was.”

Hannibal sighs in response then falls silent himself, briefly overawed all over again by this positive masterpiece of consequence and principles that’s currently draped over his back with its large eyes, deadly hands, fragile bones and luminous, lethal beauty – a slim dark soul that right now seems solely designed for its breathless capacity to captivate and inspire. “I understand,” he adds eventually, finding it hard to conceal how impressed he is. “You bore screams like a sculptor bears dust from the beaten stone. You felt guilt in the horror of taking someone’s life, yet also knew that to avoid prison you had no choice but to disguise the crime scene. So rather than desecrate him in the manner of the Sculptor, you elevated him in the manner of the Chesapeake Ripper. It didn’t matter that he didn’t warrant it – the gesture was not so much for his sake as for your own.”

Will sighs then nudges Hannibal’s shoulder with his forehead, obviously relieved at being understood so easily without having to explain. “The Ripper has no traceable motive,” he says, and once again it sounds as if each word is costing him considerable effort as he struggles to resist any suggested similarity to himself. “It’s why he’s so hard to see. He configures death as art, as arbitrary. His grand arrangement: everyone’s equally deserving.” Pulling a bit closer to Hannibal he gives a small shudder. “They fail his standards of worthiness so he transmutes them and creates something that warrants exhibition.”

“Or consumption,” says Hannibal idly. “One could even deem it commemoration. A memorial of sorts; wouldn’t you agree? The tragedy is not to die, after all – the only tragedy is to go to waste.”
Then he pauses for second time and when he speaks again there’s a trace of something like disappointment in his voice which Will is too strained and preoccupied to notice. “You’re still ashamed though aren’t you? It’s why you’ve moved behind me; you can’t even bring yourself to look me in the eye.”

Will only response is to sigh in an aimless, exhausted sort of way and Hannibal waits for a few more seconds before taking hold of his wrist so he can lever him round until they’re sat side by side again. “It’s your nature Will,” he adds quietly. “Embrace it; what other alternative do you have? You delight in wickedness and then berate yourself for the delight.”


“Oh yes, naturally,” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. “Tolerate. It’s a paradox for you isn’t it? You haven’t yet fully discovered the…appetite.” He gazes into Will’s face in a rather mesmeric way, and Will stares back with a flash of defiance before seeming to lose his nerve and looking away first. “What you said earlier,” continues Hannibal. “About the ‘symmetry’ of leaving him in the museum. I think you’re underestimating it: I think there was more to it than just that.”

“Yeah?” replies Will in the same toneless voice as before.

“You arranged his remains on the bones of a prehistoric animal,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “A beast. Something primal and primitive; something close to nature. In doing so you transform him – and you also transform yourself. No, don’t pull away,” he adds as he feels Will flinch. “Andrew was regressed into his true state – bestial and savage. You, on the other hand…” He pauses then runs a slow, considering finger along Will’s forearm. “You are learning to adapt and evolve: to become. You are transforming into a purer and more authentic version of yourself. You’re also becoming more fearless, because what you accomplished in the last few days required an extraordinary level of audacity in order to succeed. So that’s yet another transformation: the shy, introverted investigator becomes a consummate breaker of the law. Didn’t I always tell you that you were an alchemist? And so it’s proved, just like I predicted – see how you’ve reified the base elements into the purer ones?”

“You sound as if you admire it,” says Will stiffly.

“I do: I’m also fascinated by it. I’m fascinated by all human capacities.” Hannibal trails his finger along Will arm again then gives another faint smile. “Also in choice, and the consequences of our choices. Just like you and the disappearance of the chauffeur – you were presented with a certain set of circumstances and consulted your innermost instincts to react accordingly. I like trying to understand your reactions Will – and I like to explore the way they reflect my own. You might find this hard to believe, but I sometimes feel that I can understand myself better through understanding you.”

Will darts him a quick glance but ultimately doesn’t reply and instead returns to staring into the fire instead. “Nothing to say?” adds Hannibal, sounding curious rather than annoyed. “I suppose I can’t blame you. It disturbs you doesn’t it? That closeness. The concern of what might happen when you begin to see so much of yourself in another person that you can no longer deny your connection to them. It’s harrowing, isn’t it Will – not only the vulnerability it causes, but also the temptations. Because what’s to stop you using the intimacy as a prompt to let your Dark Reflection show itself? Like yourself and the Ripper, even if it was only for a very short time. Your connection to him liberated you; not least because it gave you recourse to a type of justice that was impossible by any other means.”

Will shrugs, briefly looking haunted and stricken again, and Hannibal sighs and places a hand on his shoulder. “Look at you,” he says in a gentler voice. “You’re so profoundly uncomfortable in your own skin – and all the time fighting for a version of yourself that you so desperately want to be true.
It’s as if you’re being forced into a disguise, isn’t it? This skin of yours…” He idly lets his hand stray upwards across Will’s shoulder then along his collar and across the edge of his jaw. ‘It’s so confining for you at times – like a badly-tailored suit. You have my sympathy Will; I also know about pretending to be something one is not. But you need to understand that it’s all about connection. It’s possible to be alone without being lonely, but I think you struggle with that too because you can’t find a connection with yourself. You can’t reconcile intimacy and solitude because you dislike yourself so intensely.”

Will finally glances up and catches Hannibal’s eye. “So what about you?” he asks in the same quiet voice.

“My loneliness comes from different reasons; a main one being that I once lost something very precious to me and I know I can never recover it.”

“Then you’re as alone as I am – and we’re both alone without each other.”

“And combining our artistic natures,” says Hannibal lightly. “You know, this reminds me of a conversation we had many months ago after your altercation with that drug dealer. I quoted Nietzsche’s observation that ‘He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not himself become a monster; and when you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you.’ Do you remember? We agreed that you can keep your perceptions of your monsters to yourself and appreciate their design without becoming them. We also agreed that there’s no moral outrage which, in the right hands, can’t acquire the aesthetic properties of beauty.”

“Yes, I remember,” says Will quietly. “Retain your artistry and resist the abyss.”

“Exactly. A monster, therefore, lacks artistry; just like the Sculptor does. And the particular monsters you pursue always end up destroyed by what they are. I’m determined – I’ve always been determined – that you won’t end up destroyed in the same way. Good and evil Will…they’re not independent forces. Creating a sense of self, for example; that would be seen as an absolute locus for the fight between good and evil, yet identity is not merely a process of curating various moralities: it is a representation of art.”

Will nods wordlessly, suddenly looking exhausted, then finally shuffles sideways until he’s close enough to rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. “I knew when I really wanted to kill him,” he says with obvious sadness. “It was when we were driving away and I saw you in the FBI; that moment our eyes met. I couldn’t stand you thinking I’d gone back to him by choice.”

Hannibal sighs then leans down and kisses Will’s forehead. “I would never have thought that.”

“But what that Dr Hall guy told you about post-heat hormones…”

“I would never have thought that,” repeats Hannibal firmly. “You’re surrounded by people who reduce you to your biology – I don’t happen to be one of them. Although in that respect, I should say that fabricating omega stress syndrome when you were arrested was an inspired move. You might as well make the prejudice work to your advantage.”

“It was a gamble,” says Will. “But yeah – I was desperate.” Then he lets out his breath in a long exhale and when he speaks again it’s so quiet that Hannibal has to lean in to hear him. “I wasn’t completely faking it though. I wanted you right then. I wanted you so badly.”

“I understand. I wanted you too.”

“It’s not the same,” says Will fretfully. “You know it isn’t. There’s no real equivalent for alphas
when they get parted from their omegas.”

Hannibal smiles at this then deftly tucks a strand of Will’s hair behind his ear. “Is that what you are then? My omega.”

“No,” says Will.

This is said in a tone of such stubbornness that it makes Hannibal laugh then tug Will closer towards him so he can kiss his forehead again. “Maybe alphas don’t have such a definable physical response,” he adds, “but the emotional impact of separation is equally powerful. I can assure you I was just as preoccupied with your absence as you were with mine.”

Will gives a small smile of his own to show he’s pleased by this then relaxes a bit more until he’s fully resting against Hannibal and letting him bear his entire weight. “I can’t even imagine going back to work after this,” he finally says. “It’ll be…yeah. It’ll be pretty bad. The stigma of it’s going to hang over me for a long time. Possibly forever.”

“Yes. I’m afraid it possibly will.”

“Jack wasn’t too bad I suppose. At least he did what he could. And Siemens, of all people, ended up helping me out – the absolute last person I would’ve expected.”

“Oh yes, I remember: that odd lawyer.”

“Jack sent him to the precinct to speed up getting me released once the new Ripper murder was discovered. He was pretty good to be honest; quite different to how he normally is. He went a bit stupid over me a while back and I think he’s still embarrassed about it. That was his way of trying to show he’s more competent than he first came across.”

“What do you mean he went ‘stupid’ over you?” asks Hannibal sharply.

“Forget it,” replies Will, equally sharply. “I dealt with it myself.”

“Has he been harassing you?”

“I said I dealt with it.”

“He’s still working with you isn’t he?” adds Hannibal after an ominous pause. “Still based in the same office?”

“Oh God, just drop it can’t you? And don’t you dare say anything to him.”

“There’s a loophole in that particular clause,” replies Hannibal with a grim little smile. “If I promise not to say anything to him, it still leaves an opening to do to him whatever I like.”

“You will not. He hasn’t been bothering me for months. Besides, he’s completely harmless.”

“No one is ever completely harmless,” says Hannibal. “He’s clearly been imposing on you – and even if he’s ceased to do so, the fact he did it at all implies a regrettable lack of boundaries.” He waits for a few seconds, obviously musing over the implications of this, then slowly swivels his gaze in Will’s direction before starting to smile again. “You know, it intrigues me to consider how many of your colleagues might also describe you as harmless: you’re surrounded by people who are only motivated to see the lightness in you and grow so dazzled by it they miss the darkness entirely.” Will makes an impatient noise and Hannibal reaches out then gently grips him by the chin, running his eyes over his face the entire time as if trying to consider him from the most precise angle possible.
“Light and darkness…” he repeats thoughtfully. “I’m always describing your inherent contradictions to you and you never want to listen. Not that it really matters I suppose. Duality thrives quite comfortably whether acknowledged or not; just as the moth hunts by moonlight and the butterflies have the day.”

This time Will doesn’t bother to reply at all. Instead he just twists his face free so he can roll his eyes at Hannibal – who rolls his right back – and which makes Will give a small, mournful smile before relenting slightly and shuffling a bit closer so he can rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder again. Hannibal props his head against Will’s without saying anything else and Will basks for a while in the comfort of a companionable silence before closing his eyes and allowing himself to slowly drift away. The focus of his thoughts is the same thing as usual – the last few seconds with Andrew and the sense of inevitability as the dark side took over – and while it’s something he’s re-envisioned countless times in the last few days the raw potency of it still hasn’t faded. As he thinks of it now he can feel his pulse start to quicken in sympathy with his former self: the way he’d thought I’m going to kill you, the calm detachment of it, the rush of blood and heartbeat and the cold finality of knowing there was no other option now; how there was nothing else left. How it had needed to be quick and efficient – skin against skin, strangely intimate – erasing the restrictions of physical distance and mental detachment, and maintaining control even in the ecstasy of losing it. Righteous, rebellious, redolent with the alchemy of transformation…and all done with his own bare hands.

At the image of this Will now shifts slightly against Hannibal’s shoulder as his memory gives another twinge and prompts him to begin mentally reviewing the police reports and photos from the Chesapeake Ripper. In his mind they’re swathed in tattered crime scene tape that fluttered in empty air and if he focuses he finds it’s surprisingly easy to experience them again: all those initial impressions and instincts, the narrative that had emerged from each imprinting…so vivid and vital when torn from behind the dry typescript and photocopied pages, like a gothic Grand Guignol tragedy performed just for Will – the only one who could see it. Except that Hannibal, of course, seems able to see it too: sitting so close with his head resting against Will’s and ready to gaze into his face at a moment’s notice with that unnervingly rapt stare so he can begin constructing Will’s whole philosophy and purpose from nothing more than flickers of expression or a certain tone of voice, like an archaeologist painstakingly assembling a prehistoric being from nothing but a few fragments of bone. ‘These hands of yours. There’s so much ferocity in them isn’t there? All the things one can accomplish with one’s bare hands…You’re surrounded by people who are only motivated to see the lightness in you and grow so dazzled by it they miss the darkness entirely.’

Lightness and dark, thinks Will hazily. Although surely it’s not as simple as that, is it? It never was. There’s far more than just light and dark in a hotel room with Andrew, or the silent space of the Natural History Museum, or Hannibal’s house by the fireside in the dead of night. There are provocations and incitements, there’s instinct, there’s empathy and imagination, and there’s your own bare hands and what you need to do with them because there’s no one else to do it for you. There’s Andrew – the person so bad that killing him felt good – and there’s the way the heart pounds and the blood rushes and how it looks black in the moonlight. There’s the version of Will who sits in Jack Crawford’s office or delivers earnest lectures to trainees, and who nods shyly and smiles reluctantly then pushes his glasses up with his forefinger. And then there’s the twisted version, the Dark Reflection; the one that only Hannibal seems able to fully understand. Will imagines glancing up now and seeing it stood in the shadows by the door, lean and watchful with the blood still on its face and the tattered gore-stained hands. Will’s haunted self: burning with native fire and fuelled with natural passion, whose spirit is perfectly realised, whose virtues and vices are entirely his own, and who is unashamed and unafraid and concedes to no one.

.It’s like I’m too full, thinks Will with a sudden surge of panic. And this much, at least, is true: because he is. It’s like struggling to contain two different people: one too right and one too wrong, one life that’s lived and one that’s only thought about – an entire concerto of contradiction. In fact it’s
as if this Reflection is here right now, also gazing into the fire; the exact opposite of Will, and yet also exactly like him, biding his time and lying in wait. He’s both symmetry and adversary – the dark mirror image – and the idea of his existence, taken to its logical conclusion, surely means that Will is destined to break…a clean snap, straight down the middle.

At the thought of this Will screws his eyes tight shut, fighting to repress the swell of fear and console himself that it doesn’t mean anything, not really; he’s just tired and overly emotional and therefore taking everything far too literally. Besides it’s not like there’s anything wrong with dichotomy. Surely what’s more important is the way it’s managed rather than the fact it exists; just a case of establishing harmony and concurrence between the separate impulses and resisting a hierarchy, just like Hannibal’s analogy of the moths and butterflies. And isn’t it inevitable anyway – even necessary? The world needs it divisions and oppositions, just as Will does. Joy couldn’t exist without sadness, after all, just like truth can’t exist without lies. No passion without apathy, no knowledge without ignorance, no pleasure without pain. Just as light is part of darkness, and creation needs destruction. And as death is a condition of life.

Will’s no longer sure how long he’s been lost in his own head, but it must have been a while because the fire’s nearly burnt down and the room is cold and shadowy. “Will?” Hannibal is saying, his voice very velvety and soft in the darkness. “Where have you gone? Come back to me.” He begins to run his palm up and down Will’s back like someone smoothing out a piece of material and Will blinks a few times and forces himself to focus on the touch as a means of grounding and steadying himself. Then he pays careful attention to his breathing: one breath in and one breath out (another natural opposition) and reminds himself that everything’s safe now and there’s nothing to feel so tormented over. It’s not as if he even has the physical or mental energy required for such soul-searching anyway. Not now. Not ever. I can’t, thinks Will, I can’t I can’t. And so – he doesn’t. Then he tells himself instead that it’s all in his imagination. Just a phantom impulse, falsely created in the intensity of the moment, and no more real or lasting than the flickering images that twist around in the fire.

From somewhere in the blackness Will gradually grows aware of how Hannibal is still repeating his name. The tone is so tender and reassuring that it seems to be an invitation for him to respond, although even when he doesn’t Hannibal doesn’t seem annoyed and simply moves away until he’s sat directly behind Will then gently tugs him against his chest, wrapping one arm across his waist and the other round his chest then holding on. In the midst of so much internal chaos the sensation is hugely comforting and Will gives a small sigh then rests his face against Hannibal’s shoulder. “Stay with me,” he says abruptly. “Please. Stay with me tonight.”

“You know I’ll stay. How can you even need to ask?”

“Because…” says Will. “Because after everything that’s happened…After what I’ve done…”

Hannibal lightly presses his fingers against Will’s mouth to show that further self-reproach isn’t necessary, then lightly kisses his cheekbone and adds in a mock-serious voice: “I’ll stay, but on one condition: I want you to humour me and give me permission to carry you upstairs.”

This is enough to make Will laugh before nudging Hannibal’s arm with his forehead. “No,” he says. “No way. You can lead me upstairs – by the hand – but that’s as good as you’re getting.”

“I suspected as much,” replies Hannibal. “I suppose I’ve only myself to blame for asking. Not that it’s entirely my fault; it would appear having you away from me for so long has brought out all my worst alpha instincts.”

“Oh dear Dr Lecter,” says Will. “That’s rather embarrassing for you.”

“Yes it is, isn’t it?” says Hannibal, who looks on the verge of laughing as well. “I’m more deserving
of pity than contempt. And yet how I’ve been missing you Will Graham – you have a talent for making your absence felt.”

“Have I?”

“You have.”

Will gives another small smile then carefully places his hand over Hannibal’s. “I came back though.”

“Yes” says Hannibal, returning the pressure. “And if you hadn’t I would have come and got you. Don’t forget that Will. I never doubted you could deal with the situation yourself…but if anything had gone wrong I would have come and got you.”

“How could you have done? You didn’t know where I was.”

Hannibal pauses very fractionally then strokes his cheek against Will’s. “I would have found you somehow,” he says quietly. “No matter how long it took or how hard it proved. I would have searched for a lifetime if necessary; and if the search proved fatal then I would have made sure I looked for you in the next life and found you there instead. No matter how many lives, or lifetimes, or different versions of ourselves…I’d still always find you.”

Will goes extremely still in Hannibal’s arms and when he finally speaks again the crack of emotion in his voice is obvious. “How can you say that after everything I’ve done?”

“Very easily.”

“But when you know about that part of me? That dark, ugly part…”

“Him too,” replies Hannibal simply. “I want to get to know him better – I want you to show him to me.”

“No,” says Will with a visible shudder.

Hannibal falls silent for a few moments then slowly brushes his lips against Will’s jaw, up across his cheekbone then along the edge of his ear. “Yes,” he says softly.

“I don’t…what do you mean?”

Hannibal briefly buries his face in the back of Will’s neck then lets go of him entirely and gets to his feet. In the smouldering remains of the fire his face looks vaguely infernal – all hollows and sharp edges – and as Will watches he holds out a hand and says: “Do you trust me?”

“Trust you for what?”

This time Hannibal doesn’t respond at all beyond smiling very faintly before lowering his hand to cradle the side of Will’s face. Will stares up in silence, for a few seconds looking intensely wary and vulnerable, and Hannibal stares back as he processes all the flickers of expression which show Will’s obviously struggling about the best way to reply. “Do you?” he asks again in the same low voice. “Perhaps you don’t. But at the very least – would you like to find out?”

He brushes Will’s lower lip with his thumb then lets go of his face and once more offers his hand in an invitation for Will to follow him. And Will, after one last hesitation, finally reaches up – and takes it.
I usually only reproduce the more well-known lines word-for-word, so in case anyone didn’t recognise it "You bore screams like a sculptor bears dust from the beaten stone" isn’t my original dialogue but is taken from the S2 episode with that weird guy who wanted to be a cave bear and ended up getting Grahamed instead (in that respect extra kudos to the people who guessed the relevance of the museum reference when it first popped up a few chapters ago :-D)
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to the lovely marlahanni and Lowrie who’ve made my day with some fabulous fanart for chapter 27 and a brilliant new cover. In fact people have been so kind making glorious cover art for this that it gave me the motivation to get my technodumbass head round how the embedding feature on Ao3 works, so they’re in chapter 1 now if you want to see them all together. Thanks also to people who’ve suggested collecting all the art into a single chapter; I definitely intend to make this, but sorry in advance for the delay because I’m embarrassingly rubbish with this kind of stuff and it takes me ages to do.

Also, just to let you know that parts of this update are very NSFW so if that’s not your thing then you might want to skip some sections. Additional kudos to our Lord and Saviour, Saint Bryan of Fuller, who inadvertently inspired some of the themes in this chapter in an interview discussing ways that the Devil is portrayed in media: “Sexuality and the sexual act in its ideal form is something that takes us out of our heads and allows us to merge with another being and experience a life energy that is hard to quantify outside of an intimate setting. That connectedness and that loss of body and form is a magical seductor.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal keeps a firm hold of Will’s hand the entire way upstairs; secure and unwavering amid the shadows and with a tightness that borders on painful and an air of possessiveness that Will knows he’d normally resent but in this context finds strangely reassuring. It’s been over an hour now but the power still isn’t back, so the intensity of the darkness is disorientating and filled with crooked silhouettes in every corner wherever a rogue sliver of moonlight manages to spill across the floor. It makes it seem as if the house is filled with half-formed human figures – spectres or ghosts that would wither away once the light was on them – and which Will’s imagination readily supplies with an eerily choking quality that reminds him how unfamiliar such utter blackness actually is.

This is how it must feel to be blind, he thinks: charcoal where the colour used to be and nothing beyond a stretch of dim and shady shadow as the world disappears and your eyes can no longer grasp reality. The only constant is the feel of Hannibal’s hand around his, the skin warm and firm beneath Will’s with a ridge of bone and coil of muscle – flesh and blood amid all the phantoms.

Once they’re on the landing Hannibal pauses for a few seconds and Will hears the faint rustle of breath in the darkness before an arm shoots out to wrap around his chest and Hannibal takes advantage of Will’s momentary blindness to carry out his previous threat of picking him up. Although the suddenness of it is unnerving and makes Will flinch, the ridiculousness of it also manages to break the tension, and after briefly going rigid he finds himself giving a burst of laughter followed by assorted gasps of “Oh God, this is so stupid – stop it you maniac.” Hannibal smirks slightly but refuses to comply, instead burying his face in Will’s hair then ignoring his struggles completely in favour of kicking the bedroom door open so he can ferry him through and deposit him on the bed.

“Idiot,” says Will when he lands.
“Brat,” replies Hannibal. “No, don’t move,” he adds as Will tries to haul himself upright. Leaning over he puts a hand on his forehead and gently but firmly pushes him back down. “I want you like this.”

Will pretends that he’s going to play along then waits until Hannibal has turned round and promptly sits upright again. “You’re already disobeying me aren’t you?” says Hannibal’s voice, fond and amused from somewhere in the depths of the darkness. “What a rebel you are. I don’t know why I bother asking you anything.”

Will gives a tiny smirk of his own then peers into the shadows, eyes straining uselessly as he tries to get a sense of what’s happening. “Where are you?” he says when it’s clear this isn’t going to achieve very much. “What are you doing?”

“Candles,” replies Hannibal succinctly. “I don’t know how long the outage will last and what I have in mind requires a little illumination.” His voice still sounds disembodied as if the darkness has swallowed it up, and Will waits out the silence in growing impatience before there’s a flare of matches and Hannibal finally emerges again through the gloom: somehow managing to seem even taller than usual and carrying a wrought iron candelabra whose numerous arms writhe and flicker in the half-light like as many black serpents.

“Oh God, seriously?” says Will, trying not to laugh. “How very gothic of you. You look like a butler in one of those 50s horror films.”

“Do I?” replies Hannibal. He deliberately holds the candles beneath his face so the shadows spill upwards and give him an exaggeratedly eerie look. “But then what role would that give you?”

Will, who doesn’t have the faintest idea, rolls his eyes at Hannibal in silent reproach for being so melodramatic and Hannibal gives a faint smile in response then places the candles on the bedside table. From this angle the flames make his face looks unworldly – all jagged hollows and unnatural slants – and he stares down at Will with an unreadable expression for what feels like several minutes before suddenly coming back to life again and darting towards him. Will half sees it coming and makes an attempt to roll away but somehow Hannibal is quicker: striking out unnaturally fast like a snake or mantis so he can neatly climb on top of Will then pin his wrists above his head.

“Hey!” says Will sharply, suddenly unnerved. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“Well don’t,” snaps Will, reluctant to admit he doesn’t exactly know the answer to this question. “I don’t like it; I don’t like being held down.”

“Why not?” asks Hannibal. He loosens his grip slightly but doesn’t let go and Will glares back at him without actually making a serious attempt to struggle. “Is it because it makes you feel like you’re not in control?”

“Yes.”

“Helpless?”

“Obviously, what do you think? Now get off.”

Hannibal gives a slow smile then finally releases Will’s wrists and cups his face instead. His fingers, ghosting along Will’s jaw and cheekbones, feel strangely delicate despite the firmness of the touch. “You’re unsettled now aren’t you?” he says softly. “Tell me why.”
“Because I don’t know what’s going on here,” admits Will, a note of irritation clearly snapping through his voice. “What you said downstairs…I don’t know you’re planning to do.”

Hannibal merely nods as if he was expecting a response like this then shifts his weight to give Will more room before leaning down to kiss his throat. “I can feel your pulse,” he adds, and his voice is so soft and languorous it feels almost as caressing as his lips are. “How it races. Fluttering and trembling like a bird in a cage.”

“It’s not,” protests Will.

“But it is, beloved,” replies Hannibal, beginning to run his teeth against Will’s jaw. Although it doesn’t hurt Will still squirms uncomfortably at the sensation and Hannibal gives the skin a tender lick of apology then immediately does it again even harder than before. “What you told me earlier; when you said you trusted me. Did you mean it?”

Will sighs loudly in a way he hopes sounds impatient rather than nervous then roughly wrenches his hands free. Hannibal lets him do it, appearing to be rather fascinated at the show of resistance, and Will grabs his shoulders and tugs him downwards in an attempt to get the right leverage to grind their hips together. In fact he’s well aware the question’s intended as a loaded one – and at one point even has a vague sense of shaking his head – but despite it the reply that comes out, unmistakably loud and firm, is: “Yes.”

Hannibal gives a low sigh of his own when he hears this then presses his lips against Will’s forehead, sliding his legs upwards at the same time until one of his thighs is rammed up against Will’s groin. Will’s breath promptly catches and Hannibal smiles again as he cups Will’s hips in both hands and begins to rock them back and forwards. “That’s it,” he says as Will starts to pick up his own rhythm. “Good boy, that’s beautiful.”

“Oh yes,” says Will quietly. He bites down on his lower lip, shamelessly thrusting himself against the iron hard stretch of Hannibal’s thigh, then whimpers slightly as he feels a hand stroking his face before straying back to his throat again.

“Why does your pulse raise so fast Will?” asks Hannibal in the same soft voice as before. “Is it because you’re afraid – do you think I’m going to hurt you?”

“No,” says Will. Hannibal promptly pushes his leg further forward and he gives a choked-off moan as his eyes fall closed. “Anyway, I…ah. I wouldn’t let you.”

“Wouldn’t you?” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to run his finger along Will’s lower lip. “Do you really think you could stop me?”

“Of course,” says Will fiercely.

“But how would you do that, my love? After all I’m much stronger than you are.”

“I don’t care.”

“Hmmm, you truly don’t do you?”

“No. Oh God, Hannibal, that feels so good.”

“It’s supposed to feel good,” replies Hannibal in an usually tender way. For a few seconds he stares at Will in silence like someone entranced then takes hold of his hips again to help rock them even harder. “As it happens I agree with you,” he adds, with a level of sincerity that Will’s too far gone to pay proper attention to. “There are very few people for whom I’d say the same but you’re
undoubtedly one of them. Not that it matters of course, because I have no intention of harming you.”

By this time Will is bucking against Hannibal’s thigh rather frantically and hardly seems to be
listening – only focusing again to give a loud groan of frustration as Hannibal pulls away and he
finds himself thrusting into empty air. “I know, I’m sorry,” says Hannibal, “but this time I want you
to be patient.” He briefly falls quiet again, still wearing the same indecipherable expression and face
mostly obscured in the shadows, then without any warning seizes hold of Will’s arms and jerks him
upright.

“Oh God, what now?” says Will, irritably snapping his eyes open. “Don’t you know anything about
how this is supposed to work? I thought you were doctor.”

He roughly twists his arms free and Hannibal gives a private smile at the familiar display of rebellion
while privately marvelling at how immensely charming Will’s flashes of temper always manage to
be, despite being the sort of thing that would be unbearably ugly in anyone else. He decides to let
Will sulk for a few moments simply to relish the spectacle of it then finally leans forward and deftly
flicks open the top few buttons of his shirt. Will’s breath catches sharply in response and Hannibal
kisses his jaw and murmurs his name before slowly sliding a hand across the exposed skin. “You
know I enjoy seeing you in my clothes,” he adds. “I want you to wear them more often.”

“Really?” replies Will with clear scepticism.

“Really.”

Will gives an awkward shuffle, obviously self-conscious. “I mean, I guess if you like.”

“I do like. I want everyone to see who you really belong to.”

Will opens his mouth as if he wants to argue with this then seems to change his mind halfway
through and closes it again. “In fact don’t shower tomorrow either,” says Hannibal, running his
hands along Will’s hips in a way that’s unmistakably possessive. “I want my scent all over you: I
want you to smell exactly like me.” Will sighs at this, previous irritation forgotten as he arches his
back in what’s clear preparation to pounce on Hannibal and wrestle him onto the bed, then promptly
starts to pout his lips. “No, be still,” says Hannibal, tightening and relaxing his grip to emphasise each word. “Not yet mylimasis. I want you to do something for me first.”

“What?” says Will crossly. “It better not take long, I’m warning you now. And for God’s sake get
your clothes off.”

“So impatient,” replies Hannibal with another slow smile. He raises Will’s wrists to his face and
kisses the back of them then begins to leisurely unfasten his own shirt with one hand while keeping a
firm grip on Will with the other. “I suspect you won’t like it, but I want you to at least consider what
I’m going to propose. Bear in mind also that I’m not going to force you to do anything you don’t
want to. I’ve no interest in coercion. I merely want to…persuade.”

“What?” snaps Will, whose fragile patience is clearly about to expire. “What do you want?”

Hannibal smiles again and continues to unfasten his shirt – precise and methodical like someone with
all the time in the world – and then, just when it seems he’s like not going to answer at all, abruptly
snaps his head upright with a stare of such intensity it’s actively unnerving. “Tell me Will,” he says,
each syllable neatly clicking together. “Do you remember what I said to you earlier about control?”

Will, who wasn’t expecting anything remotely like this, recoils slightly and darts his tongue over his
lips, eyes flicking nervously as he uses his precise eidetic memory to recall the conversation: The way your yearning for intimacy threatens your self-control and how you long to give yourself over to the rapture of losing it. The ecstasy of it – indulging all your darkest desires. The associations are immensely unsettling and he swallows audibly then gives the faintest hint of a nod.

“Good,” says Hannibal, who’s now staring at Will even more intently than before. “Because that’s what I want. Every time we’ve been together like this you’ve been fighting to remain in control. For the next few hours…” He pauses again then slowly strokes his eyes across Will’s face. “...I want you to give all your control entirely to me.”

Will blinks a few times like he can’t quite process what he’s heard then automatically stiffens and pulls away. “No,” he says firmly. “You can’t be serious?”

“I’m perfectly serious.”

“You want…what? For me to be your sub?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking,” replies Hannibal with typical calmness. “I don’t want to exert power over you for my own gratification. I merely wish to see what happens when you’re prepared to surrender it – at least temporarily.” He darts his eyes over Will’s face a second time, quickly assessing the mingled blend of reluctance and uncertainty, then reaches out and gently cups Will’s face in his palm. “Believe me, I’m not interested in oppressing you in the style of someone like Andrew. I only want to have a sense of merging with you; and I can’t do that while you have all your defences up.”

At the use of the word ‘merge’ Will has a second wave of memory, only this time of his own words just after the heat and how he’d used the exact same term in a journal entry: ‘I remember feeling that it was as if we’d fused together; like my body was your body. Like I was you and you were me...For a brief snatch of time we weren’t two people anymore but one. We were two halves of the same whole, an unsplitable atom, and I didn’t know anymore where I ended and you begun.’ Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts, smiles very faintly and adds: “And I want us to do it when you’re fully aware of what’s happening. Not when you’re in heat but when you’re entirely yourself.”

Will gives an unhappy shuffle then squints up at Hannibal from beneath his eyelashes, tempted in spite of himself yet still undeniably wary. On one hand this is going to be the first time they’ve had full sex when Will isn’t in heat and the idea of being expected to take a stereotypically passive omega role is deeply unappealing on principle. On the other, it seems like it would make Hannibal happy and this in itself offers a certain gratification. Besides, it’s not as if there’s any harm in it (is there?). “Just for a few hours?” he says cautiously. “Not all the time?”

“For a few hours only. Probably less than that.”

Will nods then falls quiet once more, fretfully gnawing at his lower lip as he visibly thinks it over. “Well…maybe,” he says eventually. “I guess we could do that.” He pauses for a second time then adds in a voice that’s noticeably firmer: “But you have to stop if I ask you to. I mean it Hannibal: you have to stop straight away.”

“Of course,” replies Hannibal, and once again he sounds incredibly calm; poised and composed as a piece of marble, whereas Will feels as turbulent and untamed as a wave wildly pounding itself against the side of a cliff. That’s good, thinks Will silently to him. Stay that way – you have to be calm for the both of us. Hannibal slowly runs his eyes over Will’s face as if he’s categorising him then adds: “Do you want me to give you a safe word?”

Will hesitates again. “No.”
“No,” says Hannibal approvingly. “I didn’t think you would. Not that it should be necessary: I’m not going to hit you or choke you – nothing that will cause any damage. It’s not really anything more than a chance for you to come out of your head for a while and get back into your body.”

“Fine,” replies Will. Even as he’s speaking he can feel the first faint stirrings of anxiety and deliberately makes his voice sound flippant in an attempt to hide it. “Only don’t get too used to this. It’s not something I intend to do on a regular basis.”

Hannibal dips his head to indicate agreement and Will nods back to seal the deal then shuffles his hands together in his lap with a nervous tapping gesture like a croupier shuffling cards. His only awareness of domination play is the floridly excessive type that’s beloved of cheap movies and music videos – whips and ball gags and studded black leather – and it’s impossible to imagine such garish items having any kind of place in Hannibal’s sleekly refined surroundings. Although even if they did, he knows deep down that what’s really bothering him is the suspicion that this whole scenario has much less to do with physical restraint than it does with psychological surrender. Hannibal, after all, has always possessed a truly unnerving ability to get inside someone’s head after only a few moments of talking to them and while Will knows it’s already been done to him several times the idea of it happening to an even greater extent unsettles him more than he wants to admit to. Then he briefly remembers Hannibal’s request to be shown Will’s dark side and feels a further plunge of unease before reassuring himself that of course it was only hypothetical and has nothing to do with the situation at hand. Even so, suspicions aside, it’s still not enough to make him want to leave – it’s nowhere near enough. Clearing his throat rather awkwardly he adds: “Okay. So. What do you want me to do?”

“Only what I tell you,” replies Hannibal. “And not to speak unless I ask you a direct question.” As he pauses his mouth arranges itself into a faint smile. “I intend to talk enough for both of us.”

“Yeah,” says Will drily. “I bet you do.”

Hannibal catches Will’s eye and the faint smile grows broader in acknowledgement of a shared joke before a visible change comes over him and his face flickers slightly before completely closing down. It’s actually rather unnerving to witness – all the features folding into themselves one by one like a mask – until his expression has finally settled into one of blank impenetrability and he leans back on his heels to regard Will very intensely from several angles without speaking. In fact the silent scrutiny stretches out to the point it’s uncomfortable and Will is struggling not to squirm under the weight of it until Hannibal says very calmly, almost as if it’s an afterthought: “Take your clothes off. And do it slowly.”

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Will half wants to ask whether this thing (whatever it is) has now officially started but suspects that doing so would break the mood. Not that there’s much point because he supposes it must have done; even though it feels like it’s started without him and he’s now struggling to catch up, like walking into a film halfway through and being uncertain of how to follow the script. Hesitating for a few seconds he clears his throat again then starts to self-consciously unfasten Hannibal’s shirt, the only thing he’s currently wearing. It’s a simple enough task but somehow feels much more difficult than it should, rather as if the buttons have grown too large for their holes, and seems to lead to a lot of unnecessary fumbling and awkwardness before he’s finally able to let it slide down his shoulders and onto the bed. Then he’s half expecting Hannibal to tell him to fold it up – and is struggling to decide whether he’s going to obey or not (he’s not) – before realising Hannibal clearly doesn’t care about the fate of the shirt and is watching him instead with such blatant approval that he can feel himself starting to blush. Hannibal gives another slow smile which somehow manages to be far more suggestive than any of the others then neatly shrugs off his own clothes without once removing his eyes from Will’s face and lacking even the smallest hint of embarrassment or self-consciousness. You smug old bastard, thinks Will with a blend of envy and fondness, then jumps slightly as Hannibal’s
voices cuts through the darkness again to say: “Hold out your arms.”

“Why?” demands Will, who’s already forgotten that he’s not supposed to speak until spoken to. Hannibal raises a single eyebrow and Will scowls at him and goes quiet again before glancing down and seeing that Hannibal has retrieved his tie from the pile of clothes and has started weaving it around in his hands like a snake.

“Oh,” says Will before he can stop himself. Admittedly it’s not like he shouldn’t have expected this, but somehow it still never really occurred to him and he automatically cradles his hands in his lap like he’s trying to protect them from any misuse. Hannibal watches the progress of Will’s hands with interest then tenderly runs a finger along the edge of the tie as if it’s a living thing and Will can’t help giving a small flinch as he struggles with a sudden urge to announce that he no longer wants to play this game. In fact he easily could if he wanted and he knows that Hannibal won’t force him, yet despite his nagging reservation the joint pull of intrigue and arousal is somehow still enough to prevent him walking away. Hannibal waits patiently without saying anything else and Will darts a look at him then pauses, falters, and finally holds out his arms as requested.

“Good boy,” says Hannibal softly. He wraps the tie round Will’s hands and wrists in a series of deft swipes then secures it with an elaborate form of anchor knot so he can’t move his fingers. The silk is surprisingly cool against the warmth of his skin and so delicate it seems impossible it could be an effective form of restraint. Nevertheless when he gives it a few cautious tugs it’s clear he’s not going to be able to free himself.

“You know I’ve always thought you’d suit candle light,” adds Hannibal, who once again is watching Will very closely. “And it seems I was entirely correct. It lends a certain ambience doesn’t it? So far removed from modernity, we might almost be somewhere archaic and Medieval. A chapel perhaps.” He pauses then delivers another slow smile. “Or even a dungeon.”

Will opens his mouth to reply before remembering he’s not supposed to speak and reluctantly closing it again. Then he takes a few deep breaths in a conscious effort to enjoy the intensity of the moment and let the unease dissolve and desire take over. In fact his body is clearly several stages ahead of his mind in this respect, and when he focuses on how he’s feeling he’s almost shocked to realise how hard and straining his cock is getting and that the top of both thighs are already slippery with a glistening trail of slick. Hannibal trawls his eyes downwards in a very deliberate way to show he’s fully aware of both these things and Will blushes slightly then hesitates before shifting his knees so his legs are spread wider apart.

Hannibal’s breath gives a tiny hitch. It’s too subtle for most people to notice, but Will detects it immediately and feels a flare of triumph that despite the impassive exterior Hannibal’s obviously not quite in control as he seems. In fact there’s a delicious sense of power in it that transcends the tied hands and the lack of dissolves and desire take over. In fact his body is clearly several stages ahead of his mind in this respect, and when he focuses on how he’s feeling he’s almost shocked to realise how hard and straining his cock is getting and that the top of both thighs are already slippery with a glistening trail of slick. Hannibal trawls his eyes downwards in a very deliberate way to show he’s fully aware of both these things and Will blushes slightly then hesitates before shifting his knees so his legs are spread wider apart.

He leans towards Will as if he’s about to kiss him then appears to change his mind and strokes his lower lip instead to encourage him to open his mouth. Will obeys immediately, eagerly sucking Hannibal’s fingers while gazing wantonly at him from beneath his eyelashes the whole time. “That would put me in the role of either a priest or a gaoler,” murmurs Hannibal, withdrawing his fingers so he can rub slow, slippery circles against Will’s nipples while stroking his hipbone with the hand. “Which would you prefer, do you think – if you were given a choice?”
Will gives a low moan and lets his head tip back. His cock is really aching now and when Hannibal kisses his throat he makes an involuntary whining sound, helpless and faintly humiliated as he feels it spasm with an obvious rush of pre-come. Hannibal hums with approval then waits a few more seconds before reaching up to give his hair a small tug. “I asked you a question Will.”

“Neither,” snaps Will, who even during semi-delirium can’t resist being stubborn.

Hannibal’s mouth quirks at this like he’s struggling not to laugh. However, when he speaks again his voice has all the quiet intensity of before and seems shot through with a note of anticipation that’s practically smouldering. “You’d forfeit the ability to choose?” he says thoughtfully. “One would have to be either reckless or fearless to give up autonomy that casually. So tell me then: which one are you?”

Will gasps again then bites his lip, desperately trying to stifle all the whining noises that he’s starting to feel embarrassed by. “Both.”

“Both,” repeats Hannibal, who this time finally does smile. “Yes indeed. What a magnificent creation you are Will Graham; so bold and audacious yet still so haunted by your own sense of yourself. As I’ve said before, you embody the observation that ‘Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.’ Yet what an ever greater tragedy if you never realised your full potential and were doomed to languish and go to waste. That would be my choice too, wouldn’t it – if either of those scenarios were true. I’d have to make a choice whether to sacrifice or save you.”

For a few seconds he goes quiet again, still radiating carefully coiled control and with the same inscrutable expression on his face, then slowly leans forward and brushes his lips along the edge of Will’s jaw. “It would occur to me instantly wouldn’t it?” he says, and it sounds more like a statement than a question. “Amidst all the sacrificial offerings you’d immediately stand out. ‘This beautiful little victim is different from the others,’ I’d say to myself. ‘There is something special about him’.” Skimming his palms across Will’s ribs he finally takes hold of his waist and rubs his thumbs into the hollow of both hip bones. “You feel so fragile – as if I could break you in half. But you still wouldn’t beg, would you; not like the others. Your peers would be pleading and imploring and you’d just be staring at me with that aloof, cool defiance you wear so well.”

By now Will’s breath has sped into a kind of pant and Hannibal pauses once more so he can admire the way his ribcage is pulsing with a rhythm of its own and how his pale skin glows like ivory in the candlelight with a thin sheen of sweat. “I’d have the task of preparing you to be sacrificed, wouldn’t I?” he adds softly. “Determining where the knife would go in. Here, I think: straight into the heart. How it races.” With delicate precision he presses two fingers against Will chest, cradling his head with the other hand to prevent him pulling away. “Although you still wouldn’t beg would you; not even then. You’d just stare at me much as you’ve been doing tonight. You’d know I was fascinated by you and that you could use it to your advantage; you’d exploit my captivation and use it against me. The key question, of course, is whether or not I’d let you. What do you think Will? Do you think you’d succeed?”

Will draws in his breath with a half-laugh then lets his head rest against Hannibal’s shoulder. “Yes,” he says.

“Yes,” repeats Hannibal languorously, propping his head against Will’s and lightly kissing his temple. “Undoubtedly yes: I’d catch your eye and a single look from you would be enough. I’d immediately order everyone else from the room so we could be alone together. Of course they’d be staring at me in surprise as they left; all suspicious and confused and muttering under their breath – all wondering how you’d managed to inspire such a breach of protocol. It would be inconvenient for me, wouldn’t it Will? My compassion overcome by your charisma, and you being so cunning and
resourceful the entire time. I know you’d try to seduce me into making love to you instead of killing you.” Leaning forward again he scrapes his teeth very lightly against Will’s throat. “Do you think you’d be able to do that?”

Will quivers slightly beneath Hannibal’s hands then twists around to search out his mouth for a deep kiss: all tongues and teeth and hot panting breath. “Yes,” he says when he finally pulls away.

“Confident aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

Hannibal’s face flickers into the same faint smile as he lets go of Will entirely then leans back on his heels. “Go on then,” he says when Will hesitates, appearing unsure of whether he’s got permission to move. “Show me your best attempt. And you have five minutes before I make my decision, so I advise you put some effort into it.”

Will, who doesn’t need any further encouragement, lets out his breath in a long sigh then drops onto all fours like a supplicant so he can luxuriously slide his tongue along the length of Hannibal’s cock. The way it’s hardening in his mouth makes him feel a bit wild and he sucks and laps at the head with hungry open-mouthed kisses before slowly leaning backwards, widening his mouth as far as possible then wantonly gazing upwards so Hannibal can see his cock stretched out along Will’s tongue. Hannibal’s breath promptly catches and Will stares into his eyes for a few seconds before ducking his head again as he attempts to swallow the entire length. This time Hannibal actually gasps and the sound of it makes Will get even harder himself, barely aware anymore of how he’s starting to gag as his mouth is stretched and filled to the limit in an attempt to get Hannibal to make the same noise again. Not having the use of his hands makes it awkward and he’s so feverishly turned on he suspects he’s contributing far more enthusiasm than technique. But Hannibal doesn’t seem to mind and sighs appreciatively as he tangles his fingers into Will’s hair and gently but firmly pushes his head further down. “You look beautiful doing that,” he says rapturously. “You know how to use your mouth don’t you. In fact one day I think I’m going to try and knot it; would you like that?” Will gives a low moan in response and starts to move his head even faster. “Is that a yes beloved?” purrs Hannibal, rubbing his thumb against Will’s jaw so he can feel the way it’s sliding round his cock. “It certainly sounds like a yes.”

Will quivers then gives another small moan and pulls back for a few seconds, nuzzling his forehead against Hannibal’s abdomen as he draws in a few ragged breaths. “Will,” says Hannibal softly. “Mylimasis.” He tenderly tucks some loose strands of hair behind Will’s ear then strokes his cheek, although as soon Will gets ready to start over he takes a deep breath himself and reluctantly pushes him away. Will looks confused at the interruption (then slightly offended) and Hannibal smiles again then tells him to clean his face. “No,” he adds, as Will attempts to move his hands upwards. “Not like that.”

Will sighs wantonly in response then darts out his small pink tongue so he can delicately lick the smears of pre-come and saliva from his mouth and chin. His lips are beautifully swollen from all the friction and Hannibal can’t help catching his breath at the sight of it. “You’ve more than answered my question,” he says, slowly trailing his finger along Will’s cheekbone. “But if you want me to make love to you then I’m afraid this is the point we need to stop.”

Will hesitates then nods rather bashfully before settling down on his knees again to await further instructions. This time he looks unusually obedient and eager to please, and even though Hannibal knows his natural rebelliousness will prevent him staying like that for much longer the sight is so appealing that he can’t stop himself from tugging Will towards him for a rough press of lips and clash of teeth before lifting him up like he weighs nothing at all and setting him on the bed again face
down. The way his hands are tied makes him look incredibly vulnerable and the fact he’s still allowing it without struggling implies a level of trustfulness which – although, objectively speaking, is extremely ill-advised – strikes Hannibal in that moment as almost unbearably touching. Human bodies are so frail and delicate, so apt to rend and tear…there’s a certain savage grace to it; how swiftly, simply and beautifully they can be breached and broken apart. And there’s no doubt that Will understands this – just as well as Hannibal himself. Reverently he drapes himself across Will’s back for a few seconds so he can feel Will’s small body trembling beneath his and enjoy the heat of his damp skin, so soft compared to the tautness of the muscles underneath, then pulls away and strokes his palm across Will’s spine. “You’re doing so well,” he says softly. “Now arch your back for me.”

Will gives a beautifully breathy moan and immediately obeys so his legs are spread open. The movement is very fluid and graceful – classically omegan – and its combination of defencelessness and invitation elicits something in Hannibal which he knows, for Will’s sake, it’s extremely important to suppress. In fact he’s being so uncharacteristically docile that Hannibal suspects it’s not a natural response at all as opposed to a cleverly-constructed act that Will’s using on purpose to manipulate a certain effect. Possibly it’s something he’s practiced in the past on another alpha; and the idea of his omega being touched this way by anyone else immediately ignites a fierce surge of jealousy in Hannibal that makes him grip a possessive hand round the back of Will’s neck, squeezing gently but firmly then rubbing his thumb over the glands which cover the bonding receptors. Will dips his head to give him better access and Hannibal strokes his hair in reward then slides a hand down his spine so he can massage his soaking wet hole, admiring how flushed and beautiful it looks beneath his fingers as the muscle clenches in anticipation to the pressure. “You want that don’t you?” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to increase the speed. “You’re so responsive Will. So attuned to me – it’s perfect. They should slip in very easily. What do you think; shall we try?”

Will nods frantically and Hannibal gives a series of teasing strokes with the pads of two fingers, delicately probing and exploring then shifting his hand so he can use his thumb instead to rub in slow circles. “Perhaps not,” he adds, slightly sadistically. “I’m not sure you’re ready. You’re still so tight, just here…and here. Can you feel it too?” Glancing down he can see how Will’s cock is getting stiffener and stiffer with each touch and he sighs with pleasure at the sight of it and knocks Will’s legs further apart, repositioning himself so he’s sat between them and it’s impossible for him to close them again. “So tight. Perhaps you need a bit longer.”

Will jerks his head impatiently, obviously on the verge of speaking, and Hannibal neatly darts out his free hand and claps it over his mouth. The answering sting of small, sharp teeth shows Will’s struggling with the temptation to bite him and Hannibal smiles again at the endearing fierceness of his boy before reducing the pressure of his fingers until he’s barely touching Will at all. Will promptly buries his face in his arms and makes a noise like he’s being tortured, and despite the initial desire to punish him there’s something about the raw vulnerability of it which forces Hannibal to admit that Will desperate and needy is considerably less appealing than Will blissful and sensuous. Leaning forward he tenderly kisses his hipbone then takes his hand off his mouth so he can spread him open and then, without any warning, thrust two fingers into the tight velvety heat of his body. Will cries out immediately then shudders and goes completely still. “Oh God,” he mutters under his breath. “Oh God, oh God.”

“Look at that my love,” says Hannibal with obvious approval. “They’re just sliding inside. You could probably take me right now couldn’t you; a full knot. You could take it beautifully just as you are, you wouldn’t need any more preparation.”

Will desperately spreads his legs even wider apart, once again forgetting the earlier instruction not to speak unless it’s a direct question. “Please,” he gasps out. “I want that so much. I want you to fuck
“Soon,” replies Hannibal in the same soft voice. “Let me enjoy you like this for a little longer.”

“No…Oh God, I need it.”

“Patience,” says Hannibal. He continues moving his fingers in the same slow rhythm, watching with delight as Will eagerly takes the entire length of them with a series of beautifully breathy moans.

“That’s it,” he says encouragingly. “Let yourself enjoy it. Just relax and…let go.”

As he’s speaking he makes his hand go still for a few seconds before gradually starting to move it again; very slowly at first, but finally picking up speed until Will is gasping at the relentless of the pace and frantically rolling his hips so he can fuck himself on Hannibal’s fingers. “Good boy,” says Hannibal rapturously. “You like that don’t you?”

“Oh God, yeah, I like it, I really like it.”

“I know I can tell. Not as much as I do though, I can promise you that. You feel incredible Will. You can’t understand it yourself, but it’s one of the reasons omegas are so valued. Your anatomy is exquisite. The way you grip onto us when we’re inside you; how you’re able to show us how much you want it without even needing to say a word.” Gently he runs the palm of his free hand up and down Will’s thighs where they’re starting to quiver and are glistening with a fresh trail of slick.

“Look how excited you are. This is the type of thing that makes alphas completely helpless: we might have a level of authority outside, but when we see you like this we become total slaves to you. We’d fall at your feet and worship you; we’d do whatever you demanded. All because of this: this beautiful little opening between your legs.”

Will is now making the sort of noises that Hannibal hasn’t heard outside of him being in heat: very urgent and deep-pitched interspersed with breathy little moans and cries. It’s obviously making him self-conscious and when he tries to stifle them by burying his face in his arm Hannibal reaches out and tugs his hair. “No,” he says. “I want to hear you. I want all of you; don’t you understand that by now? I want to hear you, see you, feel you…” As he’s speaking he strokes Will’s thighs again then slowly pushes them wider apart. “I want to taste you as well. You’ll like it beloved, I promise. Would you let me do that?”

Without waiting for a reply he dips his head and begins to lap at Will’s hole with his tongue, alternating between light teasing flicks and languorous swipes then using the tip to start working it open. Will’s whole body promptly goes rigid and he hears himself gasping “Oh Hannibal, oh, oh fuck,” in a desperate sort of chant as his eyes widen at how feverishly intense it is and he gulps in desperate gasps of air. Hannibal makes a humming noise and lavishes messy spit-slick kisses across his thighs, circling his hole with a thumb before narrowing his tongue so he can breach it again with the tip. Will nearly screams and briefly thinks he can feel Hannibal smiling against his skin before he’s being spread wide open with both hands so Hannibal can eat him out; passionate and sensuous the entire time as if Will is something delicious he can’t get enough of. It feels unbelievable – so blissful and shameful – with Hannibal’s tongue so wet and warm and thick as it slides in and out of his ass and...“Oh my fucking God,” says Will helplessly. His cock is leaking all over the bedclothes now in a steady stream of pre-come, and for a few frenzied seconds he feels himself getting tighter and thinks he might actually come round Hannibal’s tongue as his hips jerk in an urgent, useless attempt to get some pressure where he needs it. In fact the need to orgasm is overwhelming and it finally occurs to him that the main reason his hands are tied is so he can’t touch himself. In theory it seems incredibly tame compared to the type of domination play he was expecting, but in practice the frustrated discomfort is almost unbearable.

Blindly Will now stretches out his hands, desperate for something to hold onto, and Hannibal takes
them in one of his and tenderly strokes the knuckles before finally straightening up and pulling away. Will takes advantage of the pause to draw a few shuddering breaths, still twitching and shuddering from the intensity of it, then promptly gives another loud moan as he feels a finger thrust inside him followed by a teasing thumb stroking along the rim. “I can’t…” he tries to say, then wails and bites his lip as he feels Hannibal’s tongue swirling across the taut, slippery skin where his fingers are scissoring Will open. “Fuck. Oh fuck. Please. I can’t come like that.”

“Yes you can, beloved,” replies Hannibal with supernatural calmness. “Because I want you to; and you like to please me don’t you?” Reaching down he glides his palm across Will’s abdomen where it’s soaked with pre-come. “Look at that. You’re doing so well already.”

“Oh God, I can’t.”

“Well if you really can’t,” replies Hannibal, “then – you can’t. In which case I’m afraid you’re going to be left unsatisfied.”

Will makes a low angry noise deep in his throat then for a few seconds seems to lose control entirely and begins twisting his hands in a frantic attempt to free himself. “Stop that,” says Hannibal in the same calm voice. “If you don’t I’ll have to tie you to the bed.” Gripping the back of Will’s neck he gives it a light squeeze. “Perhaps I should do it anyway. Would you like that? I might like it myself – to have you spread out for me, vulnerable and helpless.”

Will hisses in response then defiantly twists his head free and rolls himself out of reach. His resentment is extremely obvious and Hannibal allows himself another private smile at how beautifully feisty it looks before leaning back on his heels and lifting Will into his lap. By now he seems rather manic – flushed and dishevelled with wildly glittering eyes – and when Hannibal takes hold of his waist to stop him rocking their hips together he makes a sound that’s almost a snarl.

“No,” says Hannibal. Beginning to smile again he lifts one hand and presses it across Will’s mouth. “Remember our agreement.”

Will glares at Hannibal from over the top of his fingers but finally nods and goes still. “Good boy,” says Hannibal removing his hand. “I know it’s difficult for you. You’re doing so well. Tell me how you feel now?”

Will blinks rather groggily as if he’s drunk. “I’m not sure,” he says at last, and his voice sounds scratchy and hoarse from all the gasping. “Defenceless, I think. Like…like I can’t protect myself.”

“Yes indeed,” says Hannibal, secretly delighted by this admirable level of honesty. “Because you can’t control yourself; if you could you wouldn’t be in this situation. You want to protect yourself from yourself, and you can’t.”

“No,” replies Will, who’s finding it impossible to keep the slight tremor out of his voice.

For a few seconds Hannibal’s rigid expression softens slightly. “Then I suggest you don’t try,” he says. “You’re so striking in your imperfection: embrace the strength your vulnerability gives you. I know it’s hard,” he adds as he sees Will shaking his head. “You dislike it don’t you? You work so hard to hide it from me.”

“So what about you?” asks Will before he can stop himself. “What are you hiding?”

Hannibal’s faint smile begins to flicker as he reaches up to smooth Will’s damp hair from his eyes. “Nothing,” he says lightly. “I am entirely exposed. I lay myself down at your feet.”

“I don’t believe you,” snaps Will. “Everyone has something to hide.”
“Do they?” replies Hannibal the same soft voice. “So what do you think mine is, beloved? That special thing? That thing I hide, just as everyone else does.”

There’s a beat of silence in which the candles gutter and dip as the shadows spread, then Will is horrified to hear himself replying: “I think you’re hiding what you really are.”

Hannibal’s dark eyes now seem to be glowing in the half-light and Will swallows audibly then stares into them, slowly turning rigid with shock that he’s dared to utter such a forbidden thing out loud. In fact he’s not entirely sure how he’s expecting Hannibal to react to it: surprise perhaps, or even offence; and yet somehow the complete lack of reaction manages to be more unnerving than anything else. And so the seconds limp by and the silence stretches out as Hannibal continues to gaze at him before finally replying in a voice that’s as smooth and impassive as a piece of marble: “What am I, my love?”

“I don’t know yet,” stammers Will. He can feel himself starting to panic, and yet the words keep coming now and he doesn’t know how to stop them. “I don’t have a word for what I think you are.”

“Think, beloved?” purrs Hannibal. “Or know. Because you do know don’t you? You’ve always known. You just don’t want to admit it.”

For a few crazed seconds Will has a fleeting memory of his journal entry – ‘I see the darkness in you. But even more than that; I see the way it reflects back the darkness in me’ – and gives a small flinch just as Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts, murmurs: “Do you think I’ve ever hurt people Will?”

Will is really starting to panic now, and yet, oh God, God, everything feels so good. More than that; it feels right. Then he makes a noise that’s part confusion and part distress, desperately trying to drown in the physical sensation as respite from what’s threatening to start screaming within his skull. Because he can almost see it now, flickering in his peripheral vision: blood-streaked and bone-tinged, tattered black feathers like flecks of tar, shadows crouching and crawling…Then from somewhere far away he hears a voice saying “Yes” and it sounds like his own voice, even though he doesn’t remember giving it permission to try and speak the unspeakable.

“Yes,” repeats Hannibal softly. “Do you think I’ve ever killed people?” Will doesn’t answer immediately and Hannibal gently tugs his ear with his teeth and murmurs “Do you?”

Will makes another groaning sound because the pressure from Hannibal’s teeth seems to be all over his skin at intervals even though he’s not actually being bitten. “Yes.”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal in the same low voice. “You’ve run your beautiful mind ragged trying to justify it to yourself: what it is you see in me that fascinates you so much. How have you managed it? Perhaps you’ve told yourself that it’s typical for alphas because we’re supposed to be violent. Is that it Will? Have you consoled yourself that what draws you to me is nothing more exceptional than a normal set of alpha traits? That thing it is in me which strikes an answering echo in you.”

In between the panic Will feels a sudden surge of anger at the relentlessness of the interrogation and tries to tear himself away before feeling a steady hand on the back of his neck. “Be still,” says Hannibal soothingly. “Remember what we agreed. Or do you really want me to stop?”

Will grits his teeth then shakes his head and Hannibal strokes his back again before slowly pulling him closer. “I understand,” he says. “It’s so difficult for you isn’t it? Letting go like this – allowing me to strip away your layers. I promise one day I’ll return the favour Will; one day I’ll let you see me in the same way I’m trying to see you now. Complete intimacy…even if it hurts us both. Because intimacy might be painful but I never want to be a stranger to you; I don’t want there to be a part of me that’s unknown. Mind, body…” He pauses then slowly runs his palms down Will’s back. “If
there was a part of me that was unknown to you I’d want to slice out that part and place it in your hands.” Will quivers beneath the touch and Hannibal strokes him again even slower then buries his face in the curve of his neck and inhales deeply as if trying to breathe him in. “Does that disturb you?”

“No.”

“No? But you’re trembling beloved – why is that?”

“Oh God, why do you think?”

“Because you’re overwhelmed,” replies Hannibal calmly. “Which is exactly what I intended you to be. It’s all about your mind, Will; even though it’s protesting so fiercely. You’re so astute and ingenious – so endlessly clever – yet your intellect’s abandoning you isn’t it? Instinct is taking over. All your autonomy and self-determination…they’re of no possible use to you now. And such a burden to you most of the time; you may as well give them to me. You know you can trust me as a suitable custodian. Then you won’t have to do anything at all, will you? All-you’ll-have-to-do-is-let-go.”

“Oh God,” mutters Will. He shakes his head rather frantically, half offended and half afraid; two halves of one delirious whole. “No. No, I don’t want that.”

“And – there you are,” replies Hannibal, and Will groans internally at the realisation that he’s stumbled straight into the verbal mantrap that’s been set for him. “It’s not just anxiety is it?” adds Hannibal caressingly. “No, you’re angry with me. Aren’t you Will? You resent the fact I can make you feel like this. Your beautiful, self-destructive disposition: you both desire and require. Sense and reason say no, but you disregard them anyway and pursue your own course. Plunging ahead…losing yourself in your own labyrinth.” He begins to suck a leisurely bruise into Will’s neck, taking his time as if savouring every sensation, and Will moans again then finally gives into the urge to arch forwards against Hannibal’s chest. “It’s incredibly fascinating to see you do it,” adds Hannibal, giving Will a tender little nip with his teeth. “Why do you fight so hard? Always so defiant and rebellious, even when it’s contrary to your own interests.”

“What choice do I have?” snaps Will. There’s a palm gripping round his neck now to keep his head still and he tries to twist free before giving a sharp gasp as Hannibal’s other hand trails down his back to work a finger deep inside him, quickly followed by a second. “Ah yes,” says Will helplessly. “That feels good.”

“How good?”

“Fuck, please don’t stop.” It’s like being impaled and feels insanely pleasurable, making him writhe around on Hannibal’s fingers as if he’s riding them. “I think I’m going to…oh God. Hannibal. I think I’m going to come.”

“Just one thing beloved.”

“What?” gasps Will, who sounds half frantic. “What do you want?” His cock is aching now and he desperately tries to grind against Hannibal for some much-needed friction, screwing his eyes closed then whimpering slightly as he feels a soft press of lips against his forehead.

“It’s just a simple thing,” says Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair with his free hand. “I only
want you to tell me why you broke all the mirrors in your house.”

Will’s breath seems to be ripping out of him now as he arches his back against the long slide of Hannibal’s fingers. “Because I was delirious.”

“And?”

“I was on all those suppressants…”

Hannibal takes hold of a handful of Will’s hair and gently tugs it. “No,” he says. “Tell me the real reason.”


“Good boy,” murmurs Hannibal. Letting go of Will’s hair he skims a hand down his chest then takes hold of his cock instead and slowly rubs his thumb around the head. “And where else did you see him?”

“Shit, that’s not enough.” Will groans then rolls his hips in a series of fitful little stutters, desperately chasing the sensation. “Please… I need…”

Hannibal increases the pressure of his hand very slightly. “Where else Will?”

“The elevator at work, my car. Everywhere.”

“Yes, he was haunting you wasn’t he? Tell me why.”

“You know why,” replies Will with something like a snarl.

“You’re right, beloved,” says Hannibal softly. “I do know why. But I want to hear you say it.”

Will groans again then stubbornly shakes his head and Hannibal waits a little longer before either sympathy or impatience – Will can no longer tell – drives him to add: “It’s because he represents the destructiveness in you isn’t it? All that dark potential. What you fear the most.”

“Yes.”

“He killed Andrew didn’t he?” continues Hannibal, resuming the torturously slow stroking motion along Will’s cock. “But it’s not enough for him; he’s still not satisfied. And you fear him and loathe him but can’t quite cast him out entirely. It’s why you’re so filled with disgust isn’t it? Why you can’t even bear to look at yourself.”

As he finishes speaking he kisses Will’s throat then pushes him forward until he loses his balance and sinks down onto the sheets. Will gives a loud groan of frustration when he lands then lies still for a few moments, blinking rather numbly and staring at the ceiling as he catches his breath, before beginning a frantic struggle to free his hands so he can jerk himself off and get the release he craves so badly. In fact he’s so preoccupied that he doesn’t even question why Hannibal has got off the bed and begun tugging something across the room amid all the darkness; barely even notices he’s moved at all until Hannibal is kneeling behind him again and pulling him upright. And it’s only then that Will finally lifts his head and is confronted with a sight that in those few delirious moments feels like the most disturbing thing he could possibly see: a large, freestanding mirror.

“No!” snaps Will, suddenly panicked. “I can’t. No.” Desperately he twists his face away then tries to pull himself free from where Hannibal’s arms are encircling him. “I don’t want to do this. No.”
Hannibal doesn’t force Will to turn towards the mirror but doesn’t let go either, instead brushing his mouth against the back of Will’s neck in a way that’s suggestive yet soothing. “I want you to look at him Will,” he says quietly. “Remember what I told you all those times? I want you to look that darkness in the eye.” He waits a few more seconds, stroking Will’s chest and arms until he’s finally gone still, then kisses the side of his throat. “Look my love. And if you really can’t look at him, then look at me instead.”

“I can’t,” says Will faintly. “No.” And it feels as if he means it, even though he finds his gaze irresistibly drawn to the mirror before the words have even left his mouth. Avoiding his own reflection he instead focuses on Hannibal’s, desperately seeking out some kind of sense and stability in it despite the fact his face is indistinct in the shadows and all that’s really clear is the gleaming of his eyes behind Will’s shoulder. “Look at him,” repeats Hannibal, and it’s almost like a chant. “Look how powerful he is – he saved your life.”

“No. I don’t want to.”

“But you can look at me can’t you?” says Hannibal. Slowly he runs his fingers along the trail of slick that’s running down Will’s thigh, stroking and caressing almost thoughtfully before drawing them back and pushing deep inside Will’s trembling body. “You can tolerate someone else’s darkness. Why not your own?”

Will gasps helplessly and shakes his head, panicked and unsure yet surreally aware of how he’s repeating “Please don’t…please don’t…please,” even as he’s thrusting his whole body down to try and take the pressure as deep as possible while seeking out hard-edged kisses that bruise and bite. Who knows exactly why? Will doesn’t. And there he is, saying it again between all the small scared noises he also can’t help making: “Please, please, I need this. I need you.”

Hannibal kisses the back of Will’s neck then begins to speed up the movement of his hand. “You’re getting so tight,” he says softly. “I can feel it – the way you’re gripping onto my fingers. You’re close now aren’t you?”

“Yes, God…so close.”

“Keep your eyes open. I want to watch your face when it happens.”

“Oh fuck, it feels so good.”

“Do you want me inside you Will?” murmurs Hannibal. “Is that what you need?”

Will’s breath hitches at this, head spinning and ribcage heaving unnaturally fast, and overcome with a sudden longing to gasp out ‘I love you’ except that he can’t quite face the vulnerability of being the one to say it first. It’s easier to trade in symbolism instead – emblems and images, what he’d do: I’d wait for you. I’d fight for you. I’d feel pain for you. I’d kill for you. Then he twists his face round, contorting into increasingly painful angles to search out Hannibal’s mouth while Hannibal strokes his other hand across Will’s chest again; skimming further downwards each time in a tantalizing way until his hands stop just above the waist and Will gives a low whine of frustration.

“Deep inside you,” repeats Hannibal. “It would mean you don’t entirely belong to yourself anymore; just for those few moments you’d belong to me instead. What does it really mean to be inside someone else Will…What if I was in your mind as well as your body?”

Will’s breath is coming out in ragged gasps as he lets head fall back against Hannibal’s shoulder. “That’s it,” says Hannibal tenderly. “I’ve got you, I won’t let you fall.” As he’s speaking he takes hold of his cock and begins to rub the wet head against Will’s hole, very slow and persistent. “Is this
what you want?”

“Yes…Yes.”

“Yes,” purrs Hannibal. “You’ll take it so well for me won’t you? It’ll be pure pleasure just to watch you: to feel you writhing underneath me, to hear the sounds you make. Let me hear you right now Will; tell me you want it.”

“Oh fuck, yes, I want it,” gasps Will, his voice raw and urgent. “I want you.”

Hannibal gives a low sigh and scrapes his teeth against Will’s neck where, if they were bonded, the bite mark would be. Then he wraps an arm round Will’s chest to keep him upright and begins to push his cock against the tight ring of muscle, forcing forward until it gives way and he can sink the entire length into Will’s body in a single hard thrust. Will cries out with a noise he doesn’t think he’s ever made before – something deep and visceral, almost animal-like in its intensity – before a deep ripple of pleasure runs through him as he shudders, tenses and goes completely still.

Hannibal murmurs a snatch of something in a foreign language then roughly tugs Will’s head back by the hair until his throat is exposed. “Yes,” he says rapturously. “Here it is.”

“Oh God,” gasps Will and he sounds shocked, like he can’t quite believe it. “I’m going to come. Hannibal. Oh God, I’m coming, I’m coming…” He lets his head fall back onto Hannibal’s shoulder again, surreally aware of how they seem to breathing in unison – breathing for one another – as his heart crashes against his ribs in rhythm to each thrust and Hannibal’s chest covers his back with a weight and warmth that makes his nerves spark. He can feel it starting as a series of deep contractions around Hannibal’s cock and even though he hasn’t touched himself yet there’s no doubt it’s going to be enough. “Jesus, don’t stop,” he manages to gasp out. “Just fuck me.”

Hannibal makes a sound at the back of his throat that’s so deep it’s nearly a growl and Will feels another scrape of teeth against his neck before Hannibal is pulling out so he can pick up Will’s shaking body in both arms and lay him out on the bed with his legs spread apart. Will arches his back, moaning loudly and shamelessly as Hannibal works the head of his cock against his hole, then urgently cries out his name as Hannibal grips his shoulder with one hand and his hip with the other then slams inside him with such force Will’s arms give way and for a few ecstatic moments he’s completely oblivious to everything except how good everything feels. He isn’t even sure how long it lasts because time has lost all normal meaning. It could be seconds or minutes, or even hours, until Hannibal is coming deep inside him with a single hard thrust leaving Will draped across the bed feeling slick and wet and fucked wide open in a way that should possibly feel degrading and yet… doesn’t.

“Oh,” says Will faintly. “That was – oh my God.” The main thing he’s really aware of is whiteness – spectral white noise filling his head, white hot heat in his body, white light sparking in front of his eyes – and for a few seconds he’s genuinely afraid he might cry from the intensity of it and has to bite his lip in an attempt to get back in control. His body’s absurdly over-sensitive now, almost like a layer of skin’s been removed, and he quivers again as he feels two fingers sliding inside him before being pressed wet and glistening against his lips as Hannibal murmurs “Open your mouth Will.” Will makes a soft whining noise in response, eagerly obeying so he can lick Hannibal’s come off his fingers, then stretches luxuriously onto his back while Hannibal strokes his face and repeats his name in a hallowed, reverential way like it’s the words of a prayer. It only gradually occurs to him that he hasn’t been knotted, and for a few seconds can’t really understand why until he realises that it’s because Hannibal wants him mobile and easy to move: specifically so he can untie Will’s wrists then lift him up so he’s directly facing the mirror and can no longer turn away.

The sharp edge of Hannibal’s cheekbone is pressing against his own as he kneels behind him and
wraps his arms around Will’s chest, gently taking hold of his hands so their fingers are tangled together. Will stares down at them in silence, and it’s then that he remembers Hannibal’s words from earlier in the evening – ‘when you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you’ – and experiences his most powerful sense yet that in this moment of intense intimacy they’re willingly falling into the same dark chasm together: each one entwined around the other with limbs and skin and breath that’s eternally and fatally connected.

“Look Will,” murmurs Hannibal, and it seems by now as if his voice is literally inside Will’s head. “Beloved, look. Can you see it? Do you understand?”

And so – Will finally looks. The candles have nearly burnt down by now but despite the shadows and half-light he can clearly detect the contours of his face: intensely pale and waifish yet still luminous with that unmistakable hint of the Dark Reflection…while beyond his shoulder Hannibal’s eyes stare directly into his with the exact same nuance of lethally beautiful blackness.

And it’s then that he hears himself replying in a voice that’s quiet but has no hint of hesitation: “Yes.”

The next day begins gloomy and overcast with a bitter welter of wind that constantly threatens more snow and a sickly sky that’s pock-marked with tattered clouds the same pale grey as bruises. It’s really not the sort of weather to inspire much optimism and after a half-hearted attempt to get some coffee Will takes one look at it then crawls back into Hannibal’s bed before curling into a determined ball and refusing to get out again.

“You’ll have to remove yourself at some point,” says Hannibal. “Or do you intend to stay there all day?”

This speech is delivered to the top of Will’s head, which is the only part of him currently visible. After a few seconds Will’s hand joins it over the top of the covers and makes an irritable shooing gesture in Hannibal’s direction. Hannibal smiles then catches hold of the hand and runs his finger along the knuckles. “I suppose that means I’m being dismissed?” he says. Will growls something indecipherable and Hannibal’s smile broadens slightly. “How incredibly rude you are.”

Will finally emerges from beneath the covers and regards Hannibal rather owlishly for a few seconds before scrubbing his fingers across his face and scowling over the top of them. “What a look you’re giving me,” adds Hannibal with obvious amusement. “It would quell a lump of granite.”

“I’m tired. Go away.”

“Go where?” says Hannibal.

“Anywhere but here. Use your imagination; I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“So I’m being thrown out of my own bedroom?”

“Looks that way.”

“That’s nice for me,” replies Hannibal drily. “Not one of my finest moments either, I’ll admit. At least I don’t need to worry about any more alphas abducting you do I? You’re such a little horror they’d just bring you straight back again.”

“Yes,” says Will with gloomy satisfaction. “I suppose I am a bit of a horror.”

“You are,” replies Hannibal with mock-seriousness. “But you’re my horror, so it doesn’t really
“Ugh,” says Will, beginning to roll his eyes. “That was terrible. Sentimental much? You should count yourself lucky I don’t turn round and vomit over you.”

“Agreed,” says Hannibal serenely. “It was abominable. It’s as I said before – seeing you like this brings out my most embarrassing alpha instincts. I deserve the utmost pity.”

Will gives a small smile at this then rubs his face again before struggling out the bedclothes so he can grope around on the floor to locate last night’s shirt. Hannibal watches his progress with a smile of his own, and Will smiles back then sits and stares at his hands for a few seconds, consumed by a sudden urge for some contact but unsure of the best way to ask for it. If he’s honest with himself he feels as if climbing into Hannibal’s lap would be the most preferable thing, only he can’t quite bring himself to do something so mortifying and eventually settles for kneeling behind him instead so he can massage his shoulders. Omegas are supposed to crave intimacy with alphas so perhaps the strength of the feeling shouldn’t be surprising, yet somehow it still is. Did he ever do something similar with Andrew? Possibly he might have done…at least in the beginning when he was still young and stupid and trying to make the best of the situation. Even so, it definitely never felt like this. Hannibal’s leans appreciatively into the touch and Will feels a renewed wave of affection and resettles himself so his legs are bracketing Hannibal on either side and he can rest against Will’s chest. “You’d make a terrible alpha,” he says fondly. “You know you would.”

“Probably.”

“As bossy as hell.”

Hannibal makes an amused noise and dips his shoulders to give Will better access. “Of that,” he replies. “I have no doubt at all.”

“At least the power’s back on,” adds Will, tugging Hannibal’s collar down so he can rub his neck. “Do those outages happen often?”

“Not very often. Obviously it’s inconvenient whenever it does happen.”

“You should get a generator.”

“Probably I should.”

“Yeah? I could set you one up if you wanted.”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal in a pleased way. “That would be ideal. You know how to do it?”

“Sure, it’s simple. You could have just done it yourself.” Will pauses then nudges the back of Hannibal’s neck with his forehead. “Bit useless really, aren’t you?”

“It would appear so,” replies Hannibal, who doesn’t seem remotely concerned about it. “I’m obviously not as technically-minded as you are.”

“I like how you manage to make ‘technically-minded’ sound like an insult,” says Will, giving Hannibal’s shoulder blade a squeeze. “I suppose you think you’re above that sort of thing.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” replies Hannibal innocently, which makes Will laugh and pummel his shoulder again before resuming the massage along the length of his spine. “You know you still feel tense,” he eventually adds. “Even more than last time.”
“You sound surprised.”

“I am. I can’t really imagine you being on edge. You always seem…I don’t know. So calm. Like nothing ever fazes you.”

“And yet you disappearing was extremely tense,” replies Hannibal, elegantly flexing his neck. “See how deceiving appearances can be?”

Will hums non-committedly then ducks his head and pretends he’s concentrating on kneading Hannibal’s shoulder blades as a way of avoiding having to answer. As displays go it’s fairly convincing and he knows he must seem relatively calm himself, but the truth is that last night’s frenzied revelations have started flickering through his head and he’s finding it increasingly hard to ignore them. Even the mirror seems to be daring him to say something, still propped close by like a third person in the room that’s ready to describe what it saw – yet how is he even supposed to begin discussing a topic so frenzied and forbidden? Mentally he auditions a few possibilities (‘So, what we did last night; that got a bit weird didn’t it? A bit intense? Although it was just a kind of role play wasn’t it…you didn’t really mean what you said?’) but ultimately rejects them one by one until he’s forced to admit that despite the way the memories are hovering in the air with their weighty, unspoken implications he still has no real ability to mention it. He knows that Hannibal won’t either unless asked directly, and Will himself realises that given the circumstances he’s strangely content for last night’s scene to simply exist in the meantime as something that…and happened. Something extreme admittedly; potentially even something dangerous, yet also something that a heightened awareness and understanding of one another can allow to flourish further when the time is right. Hannibal, almost as if he’s thinking the same, leans back until his head is resting on Will’s shoulder and the gesture is sufficiently pensive – and therefore out of character – that Will can’t help noticing it immediately.

“Hey,” he says gently. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing at all,” replies Hannibal, whose eyes are now closed. “I’m just glad that you’re here.”

Will, who’s surprised how moved he feels by this simple declaration, goes quiet for a few seconds then leans forward and smooths Hannibal’s hair off his forehead so he can press his lips against it. “Same,” he says softly. Hannibal’s normally sombre face immediately arranges itself into a smile and Will smiles too then runs both palms along his shoulders and down his arms. “Look at you,” he says fondly. “You’ve gone all floppy.”

“Hmmm,” replies Hannibal without opening his eyes. “It’s because I feel content. Like a cat.”

“Actually, you look like you’ve been tasered.”

Hannibal makes an amused sound. “At least we don’t need to worry about my excesses of sentimentality,” he says. “You can always be relied on to provide a bit of realism.”

Will grins and kisses Hannibal’s forehead again then gently pushes him upright so he can resume massaging his back. “I’ve decided to go to work today,” he adds. “I was wondering whether to leave it a bit longer but I think it’s better to just get it over with.”

“Understandable. The first exposure is always going to be the worst one.”

“You still want me to wear one of your shirts?” asks Will casually.

“I do,” replies Hannibal, placing his hand on Will’s thigh in a way that’s unmistakably possessive. “Not the one you’re currently in, obviously. Find one that’s been ironed.”
Will shrugs then happens to catch sight of himself in the mirror and realises that Hannibal is staring into it too – and has clearly been watching him the whole time. “It’s a shame I can’t iron my face,” he says, trying to be flippant to disguise the brief flare of awkwardness. “I look wrecked. Like seven shades of shit.” Hannibal’s reflection smiles beatifically. “You know this is the point you’re supposed to contradict me, right?” says Will, giving Hannibal’s shoulders a slight pinch. “It’s the point where you’re supposed to look horrified and exclaim ‘My dear Will, what on earth are you talking about? You look fucking radiant.’”

“I could indeed say that, most dearest of Wills,” replies Hannibal serenely. “But I would be lying.”

“So what? You’re always lying. At least it’ll keep Jack happy I suppose; it’ll give him another reason to chew me out for not contacting him last night. He’ll want to know what I’ve been doing.”

“And what are you going to tell him?”

Will makes an involuntary snorting sound. “What do you think I’m going to tell him? The truth? ‘Sorry, what’s that you say Jack? Seven shades of shit, sir? Well, pull up a chair and let me explain how I spent all last night dodging the FBI while having mad sex with its liaison psychiatrist.’”

Hannibal gives an enormous smirk at this then stretches an arm behind his head and tangles his fingers into Will’s hair. “Why not?” he says. “I’m sure if such a conversation did take place then Jack would put the best possible construction on it. He’s clearly very fond of you and wants to protect your interests as far as he can.” He pauses then smirks again. “Like a well-meaning if rather condescending uncle.”

“Well if it’s all right with you, I still have no plans to confide in my well-meaning yet condescending Uncle Jack,” replies Will, shuddering slightly at the thought of it. “I don’t want anyone to know about us. It’s private. And people would just use it as an excuse to say I’ve used my gender to get ahead. You could always confide in him yourself of course; he might decide he wants to be your uncle as well.”

“It’s an extremely tempting offer,” says Hannibal. “But no. You can have him all to yourself.”

“I don’t know why you’re sounding so smug. He’d blame you just as much as me – he’d want to know why you didn’t ring him either.”

“Very true,” replies Hannibal. “I suppose he’d line us up outside his office and attempt to lecture us one after the other.”

Will gives another snort at the image of Jack earnestly attempting (and spectacularly failing) to pull this off. “So you’re planning to come in as well?” he adds, trying to sound casual.

“Do you want me to?” asks Hannibal, who’s also attempting to sound casual because he secretly likes the idea of Will needing him and doesn’t want to advertise the fact. Will shrugs self-consciously and Hannibal smiles at him in the mirror then reaches round again to take hold of his wrist. “I think I’ll interpret that as a yes,” he says. “If you want I could drive us both in.”

“Thanks,” replies Will, who’s likewise secretly grateful to be offered the moral support without the embarrassment of having to ask for it. “That would be great. Actually I need to bring you up to date with a few things so I could do it on the way.”

“Such as?”

Will gives a faint grimace. “Such as me finally meeting Matthew Brown – in the hospital of all places.”
“Oh?” says Hannibal with obvious interest. “And what were your conclusions?”

Will pauses then frowns as he slowly replays the scene: the weirdly twitching face and eyes as cold and dead as a shark’s. “I don’t know if he’s the Sculptor,” he finally says. “But there’s definitely something up with him. He’d noticed you as well; he was watching us when you came to visit.”

“Envious?” asks Hannibal, as usual getting straight to the point.

“Yeah, something like that. It was so weird, like he was…I don’t know. Obsessed.”

“With you?”

“Pretty much. And by extension – with you. I want you to be careful Hannibal; I’m worried he might want to come after you.”

“I’m always careful,” replies Hannibal, in the sort of dismissive tone that’s easy to translate as I’d like to see him try.

“I’m serious,” protests Will. “If you’d been there you’d understand what I mean. It was a clear warning; he was looking for a confrontation.”

“That’s very ambitious of him.”

“Cut that out,” says Will sharply. “Don’t be so arrogant – I know you think you’re invincible but you’re not.”

Hannibal sighs then taps Will’s wrist again, obviously making an effort to be conciliatory. “I accept your point,” he says. “You can tell me more about it on the drive in. And I promise to take it seriously.”

“You better,” replies Will bleakly. “You gave me the same advice after all.”

“I did – although I think the Sculptor poses a more credible threat.” Will opens his mouth to object and Hannibal strokes his wrist for a third time. “I meant what I said. I’ll take it seriously.”

Will nods and sighs then finally stops rubbing Hannibal’s shoulders so he can drape himself across his back instead and wrap both arms round his chest. “The Sculptor’s still out there,” he says in a strained voice. “And if the spacing of the other murders is anything to go by then we’re due another one soon. Very soon.”

“Most likely” replies Hannibal, briefly catching Will’s eye in the mirror. “You’re going to throw yourself into it now aren’t you? I can’t say I blame you. At the very least I suppose it gives you something external to focus on.”

Knowing that this is a reference to last night, Will stiffens very slightly then tightens his grip. “Maybe.”

“It’s understandable,” says Hannibal calmly. “Why wouldn’t you want to turn all that stunning perception on someone other than yourself?” Will doesn’t reply and Hannibal adds after a few seconds silence: “You’re still so conflicted aren’t you? You’re consumed by it.”

Will gives a loud sigh then nudges Hannibal’s head with his chin. “And you are consumed by a need to ask stupid questions.”

Hannibal smiles into the mirror again and returns the pressure against Will’s face with his own.
“Very well,” he says. “In that case I’ll substitute my first question for a less sensitive subject.”

“Which is?”

“I’d like you to humour me with a hypothetical.”

“Oh God,” says Wil wryly. “Not another one.”

“Yes, but only one. Which is this; once the Sculptor’s caught, what would you do – if you could do anything?”

“Anything?” repeats Will. Briefly he falls quiet again, turning the question over in his head and giving it proper consideration. “I’d disappear,” he finally says, and his voice is very low and subdued. “Somewhere no one knows me.”

“I understand. Somewhere away from scrutiny; and from responsibility.”

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” says Hannibal, who seems unaccountably pleased with this answer in a way Will can’t immediately make sense of. “You know you told me something similar when you were housebound after the heat – a desire for freedom and a chance to simply be yourself with no expectation.” He gives a very faint smile and closes his eyes as if mentally envisaging the scene. “I remember it well, particularly the expression on your face. That look of poignancy and restless yearning.”

“Yeah, well, you said hypothetical. And that’s my hypothetical.” Will pauses then sighs rather bitterly. “It’s not as if it could ever happen.”

Hannibal pauses himself and allows the silence to stretch out before deliberately catching Will’s eye in the mirror. “Couldn’t it?”

“Of course not. What are you even talking about?”

“After the Sculptor is caught,” says Hannibal, delicately running his finger across the top of Will’s. “We could do that. You know we could.”

“What, you mean just…leave here? You and me?”

“You and me.”

“But where would we go?” asks Will in a rather numb voice.

“Wherever we wanted,” replies Hannibal, whose tone seems to have shifted into something seductively low and hypnotic. “Another city or state, or even abroad – another country entirely. There are no constraints Will: just infinite prospects with limitless possibilities.”

Will goes completely still and draws in his breath with a long hiss of air. Then he inadvertently glances back at the mirror, aware of the cold surge of fear in his mind as he acknowledges the implications of what it might really mean for them to live together in wildly anonymous freedom. Instinctively everything rebels at it: morality, practicality, self-preservation…and yet how impossible it still feels to say no. “I’m not sure,” he says slowly. “It’s a big thing. Huge. I’d need more time to think about it.”

“Naturally,” replies Hannibal in the same calm way. “You have time: I know you won’t go anywhere until the Sculptor’s caught.”
“Although even if we didn’t leave,” adds Will, concerned that the hesitancy could be seen as outright rejection. “Even if we stayed here – we’d still be together. We’d be together wherever we were.”

“Indeed we would,” replies Hannibal. Gently but firmly he tightens his grip on Will’s hand. “Yet in the shadow of the FBI, how much more…limited we would be.”

Will nods in wordless agreement without fully realising he’s doing it. “I’ll think about it,” he says, leaning forward until his cheek is pressed against Hannibal’s. “I promise.” Then he remembers yet again what the mirror watched happening last night, and even as he’s speaking the sense that he’d consider it – that he wouldn’t just say no outright – provides a thrilling, inevitable sense of a line being crossed: pitch black and shining.

Chapter End Notes

Bleh. I’m really sorry this chapter is SO late, but this is the second time I’ve had to moderate a Hannigram fic after getting attacked in the comments and I’m honestly kind of done. Obviously if you choose to put work on the internet you have to be prepared for harsh negativity and I can see that I was very naïve about what to expect. But yeah – it’s discouraging. Tbh this has been going on for so long now I’m not even sure what to say about it anymore; only that I’m not an English student and don’t have formal writing experience or anything like that, and while I do my best to make content other Fannibals can enjoy I never intended these stories to be anything more than just a fun hobby that people don’t take too seriously. I respect the fact that Bright Hair isn’t resonating – heck, I’d be the first one to start critiquing it – but this relentless hostility is completely OTT for what should just be a happy, easy going fan space. The hyper-critics really need to be more realistic with their expectations; or, even better, just go and enjoy all the lovely free content on AO3 instead. Remember, Steve Jobs put that back button on your browser for a reason…not least because there are waaaaayyyyy more sensible things in life to get angry about than someone else’s smutty Hannigram murder porn. Trust me on this :-) 

Anyhoo sorry for such a grumpy AN but I really had to get that off my chest. NOW LET’S GET THIS HANNIGRAM SHOW BACK ON THE ROAD. In terms of the update schedule I’m hoping to start feeling more creative and eventually get back to weekly chapters ASAP as this monster has been rambling on for freaking ages now and it’d be good to get it wrapped up. In the meantime huge thanks, as always, to everyone who’s had the patience to stick with it and to those of you who’ve got in touch with encouragement, feedback and constructive criticism. This story needs a lot of energy to write so it’s really helped to know that there are people out there who enjoy it and has been very much appreciated for helping to balance out the unpleasant stuff xxx
One week later

Dear You,

I’ve been meaning to start this for a while now, and so I’ve finally done it and picked up the pen – and I’ve realised that I don’t really have any idea what to write. Don’t worry though. I know you might think having nothing new to tell you is a bad thing, but I promise you it’s not. And the reason it’s not is actually pretty simple: it’s because of how I’ve started to confide in you in real life rather than here, and how there’s virtually nothing left that I felt I couldn’t say.

To be honest I think that’s one of the ways I’ll look back on our relationship: all those milestones when I finally started to tell you things. I wonder if I’ll ever describe this process to you out loud? Probably I will; perhaps when we’re grey and elderly and reminiscing about the past. “Do you remember when we stared into a mirror together?” I might say to you. “Do you remember that time in your house when we were in front of the fire and you put your arms round me while I told you about that hidden, forbidden part of myself?” And you’ll immediately look superior (because of course you’ll always be superior, even when you’re old and supposed to be past that sort of thing) and remind me that I was only telling you what you already knew. Then you’ll look superior and self-satisfied again, even though you’ll be smiling when you do it. “Whatever,” I’ll reply (because no doubt I’ll also never grow out of being chippy and sarcastic and we’ll end up as the most obnoxious pensioners ever). “I actually remember it really well. I remember it because that was one of those times where the things I needed to tell you – and only you – finally got said.”

It’s not like it was before, is it. Can you feel it too? In fact now we’re talking about milestone here’s another one for you: this is the first time I’ve ever written one of these entries while you’re actually nearby. I can hear you right now in the other room. I’m lifting my head and listening. You’re moving around, very quiet and controlled – any minute you’ll probably walk in and want to know what I’m doing. Only a few weeks ago it would have been impossible to write this journal so close to where you are, but now it’s just another thing that doesn’t seem to matter much anymore. I suppose you’d want to know why I think that, and I guess I’d say it’s because there’s an increasingly thin line between the ‘You’ in the pages and you in real life. I’ve felt that more and more recently, and I know it’s a reflection of how the line between you and me is also shrinking. I think you’d be pleased if I told you that; it what you wanted isn’t it? You said you wanted us to merge. I said it too; admittedly only in this journal, but no doubt I’ll tell you in person soon. Because it’s true after all, and I suppose it makes sense that we should feel that way. It’s as if both of us have been searching for a missing part of ourselves and I found mine in you and you found yours in me. It’s what draws us together and makes us keep colliding, two halves of the same chaotic equation: like to like. I think if we were ever separated we’d end up like ghosts, haunting each other.

We’re identically different, aren’t we? You and me.

Anyway, I’ve told you this much so far and I hope I’ll always keep on telling you things. To be honest that part’s fairly easy to imagine, because your interest in me is so addictive and it’s almost impossible to imagine a time when I’m not dazzled at being the focus of your attention. But I hope you’ll confide in me as well, dearest you; I think that’s important. I want us to be mutual in our
ability to reveal and disclose, and I don’t want us to forget how to be friends and only know how to
be lovers. You see, the thing is I know there’re things you’re still not telling me – but then I also
know a major reason for it is because I won’t ask. I feel as if you’d like me to of course; as if you’re
waiting for it. I feel as if you want me to see you. For me to open my mouth and ask you to confirm
or deny…only I can’t because I’m not sure I’m ready to hear your answer. And here’s the weirdest
thing of all: if you said ‘Yes, I’m capable of just as much violence as you suspect me to be’ I know
I’d be shocked and afraid, and want to pull away from you. But if you said ‘No, I’m not remotely as
dangerous as you think I am’ then I’d be…disappointed. That sounds terrible; it’s difficult to even
write it down. But it’s true all the same.

Last week you told me “I sometimes feel I can understand myself better through understanding
you.” I didn’t say much at the time, but I still knew exactly what you meant because it’s how I feel as
well. And that’s why I’d be disappointed if it turned out your darkness didn’t run as deep as mine
does, because I want to believe that I’m not beyond the point of being understood. I need to believe
there’s someone who’s truly capable of comprehending me; and I want that person to be you.
Before I met you I spent my entire life believing the only way to deal with something that frightened
me was to turn away. You suggested the exact opposite. You held a light into the darkness and told
me to look it in the eye until everything’s illuminated – even though most of the time ‘it’ and ‘me’
were usually the same thing.

It and Me, and now You as well. It’s ironic, really, that I’ve been so fixated with mirrors considering
what you’ve always said about mirror neurons and that dysfunctional excess of empathy. Do you
want me to tell you why I think that? It’s because I sometimes feel like I could look in the mirror and
see you staring back. My Dark Reflection…my shadow self. And it’s why I can’t imagine not having
you in my life, because I’ve begun this exploration into a pitch black part of my mind and I know
that you’re the only one who can really help me navigate it.

Don’t think I can’t see the contradiction in all this by the way: how we seem to be so damaging and
wrong when we’re together and yet are so much stronger and happier than when we’re apart. Right
and wrong and good and bad, all at the same time.

Dear you, I don’t even know what to say anymore; I’m right back where I started. You frighten me
and I frighten myself, but none of it matters – not really – because I know when all this is over and
the Sculptor is finally caught, if you asked me again to leave with you…I know I’d tell you yes.

*****

The graffiti was done in the middle of the night. None of the security guards saw the culprit arrive
and no one heard them leave, and at times the stealthy discretion they must have needed to achieve
their goal seems outright eerie in its efficiency. But however they managed it the outcome is still the
same, and when people begin to filter into work the next morning the results of their handiwork are
stretched halfway across the parking lot for all to see in enormous dripping letters that glisten with the
same scarlet wetness as blood: FBI Killer.

In the shadow of a watery winter sun a group of agents have now gathered around it, alternatively
stamping their feet against the cold or taking scalding sips of coffee from thermos flasks with
detachable lids as they lower their voices to a suitably scandalized tone and trade theories about a
likely source for the letters. Some of them have assumed it’s a mocking rebuke about their inability to
catch the Sculptor – or, for that matter, the Chesapeake Ripper – whereas others believe it’s meant as
a threat of some kind. But the most lingering theory of all, barely uttered but undoubtedly there, is
that it was intended as a reference to Will.

“Possibly just a few kids,” says Jack back in the lab, deliberately injecting a casual tone to his voice
in an attempt to be reassuring. “In my first field office we had a gang that were always pulling stupid stunts like this. We’ll check the CCTV.”

From out the window Will rakes his eyes across the bleeding letters as an image of Matthew Brown’s gloating face briefly flickers into his mind. It’s undoubtedly grotesque but there’re so many different ways to interpret the message, and he now begins to silently audition certain options in his head like a morbid game of Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. Threat or rebuke or a statement of fact? Homage? Love letter? “I’d like to see the tapes myself,” he says without turning round.

“That figures.” Jack lets out his breath in a long huff of air, one eyebrow quizzically raised. “You think it’s someone you know?”

Will stiffens slightly then gives an irritable shrug, immediately resentful of how quick Jack is to assume the message is addressed to him despite the fact he’s thinking the same thing himself. “So what are we going to do in the meantime?” asks Price into the resulting awkward silence. “We can’t just leave it there.”

Jack repeats the same combination of sigh-grunt-grimace from earlier and waves his hand in the direction of his office. “The janitors won’t touch anything outside the building so my secretary’s called the grounds staff. They’ll be here this afternoon.”

“That’s hours away,” says Price shrilly. “There’ll be photos of it all over the Tattlecrime by then.”

“Well what do you suggest?” snaps Jack.

“I suggest we get some paint stripper and do it ourselves,” replies Price with a touch of self-righteousness. “I’ll volunteer for starters. It’ll take at least half the morning – then when Mr Skinner asks why I haven’t done his reports, I shall be able to tell him I’ve been labouring for the greater good.”

“You still haven’t done them?” says Jack, who’s visibly struggling between a professional duty to reproach Price and a personal desire to side with anything that aggravates Skinner. Professional duty finally wins out with the choice of words, although personal desire scores a last minute goal in the extremely half-hearted way they’re said. “Why not?” asks Jack, pretending to be severe. “He asked for them weeks ago.”

“He did,” agrees Price cosily. “My official excuse – that is to say, my official reason – is because the lab computer ate the data. Which is highly plausible I might add, seeing how the lab computer is a magnificent liability and can always be relied on to be unreliable. At least we know those Terminator movies got it wrong,” he adds, giving the monitor an encouraging pat. “If this little fool is anything to go by I don’t think we’ve got much to worry about with the Rise of the Machines. Isn’t that right Paracelsus?”

“You called our computer Paracelsus?” says Zeller incredulously.

“I did,” replies Price. “The father of toxicology. It’s very fitting too, because he was brilliant in some ways and completely useless in others. He once tried to grow a tiny man from the bodily fluids of full-sized ones.” Zeller opens his mouth then closes it again. “Now about that clean up,” says Price briskly. “Let’s get to it, because I for one do not want that graffiti made public. We only managed to get rid of those news vans last week and the smallest hint of this will bring them straight back again.”

He turns round and beams invitingly at the assorted faces; all of who exchange awkward glances with one another before announcing that they’d personally love to help Dr Price – and definitely would – except for a certain meeting that can’t be missed or a phone call that can’t be postponed,
then taking it in turns to evacuate the lab at high speed in what’s an obvious attempt to not get pressganged into hours of scrubbing in the freezing cold. “Light weights,” says Price witheringly to the departing backs. “What about you Jack? I thought the captain was supposed to go down with his ship.”

“I’m meeting Hannibal,” says Jack. “I’ll help out afterwards though.”


In the end Zeller, as last man standing, reluctantly offers to help which means Will feels like he ought to as well – and together they trample off to the car park armed with assorted brooms, buckets, canisters, and an absurd portable power washer with a neon lid that Zeller has swiped from the janitor’s room. The weather seems to have deteriorated even further since the morning: gloowering grey sky above, frost-bitten asphalt below, and vicious gusts of wind in the middle that cut across the face like a flick knife. Will shivers slightly then wraps his scarf more firmly round his throat, immediately noting the faint trace of Hannibal’s cologne that’s still lingering on the fabric from the time he borrowed it.

“Heigh ho, heigh ho, it’s off to work we go,” sings Price, dramatically hoisting his broom over his shoulder. “We look like we’re part of the Seven Dwarves: Brainy, Lanky and Grumpy. I do hope it doesn’t take too long to clean.”

“It’ll take ages,” says Zeller resentfully. “Paint always does.”

“It will with you two on the job,” replies Price. “You’re both useless: I’ve already done twice as much as the pair of you.” Zeller mimes hitting Price over the head with his broom then has to abruptly straighten up again when he looks like he’s going to turn round. “And I’m older,” adds Price with obvious smugness. “Now stand aside, you feeble lads, and watch how it’s really done.”

Will sighs to himself then resumes listlessly scrubbing a large crimson K, watching the way the water turns pink and foamy as it dribbles along the concrete. From one of the office windows he can see two tall figures staring into the parking lot, and on peering closer he realises that Jack and Hannibal have gathered together and appear to be observing their progress. Jack looks strained and anxious, whereas Hannibal’s features have arranged themselves into a very faint smile and a steady gaze that never shifts from Will’s direction. In fact the smile is so indulgent and the gaze is so fixed that Will gets an immediate sense that Hannibal’s rather enjoying watching him doing this kind of manual work and has a sudden childish urge to yell at him to fuck off.

“Look at those two,” says Price as if reading Will’s thoughts. “Inspecting the peasants. We should go and force them to give us a hand.”

“Yeah, right,” replies Zeller with obvious sarcasm. “And speak for yourself about being a peasant.”

“And good luck with getting either of them to help,” agrees Will, surreptitiously brandishing his broom in the direction of the window. Hannibal promptly tips his head in response like he’s trying to get a better view, and Will catches his eye then rolls both his own while struggling not to laugh. Hannibal smirks back and Will grins again then mouths: Go away.

“Someone should pretend to slip on the water,” Price is now saying. “Then we can get one of those personal injury lawyers and sue the FBI.”

Zeller gives an extravagant eye roll himself then abandons his own smear of red and shifts around the letters in a circle until he’s close enough to Will to give his broom a tap with his own. “Hey,” he says kindly. “You okay?”
“Sure.”

“Good,” adds Zeller earnestly. “Because I’m certain this is nothing to do with you. FBI Killer? It wouldn’t even make any sense. It was obvious you should never have been arrested.”

“Thanks,” says Will, surprised to realise how grateful he feels that someone’s said this out loud.

Zeller hesitates a few seconds then lowers his voice, seemingly unaware of how it makes his words sound much more sinister than they would have done otherwise. “And it’s not the type of message he would leave. You know…the Sculptor.”

Will gives a vague nod of agreement, trying to convince himself this is true even as he’s attempting to ignore the way Matthew Brown’s lean, feral face continues to flash before his eyes. Then he tightens the scarf round his throat until he can smell Hannibal and resumes scrabbling at the letter K with even greater energy than before, despite the fact it doesn’t seem to be doing any good and the red stubbornly continues to glisten. There must be a kind of metaphor in it somewhere…try as hard as you want but the stain never fully wears off. “Hopefully it’s just a one-off,” he says out loud. “Something and nothing.” Oh God, that’s such a cliché – and it’s not like he even fully believes it himself.

“Ugh, watch out,” hisses Price, abruptly breaking the silence. “Here comes Agent Edge Lord and the other one; we seem to have started a trend.” Will and Zeller groan in unison and Price turns round to where Skinner and Siemens are picking their way across the parking lot then waits until they’re within hearing distance before raising his hand. “Come along gentlemen, the more the merrier. Grab a sponge and get swabbing.”

“I wasn’t actually planning to help,” says Siemens, taking hold of a brush and staring at it rather uncertainly. “I was only coming to see if Will was okay.”

“Well of course he’s not okay,” replies Price briskly. “Look at him: he’s having to clean a carpark. He might slip on a puddle and have to hire a personal injury lawyer to sue the FBI.”

Siemens blinks foolishly then glances down at Will’s feet and back up again. “I’m fine,” says Will, struggling with the usual wave of frustrated discomfort that always washes over him when Siemens turns up. “Just helping out until the grounds staff arrive.”

“Oh I didn’t mean the cleaning,” replies Siemens. “I meant…y’know. After everything that’s happened. I haven’t seen you since they let you out the hospital and…well…”

“I’m fine,” repeats Will in the usual automatic way. And, then, because it seems like the least he can do all things considered: “I appreciated you going to so much trouble. The release process would have taken a lot longer without you.”

Duty done he now returns to do battle with the letter K, but Siemens seems to be enjoying the conversation and is unwilling to let it go. “Oh I’m glad,” he says very seriously. “I’m glad to hear that Will.” He reaches out a hand as if he wants to pat Will’s arm then seems to change his mind halfway through and thrusts it back in his pocket again; in the winter sun, the skin looks as pale and spongy as dough. “It must have been awful for you.”

Will opens his mouth to say something about it not being too bad, only can’t think of a way to do it that won’t make him sound like some kind of smug macho asshole from a late-night cop serial so ultimately just settles for looking suitably mournful instead. “Those guys were the worst,” adds Siemens with feeling. “All they cared about was the glory of catching the Chesapeake Ripper. They didn’t care at all about justice being done.”
Across the carpark Price is making a half-hearted attempt to slip on the soapy asphalt as Skinner stands to one side to drone about the missing reports, and Will lets his eyes drift in their direction and almost wishes he could join them. “I guess,” he says, attempting to sound interested.

“They were very disrespectful to me,” ploughs on Siemens. “Even after I told them Mr Crawford had sent me from the FBI. And they made fun of my name.”

Will has a sudden, hideous sense that he might be about to laugh so politely clears his throat to try and hide it. Siemens stares back, squinting and blinking in the sun as if he thinks the silence is due to confusion and Will clears his throat again in desperation. “It’s because it sounds like semen,” says Siemens piteously.

“Y-e-a-h,” replies Will, wondering whether it’s actually possible to die of awkwardness. “Yeah…I know.”

“Can you believe it? They’re supposed to be professionals.” Siemens pauses then pouts for a few seconds, mouth formed into a perfect o-shape of disapproval like a fretful baby. “At least my first name is normal. Adam: no one ever laughs at that.”

As he’s speaking the wind blows a stray leaf into Will’s scarf and his hand immediately reappears to start creeping in Will’s direction again as if he’s going to brush it away. Will’s eyes immediately swivel towards the hand and pin it in place with a glacial stare. “You’re lucky to have such a normal name,” adds Siemens sheepishly, allowing the hand to flee back to its pocket. “It’s nice. It suits you.”

“What, William?” asks Will, even though he’s not really listening anymore because he’s just remembered how the same observation was recently made by someone else. Hypnotic words in a smoky voice: William, the war deity and warrior…

“No,” blurts out Siemens. “No, I meant your surname.”

“Oh right, yeah.”

“Where’s it from?”

“I don’t know,” says Will. “I think it’s Scottish. Something to do with grey…” Then he’s about to elaborate further before realising that this isn’t going to be possible on the grounds of not having a fucking clue. Grey what after all? Lochs? Mountains? Bagpipes? He really can’t remember. “Grey…ness,” says Will eventually. In fact he’s fairly certain the last part is true (probably), although it comes out sounding so incredibly half-assed that Siemens mournful face promptly falls several degrees further, obviously assuming that he’s being made fun of. “I’ve never really looked into it,” adds Will irritably.

“Mine’s German,” offers Siemens, who’s still labouring under a terrible illusion that Will could give even the slightest of shits. “It was my stepfather’s name. I guess I could have changed it but I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. He’s such a great guy. He was my Little League coach to begin with; did I ever tell you that? It’s how he met my mom.”

Will, whose endurance level for this thrilling anecdote has now fully expired, picks up his brush again and begins to scrub at the letter K in something of a frenzy. “What’s that about Little League?” says Skinner, who’s obviously got bored with lecturing Price and is now prowling around to find someone new to torment. “Don’t tell me you were into that Will? I thought omegas weren’t allowed. Don’t they pack you guys off to special academies so they can teach you sewing and cookery and how to do a table setting?”
“It was me,” says Siemens quickly. “I was saying how my stepdad…”

“So what about you Will,” continues Skinner, ignoring Siemens. “What were you into in school? Go on, prove me wrong. I bet it was something really alpha wasn’t it? Football? Soccer?”

“Neither actually,” replies Will in a bored voice. “I can’t think of anything more utterly pointless than standing round in a field all day waiting for someone to kick a ball at your head.”

Siemens begins to snuffle with laughter just as Skinner’s gaunt face contorts itself into a violently frustrated twitch at how neatly his question’s been turned back on him. “Yeah, well, at least you’ve got the decency to clean up after yourself,” he finally adds. He curls his lips back from his teeth – uneven yellow slabs, like tombstones – then waves his hand in a derisive flick at the streaking scarlet letters. “I think we can safely assume this is a reference to that little stunt you pulled the other week.”

“Hey,” snaps Siemens, with unusual sharpness. “That’s completely out of order.”

A tense pause follows this statement until Skinner’s face twitches again and he leans leisurely back on his heels. “You’re right,” he says. “I was out of line.” This time his mouth arranges itself into what’s possibly meant as a smile, but manages to get mangled halfway through and emerge as a kind of mocking leer instead. “Just my idea of a joke, but I guess some things aren’t all that funny. Look Will, let me give you a hand.”

As Will watches Skinner cranks out another pseudo-smile before reaching into a nearby bucket so he can retrieve a sponge from the scarlet soapy water and toss it contemptuously in his direction. The malicious intent is obvious and Will, who has much quicker reflexes than Skinner, easily twists out the way to avoid it – which means it goes flying over his head and hits Zeller instead.

“Ah, shit, sorry man,” mutters Skinner, sounding genuinely awkward. “My aim, you know? It’s always been bad.”

Will lets out his breath between his teeth in a long low exhale of air. Then very slowly and deliberately he places his own brush on the ground and straightens up to his full height and takes a threatening step in Skinner’s direction. “So you’ve had the chance to demonstrate it,” he says softly. “Good for you. Now get the hell out of here and stop wasting our time.”

His voice is extremely level and precise without any sign of losing his temper. Nevertheless the rigid menace is unmistakable; and in contrast to Skinner’s blustering aggression or the petulant offence of Siemens, everything about his tone and posture manages to telegraph the fact that something genuinely serious might be just about to happen. It many ways it’s similar to how a cobra sways – very controlled and leisurely until it suddenly strikes – and everyone now glances at him nervously then falls silent one by one until there’s nothing to hear at all except the shrieking wind and the mournful croaking of a group of crows who’ve assembled on a nearby post and appear to be watching the scene unfold with their heads on one side. Even Skinner looks slightly abashed, but Will remains undeterred and ignores everything else: white-hot, ice-cold and ruthless as he narrows his eyes and takes another step forward before sparing a brief second to glance at the window and the only other thing that really matters. And it’s then that he realises, with something of a jolt, that Will has now nothing but empty space where Jack and Hannibal were once standing. Admittedly their disappearance shouldn’t be surprising considering how long they’d been there, but given the current situation Will has a very good idea where one half of them might have gone; and sure enough, when he turns his head, he immediately sees the familiar silhouette emerging from the far end of the parking lot. It’s not like it’s doing anything beyond walking in a straight line, but somehow it still manages to seem deeply intimidating – rather spectral and unworldly – with the long black coat swirling in the wind like a streak of shadow.
“Hannibal’s here to see you Will,” calls out Price.

Amid all the straining silence the sound of his voice manages to break the tension and restore a bit of normality, almost like it’s reminded everyone that they’re actually just gathered in a cold wet carpark and such eerie apprehension isn’t really necessary. Zeller is the first to recover himself by picking up his brush and resuming scrubbing, shortly followed by Skinner, who smooths down both lapels then demands in a tone of obvious resentment: “How do you know he wants to speak with Will?”

“Well of course he wants to speak with Will,” replies Price cheerfully. “He’d hardly come all the way out here to talk to any of us.” Skinner promptly looks furious again at the idea that someone of Hannibal’s status might value Will’s company more than his, and as Hannibal gets closer Price gives a faint smirk and adds: “After Will are you?”

“I am,” replies Hannibal with typical poise. “May I borrow him?”

“You may,” says Price. “But only if you bring him straight back in the same condition you found him.”

Hannibal flicks his gaze across Will’s face and gives the familiar Mona Lisa smile. “Naturally,” is all he says.

For a few seconds Will catches his eye then bites his lip and looks away, struggling not to feel too resentful at how he’s clearly only turned up to ensure Will doesn’t say anything overtly aggressive to Skinner. Admittedly such aggression is the type of thing which Will, as an omega, could get into serious trouble for; and given the long shadow that’s still hanging over him following the arrest the intervention makes complete sense. Nevertheless the idea he needs protecting from himself is hugely aggravating, and Will’s forehead creases into a frown as he broods for what feels like the millionth time over the unfair double standards as applied to omegas and alphas. In this respect it feels that Hannibal’s role is a bit like a school principal coming into the playground to break up a fight, and he can’t help frowning again before adding defiantly: “Can it wait? I need to finish up here.”

“It could easily wait,” says Hannibal, who’s now looking even more Sphinxy and inscrutable than ever. As Will watches he subtly inclines his head to where the others are standing. “In fact it definitely should. Even the most trivial activities require an opportune moment.”

Will catches his eye again and immediately experiences a dark little thrill that this apparently innocent statement is in fact a reminder of the benefits of waiting to confront Skinner properly at a better time – specifically, when there aren’t any witnesses. Hannibal’s smile broadens slightly and Will gives the smallest hint of a nod to show he understands then takes a deliberate away from Skinner and pretends to busy himself with helping Price assemble cans of paint stripper.

“Yeah Will,” snaps Skinner, unable to contain himself any longer and clearly consumed with irritated envy that Price’s prediction was correct. “Seeing as you can’t give us a decent profile for the Sculptor case you need to earn your salary somehow.”

Hannibal slowly swivels his head in Skinner’s direction and looks at him in vague surprise as if the broom had spoken. Skinner shuffles awkwardly under the force of the stare, and Price makes a contemptuous snorting noise then breaks the silence for a second time to announce with obvious disdain: “Don’t tell me Mr Skinner, let me guess. Another one of your ‘jokes’.”

“Sure,” replies Skinner. He pauses and warily darts his eyes at Hannibal to check if he’s still staring at him (he is). “Sure it was.”

“I suppose I must be very stupid,” says Hannibal leisurely. “But I don’t quite see the humour.
Perhaps you’d explain?”

As Will watches Skinner begins to bristle with barely suppressed outrage, clearly angry at being patronised like this while not actually daring to do anything about it. Will, in turn, is aware of a fresh wave of resentment at Hannibal for feeling a need to intervene on his behalf when Will is more than capable of standing up for himself…then takes a second look at the bristling and is forced to admit that the sight of Skinner being humiliated is so incredibly entertaining that it’s hard to get too annoyed about it.

“How?” asks Hannibal into the resulting silence. It’s only a single syllable, yet he manages to season it with so much contempt it’s as if it’s getting ready to roll off his tongue and kick Skinner in the face. Hannibal is often able to achieve this without ever needing to shout or show obvious anger, thinks Will enviously; in fact his normal speaking voice is so incredibly threatening when he wants it to be that you half expect it to escape from his throat at intervals and start attacking random passersby. Zeller and Price possibly think the same, because they’re now glancing from Hannibal to Skinner and back again like spectators at a tennis match, clearly scanning for subliminal signs of two alphas getting ready to fight.

Skinner, naturally, is the first to back down. “I didn’t mean anything by it,” he says, shuffling awkwardly before actually turning to look at Will as if hoping he’ll intervene and call Hannibal off. “Will knows I’m only messing with him. I’m just frustrated over the lack of progress in the Sculptor case. We all are.”

“No, indeed,” replies Hannibal crisply. “Although a concerted effort is always necessary in such circumstances – no one person’s input elevated or denigrated over anyone else’s.” He falls quiet for a few seconds, smile flickering around the edges as if it’s enjoying some private joke. “Why don’t you visit me at my office some time Mr Skinner? You seem very eager to assist. Perhaps we can extend this conversation further.”

Will catches Hannibal’s eye yet again and is immediately overcome with an urge to laugh; not least because the undertone of this whole exchange is that Hannibal won’t actually bother pursuing Skinner to kick his ass, but instead expects Skinner to go to him and present his ass to be kicked without Hannibal even having to go to the trouble of leaving his office. Skinner repeats the awkward shuffling movement of before, his arrogance blinding him to the hidden meaning of Hannibal’s message and obviously wanting to believe the invitation is sincere while still remaining wary of making a fool of himself just in case it’s not. In the resulting silence Siemens glances from him to Hannibal and back again then clears his throat with a nervous scraping sound.

“I guess we should get going now,” he says, gesturing vaguely towards the building. “We should leave you guys to it. We only came to ask Dr Price about those reports…and to say hi to Will.”

Hannibal now turns to look at Siemens instead, coolly appraising and hostile as if he thinks Siemens has taken an enormous liberty in daring to say Will’s name out loud. In fact the undertone of hostility is so extreme that Will is briefly confused at the reason for it. Then he notices the way Siemens is smiling at him and it all becomes clear as he remembers the conversation the night by the fireside when Hannibal expressed such strong displeasure at Siemens’ unwanted attention. Judging by the delicate frown lines around his eyebrows Hannibal’s obviously remembering it too; and when Siemens’ feeble smile grows broader and wider – cheerfully oblivious to any underlying tension – Will experiences a faint stirring of guilt at how he doesn’t feel more inclined to intervene on his behalf. Admittedly it’s not like he really expects Hannibal to go after Siemens over something so trivial, but he also can’t deny that there’s always been something intrinsically devious about him that leaves Will with a lingering sense of dislike and wariness whenever he’s close by. Remembering that both he and Skinner are on secondment, he makes a mental note to ask Jack how long it’s likely to
“Bye then,” says Zeller pointedly.

“Gentlemen,” adds Price with fake solemnness. “It’s been a pleasure.”

Skinner and Siemens exchange looks of varying discomfort and irritation then turn round and begin to trundle away across the parking lot, Siemens looking rather cowed and sheepish the entire time and Skinner radiating offended outrage. Hannibal spends a few seconds watching them go then finally turns round himself and runs his eyes across Will’s face.

“I’ll see you very soon Will,” he says.

The look is extremely intense, almost smouldering, and Will has a surreal certainty that if someone walked between them at that moment then their skin would be scorched by the force of it. He swallows audibly, highly aware of the way Hannibal has begun staring at his lips. “Sure,” he replies, trying to sound casual. “Soon.”

Hannibal nods courteously to Price and Zeller then gifts Will with a final piercing glance before melting away through the growing gloom with the same enigmatic poise he arrived with. But as the others resume cleaning again like it’s just business as usual, Will remains fixed and motionless as he stares silently after Hannibal; acutely bereft at the sense of being separated and aware of an urgent internal pull that makes him long to go running in pursuit.

Wait for me, he wants to call out. Take me with you...don’t leave me here on my own.

It’s ridiculous of course; that restless yearning. He knows it is – he’s going to see Hannibal again in just a few hours after all. But somehow it’s far more than just the absence of one thing as opposed to the presence of something else. It’s the existence of the graffiti, which so perfectly distils the suspicion and mistrust that’s destined to hang over him as long as he stays at the FBI, and it’s the condescension and prejudice embodied by Siemens and Skinner that seems his inevitable fate now people know he’s an omega. And taken together it means he wishes he could step out of himself in the same way a snake sheds its skin then follow Hannibal through the parking lot, down the street, and then away from the building: to just keep walking and walking side by side without ever looking back as his old self lies languishing on the asphalt like a lonely discarded relic from a different life.

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Jack is scribbling his signature onto a large pile of forms when Will enters his office, completing each one with a rather violent flourish as if they’ve done something to personally offend him. “Thanks for coming,” he says, without looking up. “Take a seat; I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Will makes a grunting noise in acknowledgement. Jack obligingly responds with a huff of his own, and which immediately makes Will wonder if they’re destined to just grunt and snort at each other like a couple of cavemen for the remainder of the meeting. Then he sits down and shuffles irritably on the visitor’s chair (which is notoriously uncomfortable and he’s convinced Jack keeps that way on purpose to discourage actual visitors) and waits for Jack to stop attacking the forms. The clock on the desk seems exaggeratedly heavy on every other beat – tick-tock, tick-tock – and the relentless drone in the otherwise silent room is already setting his teeth on edge.

“So,” says Jack eventually. He pushes the stack of papers to one side then retrieves his pen and inspects it for a few seconds before brandishing it in circles in Will’s direction. “How you doing?”

“Okay,” replies Will, unable to stop his eyes swivelling back and forth after the pen.
“I suppose you want to know what came up from the CCTV cameras?” adds Jack, getting straight to the point. Will politely raises his eyebrows and Jack scowls then tosses the pen across his desk in a bad-tempered dénouement as if he thinks it’s personally responsible. “Nothing, that’s what. Zilch. Zero. We still have no idea who put the graffiti there.”

“Not surprising really,” says Will, who’s disappointed by this but had already been expecting something like it. Jack grunts for a second time and Will pauses then adds rather hopefully: “Maybe it was just a member of the public.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s hardly consistent with the other Sculptor messages.”

Jack sighs again so Will sighs too to keep him company. Then he leans forward in his chair and runs a hand through his hair before realising, with a plunge of awkwardness, that Jack has taken the sudden closeness as an opportunity to start smelling him. In fact Jack’s been doing this a lot recently – always without seeming to be aware of it – and Will knows it’s because he’s picking up the trace of alpha scent that’s been all over him in the last week. Will doesn’t really know enough about alphas to be certain what reaction it’s creating in Jack, although he remembers reading that some of them can get unsettled and aggressive when they smell another alpha on an un-bonded omega so maybe it’s that (Christ). Is Jack unsettled? It’s not really possible to tell. He certainly looks aggressive enough, the grumpy old bastard, although at least he doesn’t seem to have realised that the scent belongs to Hannibal…not yet, anyway. Surreptitiously Will leans back in the chair and folds his arms across his chest.

“So, I did as you asked about Matthew Brown,” adds Jack. He pauses then sniffs again and Will shrinks further away, cringing slightly at how the chair’s upholstery makes a tormented squeaking sound whenever he shifts about on it. The fucking thing sounds like an angry rodent. “It’s not looking good for us. He can’t alibi himself for five of the Sculptor murders, but was working during the other three.”

*That means fuck all,* thinks Will irritably, remembers the echoing cavernous chambers of the hospital in which a person could easily get lost for days without anyone being the wiser. “We don’t know that for a fact,” he says out loud. “He could have slipped out for a few hours during a night shift.”

“Perhaps. Although we spoke to his supervisor as well; she told us she’s never had any trouble with him.”

“That means f…airly little,” snaps Will. “Half the guys on our books have friends and family swearing blind how fantastic they are.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you,” says Jack in a soothing way that immediately makes Will feel as if he’s being humoured. “Far from it. I’m just saying that at the moment we don’t have enough for a search warrant, let alone an arrest.” Oh God, now his nostrils are starting to flare again; Will promptly moves away and on cue the bastard chair emits a squeak that’s almost operatic in both noisy volume and rodent anguish. “Stop wriggling can’t you?” says Jack irritably.

“Sorry.”

“Remind me again what he said about the Sculptor?”

“Not much,” admits Will. “Only that he knew about the business cards and the Sculptor trying to contact me.”
Jack grunts again in response, face contorting with anger as he resurrects old grievances. “We never did find out who told Freddie Lounds about that.”

“I know,” says Will bleakly, starting to frown himself as he remembers his realisation that Skinner, despite being the most obvious culprit to begin with, almost certainly wasn’t responsible for the leak. It’s a shame he can’t ask Freddie about it directly, but while she’s shown an extremely malleable approach to ethics in nearly everything else there’s no doubt that a situation like this will make her shrilly self-righteous about protecting journalistic sources. Nevertheless, and despite despising her methods, he can’t help feeling a certain grudging respect for her obvious intelligence and fearlessness. Sometimes he thinks that in difference circumstances they might have even become friends.

“It’s frustrating,” he adds out loud. “We’ve got nothing on him, but I’m sure there’s some kind of link.”

Jack narrows his eyes and leans back in his own chair. “To be honest Will,” he says in a serious voice. “It looks like at least some of the link is you.”

Will feels a cold chill of unease at the undeniable truth of this and without even thinking about it presses his palm against his jacket pocket to feel the bluntly reassuring bulge of his gun. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “I know Jack. I know it is.”

“I think you need to know it – and for God’s sake don’t forget it. You don’t have that luxury anymore, not after that display at your house. The Sculptor sees this as a game Will. And he wants to play with you, whether you want it or not.”

There’s something about this statement which resonates with Will in a starkly unsettling way and he immediately finds his mind cycling back to a recent conversation with Hannibal; only one, it has to be said, of many such conversations. Agitation, revelation, inspiration…the process of being deconstructed from the inside out. “Play the game,” murmurs Will, more to himself than to Jack.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, it’s nothing,” says Will. “Just thinking out loud.” And then he smiles and tries to sound sincere, because he knows that he and Jack are no longer talking about the same thing at all.

“Well at least I’ve got one positive thing to tell you,” adds Jack when it becomes obvious that Will isn’t going to elaborate. “We’ve re-scheduled the induction event for the new trainees.” Will promptly looks blank and Jack sighs impatiently. “Remember? The one that was supposed to happen the other week.”

“Oh yeah,” replies Will who, like with so much else recently, finds he’s only able to locate it and give it any meaning in terms of the conversation he had about it with Hannibal. “I thought it had gone ahead.”

Jack raises his eyebrows, miming sarcasm. “Hardly. We had you disappearing then turning up in a police station – shortly after which the Chesapeake Ripper decided to stage a comeback. It’s safe to say everyone was a little preoccupied.” He pauses then catches Will’s eye in grim acknowledgement of how the Ripper, like the Sculptor, remains hovering in the shadows both unknown and uncaught. “Anyway,” he adds, obviously trying to rally himself a bit. “We thought it would be a nice distraction for everyone. A few welcome speeches, some drinks…maybe a bit of music.” Briefly he falls silent again, forehead furrowing with effort in an attempt to summon up some other activities that might reasonably be considered fun. “Maybe even dancing,” says Jack with triumph.
“Right.”

“And I want you there for a meet and greet.”

“Okay great,” says Will vaguely. “Wait…what?”

“I want you to do a meet and greet,” repeats Jack with exaggerated patience. “We can’t welcome the cohort without you being there.”

“Why?” demands Will, whose voice has practically risen to a shriek.

Jack settles comfortably into his own chair and darts Will a distinctly smug look. Why? the look says. I’ll tell you why. Because I’m goddamn Jack Crawford and you’re not – suck it up little man.

“You’ll enjoy it,” says Jack cheerfully. “It’ll take your mind off things.”

The beseeching tone is obvious – Jack not being above a bit of emotional blackmail when it suits him – and Will signs then tips his head back so he can stare aimlessly out the window at where the snow is starting to fall in tattered grey flecks like feathers. He’s acutely aware of the hopeful expression on Jack’s face and internally he now lectures himself for the surge of uneasy aversion that feels completely disproportionate for what he’s actually being asked to do. How bad can it really be after all? At least Hannibal had shown an interest in coming when Will last mentioned it so perhaps he might still want to. And it’ll only be for a few hours.

“So you’ll be there?” urges Jack.

Will struggles upright again then forces himself to look at Jack directly. “I…guess,” he says. Jack beams appreciatively and with an effort Will tries to inject a note of enthusiasm into his voice to add: “I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Then he attempts to say something about it being ‘fun’, only this seems like pushing probability way too far so ultimately just goes quiet again and folds his arms. Fine is good enough isn’t it? Not that it really matters whether it is or not, because it’ll have to be. It’ll have to settle for being fine.

“Of course,” agrees Jack. “It’s just an evening with a few colleagues.” Will gives the tiniest hint of a sigh and Jack sighs himself then leans across the desk and repeats encouragingly: “Just a few colleagues together Will. That’s all.” Will nods listlessly and Jack smiles again, trying to look inviting. “Seriously, though,” he says, “don’t look so uptight. I mean in the grand scheme of things… what’s the worst that could happen?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey my lovelies, sorry for such a short update. This was supposed to be a lot longer but it’s still taking me ages to get things written and after such a long wait for last week’s instalment I thought half a chapter was better than none :-) More on the way ASAP xxx
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Argh disaster lads! So sorry to spam you with notifications but I've accidentally deleted chapter 30 (and will never again sign into AO3 on my iPhone because that touch screen is freaking FATAL) and am having to repost. This means all comments have been deleted as well, so massive apologies to everyone that I didn't get to reply to beforehand :-(

Also, for anyone who didn't get to see the lovely marlahanni fanart before the original chapter 30 died, you can check it out: here.

*Drop kicks phone across living room*

The scene in the carpark would have been bad enough by itself, and Jack’s awkward request would have been bad enough by its self (‘what’s the worst that can happen my ass,’ mutters Will under his breath) but there’s no doubt that both events, when combined together, have created a level of irritation that’s positively epic. Will supposes that rising to the occasion in a situation(s) like this could be considered a test of character: in fact it half reminds him of the motivational posters that pop up in the cafeteria at intervals whenever Jack’s having one of his fits of inspiration – ‘Be the best you can be!’ ‘Face the fear!’ ‘Meet the challenge head-on!’ – and which are filled with emphatic exclamation marks and blocky fonts in primary colours yet somehow, despite their optimistic tone, are always destined to lie fallow on their various walls until they finally die and peel off and get replaced by new ones. But right now Will decides that strength of character can pretty much fuck off, so waves a metaphorical two fingers at Jack’s posters and opts to spend the remains of this shitty day hiding in his office pretending to grade papers until five o’clock arrives and he can escape back to Hannibal’s house instead.

A grimy winter dusk is falling by the time Will leaves the building that shrouds the red smears in the carpark with a ragged veil of grey. By now he’s fairly desperate to get home, but with typical perversity there are roadworks on the beltway which makes the journey take far longer than it should: limping along with a restless frustration that makes Will grit his teeth at every red light and pound the steering wheel at nothing. Far worse, however, is the text that arrives halfway through – and which he initially feels happy about when he’s sees it from Hannibal, only to be badly frustrated by when he reads it and realises that the latter has been delayed and is unlikely to be home any earlier than nine. Will, who’d been looking forward to some food, some company, and the type of quiet comfort that only Hannibal ever seems able to provide, is immediately disappointed and unlocks the door and lets himself in with the deflated feeling that always comes from an evening being unexpectedly spoiled. Even the house itself, always so secure and inviting when Hannibal’s inside, now seems stilted and foreign in the manner of a show home and he finds himself removing his shoes then tiptoeing round self-consciously like he’s an intruder with no real right to be there. The only recent sign of Hannibal being there at all is where his briefcase has been abandoned in the hallway (at least one of them has been, as he seems to have several) so Will tenderly picks it up and holds it for a few seconds until realising how ridiculous he’s being and quickly abandoning it again to its own devices. Then he sighs and runs his hands through his hair before padding into the living room on his shoeless feet so he can try to work out what the hell he’s going to do with himself for the next few hours.
In this respect food seems like the most obvious solution. Only Will can’t face navigating the complexities of Hannibal’s kitchen – which seems to require a level of daring and mental energy that might well prove fatal – so just makes himself a sandwich instead then nibbles at it propped against the counter with a rather forlorn expression on his face. In fact the forlornness is so extreme that he eventually starts to feel embarrassed, imagining how pathetic it would seem if anyone else could see him. Like a charity appeal photograph perhaps, or even an illustration for an article about socially incompetent omegas (caption: Sad bastard eating a sandwich). So he tries to rally himself a bit and checks his watch to see how much longer before Hannibal gets back. The hands are stubbornly stuck at 12 and 6; only a measly ten minutes since the last time he checked them. “That’s hours away,” says Will fretfully. In fact he has a powerful urge to call Hannibal just to hear his voice but is concerned about looking needy and clinging, so goes upstairs and has a shower instead (then uses a metric ton of Hannibal’s ludicrously expensive shampoo, because why the hell not?) before creeping into Hannibal’s study to have a furtive rummage in the bookcase. The books have interesting titles like The Idea of the Self, Phenomenology of Spirit and Simulacra and Simulation and are an attractive combination of the crisp and modern interspersed with the old and leather-bound, as well as a large assortment of academic journals with identical spines which are neatly ordered by date and appear to be standing to attention like a row of soldiers in the same jacket. Will passes a reasonably content half hour leafing through them and noting the ones he wants to read before gradually growing aware of feeling lonely again (and beset by the image of Sad bastard looking at books) so gives in and decides to have a quick nap to kill some time. In fact having a nap at 06:30 seems like the saddest of all the sad bastard activities, but he resolves that on this occasion he’s going to give himself a pass on it – not least because cleaning that carpark was really fucking exhausting.

Will’s plan is to get up again after 90 minutes or so; which as plans go is solid enough in theory but doomed to fail in practice, because he’s so tired he ends up doing a convincing imitation of a corpse and falls into a semi-coma so impenetrable that he wakes up to realise a full four hours have passed and it’s now the middle of the night. Hannibal is propped up next to him in the bed leafing through a magazine with a foreign title, and when he sees Will moving he turns round and starts to smile. Will, who wants to apologise for being too unconscious to welcome him home as planned, opens his mouth to start speaking and is rather dismayed when nothing comes out except a tired croaking noise.

“Is that so?” says Hannibal. “How very interesting.”

Will gives a wide yawn that shows his tongue and most of his teeth then rolls onto his back and scrubs a hand across his face. “You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are,” he says. “You know that right? Your self-delusion’s a bit tragic.”

“Probably,” agrees Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair with his free hand. “Although at least your recovery is prodigious; you’ve already graduated to full sentences. I apologise if I woke you by the way. I was trying to be as quiet as possible.”

“S’fine,” says Will. He yawns again then shuffles closer to Hannibal so he can climb on top of him and tuck his head beneath his chin. It’s a classic omega gesture and actually quite embarrassing (Sad bastard snuggling alpha), but the security and comfort ultimately outweigh it and despite his self-consciousness he finds he has no real desire to move. Hannibal rustles the magazine then starts to skim a palm up and down his back in a rather absent-minded way, just as Will gives an irritable shuffle to try and avoid it.

“What’s the matter?” says Hannibal placidly. “Why are you fidgeting so much?”

“Stop it.”
“Stop what?”

“That,” says Will as Hannibal does it again. “It feels like your patting me. Like I’m a dog.”

“Is that how one touches a dog?” replies Hannibal, removing his hand from Will’s back. “I concede to your greater expertise. I also apologise – again. If you can wait until I’ve finished this piece I shall give you my full attention.”

Will promptly feels guilty for being unreasonable (although it really did feel like stroking a dog) then stretches out his legs until they’re entangled with Hannibal’s and he can run a foot along the side of his calf. Hannibal has strong, well-muscled legs – fairly typical for an alpha – although they’re also fine-boned and sculpted like an athlete or dancer, which is decidedly not typical and might actually be considered more omega-like. If Will’s honest with himself he has a bit of a fascination with them; not that that’s necessarily a bad thing, considering how Hannibal’s so tall and rangy that most of his body seems to be made up of leg. Hannibal, oblivious to the admiration, is starting to fidget himself from where Will’s face is pressed against his shoulder; Will supposes his hair must be tickling him, so puts a hand on his chest to make him stay still.

“You’re wide awake now aren’t you?” says Hannibal from behind the magazine.

“’Fraid so,” replies Will cheerfully. “Looks like you’ll have to stay awake a bit longer to entertain me.” Hannibal gives the smallest hint of a sigh and Will smiles to himself then adjusts his weight until he’s propped upright again and can run his finger along Hannibal’s collar bones. To an observer the touch appears a casual one, but in reality is as vigilant and measured as a palaeontologist and pays careful attention to each plane and ridge of bone as it curves into the shoulder then spans out across the chest. The intensity of his fascination is actually fairly mortifying to Will, but it’s not like it’s the first time. In fact he’s not only aware of doing it more frequently in the last few weeks, but how the desire to do it at all is being propelled by his sense that emotional intimacy isn’t enough anymore and needs to be augmented by acquainting himself with every inch of Hannibal’s body as well.

“Time for another one of your inspections?” asks Hannibal in a long-suffering way.

“Yes. Stop wriggling.”

“I do not wriggle,” replies Hannibal with extreme dignity.

“No, maybe not…actually it’s more like squirming. Hold still can’t you? I want to look at your chest.”

“Why? I can’t think of anything more incredibly tedious.”

Will ignores this and presses his cheek against Hannibal’s ribcage, silently counting out his heartbeat.

“Why is your sternum so long?”

“You mean compared to yours? I suppose because I’m an alpha and you’re not.”

“Really?”

“Why do you sound so sceptical?” says Hannibal, briefly reappearing over the top of the magazine. “What other explanation would satisfy you more?” He pauses then smirks very slightly. “Perhaps it’s because I’m tall and you are tiny?”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”
“You are quite right to do so,” replies Hannibal, slowly vanishing behind the magazine again.

“I didn’t actually know that,” admits Will. “About the sternum. Although I knew alphas’ ribs tend to be longer; it’s one of the ways they gender skeletons. Just...here.” He moves his finger down an inch and presses firmly. “Stay still can’t you. Are you ticklish?”

“I am not. I’m just not insensible to being jabbed in the chest.”

“I’m showing an interest in you. You should be flattered.”

“I am immensely flattered,” replies Hannibal in a deadpan voice.

Will gives a smirk of his own then relocates his inspection to Hannibal’s acromion bone, which is very firm and rounded at the end with a smooth bolt of muscle nestled underneath. “So how was your day?” he says, shifting down to the bicep. “I suppose you must have been at work for hours.”

“My day was uneventful.”

“Boring?”

“Not at all. Considering everything that’s happened recently a lack of events felt rather ideal.”

“Mine got worse,” says Will gloomily. “Jack’s rearranged that welcome event for the trainees: he wants me to do a meet and greet.”

“Then you have my condolences,” replies Hannibal, finally putting the magazine down so he can take hold of Will’s waist in both hands. “I have no doubt it will be just as terrible as it sounds.”

“Hmmm,” says Will. “I know.” He pauses then fretfully knots his fingers together before darting a look at Hannibal from beneath his eyelashes. “I was wondering...would you come with me?”

“Of course,” replies Hannibal promptly. “I said that I would. Although I seem to remember you were rather opposed to me being there the last time we discussed it.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve changed my mind.”

“That’s your privilege of course,” says Hannibal when it’s obvious Will isn’t going to elaborate any further. “Give me the details and you can rely on my presence – although I draw the line at the meeting and greeting of trainees.”

Will smiles in response, pleased to have been guaranteed some moral support for the event without having to explain his irrational unease at the thought of going in the first place. Then he takes another look at Hannibal, so chiselled and leonine in the softness of the lamplight, and feels irrational all over again at the fresh little twinge of anxiety that’s immediately appeared at the idea of him being exposed to a swarm of younger, more glamorous agents...some of whom might very well be omegas, albeit concealed under layers of pheromone spray. This insecurity actually seems rather contemptible and he dislikes it intensely, but it’s still impossible to ignore; not least because of his secret conviction that Hannibal, as a wealthy, successful and thoroughbred alpha, could easily attract an omega who’s infinitely more desirable and socially successful than Will is. In an effort to distract himself he begins examining Hannibal’s shoulders again, tracing the tip of his forefinger along a small scar at the side. “How did you get that?” he asks after a pause.

“That one?” says Hannibal. “Don’t ask me about that. The story isn’t particularly interesting.”

“No?”
“No. More importantly, it wasn’t an altercation I performed particularly well in. The other alpha had a weapon and I didn’t.”

Will sighs loudly then goes still for a few moments before leaning forward and resting his face against Hannibal’s chest again. “Please don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Act as if you’re infallible. I know you don’t mean to but it makes me feel patronised. Do you understand? I’m not this frail, lesser being that you have to impress by making out how indestructible you are.”

“Ah, I see. You mean because you’re an omega?”

“But I’m not,” says Will stubbornly. “I mean I am, but…” He frowns then falls briefly silent, struggling to find the best way to express it. “I’m just Will.”

“I thought we’d agreed that you’re The Will,” replies Hannibal, beginning to card his fingers through Will’s hair. “And if it’s any consolation then it’s not just you by any means. I seem perpetually inclined to try and impress everyone.”

Will gives a huff of laughter then nudges Hannibal with his forehead before climbing off him so he can stretch out flat on the mattress. “Well then don’t treat me the same way you treat everyone else.”

“Believe me Will I make all kinds of exceptions for you,” says Hannibal with a flicker of seriousness. “Not always entirely by choice.”

“I want to hear about the times you lost out or got it wrong,” adds Will, reaching up to twine his arms through the slats in the bedpost. “It happens to everyone; even you. I want you to be real with me.”

Hannibal nods to show he understands and Will gives a faint smile then tilts his head until they’re looking at each other directly. “That guy with the weapon,” he says. “I bet you still killed him didn’t you?”

“I did,” replies Hannibal serenely.

Will, who’s long past the point of even pretending to be shocked by this, catches Hannibal’s eye again in a wordless, mutual expression of satisfaction. “Some people are so fatally compromised in their capacity to live well,” adds Hannibal with something like relish. “So coarse and inelegant – so unrefined – that one wonders how they’ve managed to stumble and blunder along in the world for as long as they have. Removing them from it is almost a kindness. An act of mercy, one might say.”

“Actually, I don’t think anyone would say that.”

“But I just have,” replies Hannibal, swivelling his dark eyes onto Will’s face then holding them there. “Our moralists, after all, show significant arrogance in attempting to define the principles of mercy. Consider doctors for example…”

“Like you.”

“Like me,” agrees Hannibal with a slow smile. It occurs to Will then that his laugh is rather light and strange…although maybe it’s only because it emerges so rarely and Will still isn’t used to it yet. “Consider doctors who save lives and refer to being in possession of a ‘god complex’ when doing so. Is it all that different to play at God by saving lives as it to play at God by ending them?”

“Don’t be stupid, of course it is. Although I can think of one commonality; in fact you just said it
yourself – arrogance.”

“Well here we are philosophising,” replies Hannibal briskly. “And yet actions, as they say, speak far louder than words.” He pauses then casts Will a pointed look. “That was a very interesting scene in the carpark today.”

“Not really,” says Will, who doesn’t particularly want to talk about Skinner. “Unlike you I wasn’t wearing my god complex. I never intended to hurt him.”

“I know you didn’t; you are not so intemperate as that. But you would have intimidated him verbally, which in turn would have had consequences.”

“I know,” agrees Will with obvious fretfulness. “On the other hand if I was an alpha then no one would care.”

“But you are not an alpha are you? You are simply going to have to do the best you can with what you have.” Hannibal smiles again then traces his finger along the edge of Will’s cheekbone. “And what you have is considerable. It’s merely a question of biding your time, then when the moment is right…you strike.”

“I can’t stand him,” snaps Will with unusual venom. “He’s vile: the worst kind of bully.”

“Certainly he is. But if it’s any consolation – not that I really expect it to be – I believe you cause him infinitely more aggravation than he causes you.”

“You reckon?” says Will sarcastically.

“I do, and I shall tell you why. When I was driving home yesterday I saw a small boy in a playground tugging the hair of one of his friends. He was making himself extremely disagreeable and it was obvious that he was desperate for her attention but didn’t know of a better way to engage her. ‘Ah,’ I said to myself. ‘Here we have Agent Skinner.’”

“No, you’re wrong. There’s no way he’s attracted to me.”

“Perhaps not in the more conventional sense, but at the very least he experiences a…what should we call it?” Hannibal pauses thoughtfully then trails his finger away from Will’s cheekbone so he can stroke across his forehead instead. “A fascination with you. Why spend so much energy tormenting you otherwise? The opposite of hate isn’t love after all, it’s indifference. If he merely disliked you he’d simply avoid your company, much in the way you avoid his. No, I believe you occupy an extremely prominent place in his mind.”

Will shrugs unhappily, obviously reluctant to acknowledge the reality of this, and Hannibal finally stops stroking his face and starts to massage the back of his neck instead. “You really underplayed the extent of it,” he adds gently. “Sometimes you are too stoical for your own good; you should have come to me sooner about him.”

“No really. It wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle myself.”

“That’s not the point; sometimes one just requires an ally. Being the focus of so much vivid fascination is an uncomfortable place to be. As I said, you minimised it in your own descriptions but when I observed him myself this morning I found it extremely obvious. I think he broods about you constantly when he’s alone and becomes fixated by your presence when he sees you. I shouldn’t even be surprised if he uses you as a source of erotic stimulation.”

Will opens his mouth and promptly starts choking on his own spit so has to cough for a few seconds
before being able to reply. Hannibal raises a polite eyebrow. “Oh for God’s sake,” says Will finally. “Did you just say he jerks off to me? You did didn’t you. You think I’m Skinner’s masturbation inspiration.”

“Well obviously I can’t say for certain. Fortunately for me I can’t see inside his mind – fortunately for him too I should add. But yes, I think it’s possible. If so it would be a subjugation fantasy in which you’re extremely abject and docile, imploring him for his protection and forgiveness in the manner of a stereotypical omega. It disempowers you, which is the only way he knows how to deal with you at all.” For a few seconds Hannibal looks extraordinarily grim before glancing at Will again and allowing his expression to soften slightly. “Of course it may not be remotely likely, because depicting you in such a role requires a level of imagination he almost certainly doesn’t possess.”

“Yeah, well, I’m opting for denial. My official line is that I still don’t see it.”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to. In fact the only time I ever see your insight fail is when you’re trying to appraise your positive qualities from the perspective of someone else. Look how oblivious you were to my admiration – I practically had to send you a written invitation.” Will rolls his eyes and gives Hannibal a playful shove, and Hannibal smiles again then wraps an arm round his shoulder. “Besides, it’s not a question of empathising with Skinner as opposed to dismantling his motives. And that’s something that’s far easier for myself as an outsider – and another alpha – to be able to do.”

Will frowns slightly at this, remembering Skinner’s deranged display behind the CSI van on the hideous night he’d started going into heat. “You respect omegas though; he doesn’t. In fact sometimes I think he hates them.”

“Agreed.”

“You seem very calm about it all by the way,” adds Will. Reaching out he casually ruffles Hannibal’s hair; not really for any better reason than because the sight of Hannibal with mussed-up hair is strangely appealing. “I would’ve expected you to be more angry. Where’s all your alpha possessiveness gone? It’s usually right up there hanging out with your god complex.”

“Oh rest assured, I am extraordinarily angry,” says Hannibal. “And if I thought he was a genuine threat to you I would have removed him a long time ago. As it happens I am exercising self-restraint. I would like nothing better than to instruct him in the error of his ways, but I’m reluctant to deny you the satisfaction. After all, you’re capable of devising a solution that’s just as…elegant as mine.” Will catches Hannibal’s eye and holds his gaze for a few seconds before looking away again. “And that’s the other reason for his endless baiting,” adds Hannibal smoothly. “He’s threatened by your success and intelligence and desires to punish you for the way you make him feel. In reality I think he’s consumed by desperation and loneliness, but is the product of a classic alpha upbringing which leaves him with the belief that aggression is the only legitimate way to express his emotional pain.”

“If you expect me to feel sorry for him…”

“Oh course not,” says Hannibal firmly. “One can understand something without condoning it. Why wouldn’t he be threatened by you after all? Your abilities are exceptional. Someone like Jack can appreciate and respect them without becoming envious, whereas Skinner sees them as an assault on his own self-worth. The fact you’re an omega only makes it worse.” He pauses, briefly looking thoughtful, then turns onto his side so he can look at Will directly. “He’s hardly the only one though is he? Your spell’s been woven far beyond the FBI.”

“You mean the Sculptor,” says Will bleakly.
“I do,” replies Hannibal, beginning to stroke his eyes across Will’s face. “Also the elusive Matthew Brown; if he is indeed a separate person. All these degenerates, Will: you’re like catnip for them aren’t you? How do you manage to attract such very sinister suitors?”

“You mean like you?” says Will, without breaking eye contact.

Hannibal smiles approvingly at a point neatly made: touché. “Perhaps not quite like me. At least not entirely. They want to possess you utterly, but to succeed would ultimately mean your destruction.”

“So what do you want?”

“Naturally I want to possess you,” replies Hannibal calmly. “But the similarity ends there. My goal is deconstruction, not desecration.”

“Oh yeah?” snaps Will. “When you deconstruct something you take it apart. And you break it.”

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal without missing a beat. “Then you make something beautiful from the pieces.” Smiling again he reaches out and cups Will’s face in his palm. “What a disastrously clever boy you are. But if you think I’m so accomplished an architect you’re giving me too much credit. The true arbiter of this particular masterpiece is going to be you – as I believe you’re already well aware.”

“Well what I don’t believe,” replies Will, trapping Hannibal’s hand in his own. “Is pretty much a single word of what you’ve just said. I think you see yourself as in control of everything; including my so-called metamorphosis.”

“So you remember that conversation?” says Hannibal, whose smile has started to broaden. “What am I saying? Of course you do – your memory is almost as good as my own. Well then. You know that I consider it a process of becoming that belongs entirely to you; and that I can influence, and I can persuade, but that whatever emerges is destined to follow its own nature and is beyond me. I’d never want it otherwise Will. If I saw you as simply an acolyte or apprentice then I would have grown bored with you a long time ago.”

Will stares back in silence for a few moments, slowly tangling and re-tangling Hannibal’s fingers in his own. “So what am I then?”

“My equal,” replies Hannibal softly. “You’re also a looking glass with infinite possibilities reflected in it. In fact it’s ironic you profess to hate mirrors so much, because your image is a source of constant illumination.” He smiles again, briefly looking intense and almost dream-like as if inspecting some internal panorama that encompasses far more than what’s simply happening at that moment in the room. “You’re like a work of art to me, Will – so achingly beautiful. All inspiration and revelation, with the vitality of youth and the graceful methods of maturity…so ferocious and audacious, with an exquisitely obscure mind and a dark slender soul. Only you could never perceive it yourself so I had to see it for you; I had to be your eyes, then hold up the mirror for you to watch the transformation. Just you, Will: the small, shabby boy with the houseful of shattered glass became all the great warriors and philosophers of the world to me. You are a piece of unprincipled poetry: all delicacy, fury, grace and passion. And you pierce my mind yet consume my interest, and when we’re lying here together like this I feel I could happily live in a world I’d given up for you with no one else present.”

This time Will doesn’t reply straight away, instead drawing in a deep breath that quivers faintly on the exhale. “Okay,” he finally says, and there’s a slight catch to his voice. “That was a pretty good answer. Full marks for effort.”
“Excellent,” replies Hannibal, immediately reverting to his previous, more playful mood because he can see that Will is on the verge of becoming overwhelmed. “I feel like I’ve vindicated myself now. What’s my reward going to be?”

“What says you deserve a reward?”

“I do. And as an alpha I can be guaranteed to sulk horribly if I don’t get my own way.”

Will laughs out loud at this, obviously relieved to have the atmosphere shift to something more innocuous and less intense. Hannibal smiles back in an unusually benevolent way and Will wrinkles his nose at him then smiles a bit more before pulling away and sitting upright. He then proceeds to stare at Hannibal very thoughtfully like he’s trying to size him up, and as Hannibal raises an eyebrow in response Will waits a few more seconds then neatly pounces on him: straddling his chest then grabbing both wrists to pin them above his head.

“What an incredibly underhand move,” says Hannibal in amusement.

“Submit!” replies Will triumphantly.

“Indeed. I surrender unreservedly.”

“Good for you.”

“Not really. There’s no particular merit in it; I just don’t see what other choice exists when I have you sat on top of me looking so maniacal.”

“Not as formidable as you like to think are you?”

“It appears not. I am a failed alpha.”

Will grins and pretends to bite Hannibal’s cheekbone. “It’s alright. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Then you have my eternal gratitude.”

“To the victor the spoils,” adds Will. “So what am I going to do with you now?”

“I hope you’ll show me some mercy,” says Hannibal, twisting his wrist a little so he can run his fingers against Will’s. “Or perhaps you won’t? Perhaps you’re too pitiless and you plan to exploit my defeat.”

Will delicately rolls his hips against Hannibal’s then leans down and begins to kiss his way along his jaw. “You really would submit wouldn’t you?” he says softly. “If I told you to?”

Hannibal’s mouth immediately arranges itself into a rather feline smile. “Of course,” he replies, tipping his head back to give Will better access. “I believe we established that some time ago.”

“But did you really mean it?” murmurs Will. He gently tugs Hannibal’s ear with his teeth then resumes the slow parade of kisses down his throat as if he’s speaking straight into his skin. “Or are you going to stop talking for once and prove it?”

Hannibal gives another slow smile. This time it seems to be more for his private benefit than Will’s, and he lets it flicker round his mouth for a few seconds before turning his head so he can look at Will directly. “I don’t have the slightest objection to proving it,” he says. “Do your worst.”

Will gifts Hannibal’s neck with a final scrape of teeth then slowly sits upright again, pretending to be casual despite the fact he wasn’t expecting such quick permission and is finding his initial twinge of
surprise is quickly being followed by the realisation that he’s not entirely sure what he wants to do with it. Beneath him Hannibal stares up rather wantonly then stretches and flexes his shoulders like someone with all the time in the world, and the complete absence of nerves or uncertainty strikes Will as faintly irritating compared to how anxious he was himself a few nights ago in a similar situation. Hannibal smiles serenely in response like he’s guessed what Will’s thinking, and Will catches his eye and can’t help smiling back before reaching down to stroke the side of his face. In fact the lack of certainty over what he wants has at least helped to crystallise what he doesn’t want, which is anything that could cause genuine hurt or humiliation (not that either option seems particularly possible to achieve, even if he did want to). Nevertheless, the idea of testing whether Hannibal’s genuinely willing to let go of the more dominant alpha role for an hour or two is undeniably interesting.

“I’m not going to ask for anything complicated,” says Will finally. “Not this time. In fact all you have to do is the same you wanted from me the other night: not speak unless spoken to and obey my instructions.”

Hannibal sighs with anticipation and elegantly arches his neck. “Do you intend to tie me up?”

“No,” replies Will with a faint smile. “Trust me; you’re going to need your hands.”

Hannibal returns the smile then gives a long, languorous stretch like a jungle cat and attempts to take hold of Will’s waist. “No,” snaps Will, grabbing hold of his wrists and pushing them back on the bed. “You don’t get to touch me until I tell you to.”

Hannibal dips his head to show agreement then gazes calmly up at Will without saying anything else. “Look at you,” says Will, struggling not to sound too fond. “ Pretending to be passive; it’s almost convincing.” Idly he strokes his palm against Hannibal’s chest, pausing every so often to allow a light scratch of nails. “It’s a shame we’re both undressed already or I could have made you strip for me. Alphas don’t generally do that do they? Of course they expect omegas to do it, but they resent being asked themselves. You’re so vain though, aren’t you…you probably wouldn’t care.”

Hannibal’s serene expression doesn’t falter once, but the way they’re so attuned to one another still makes it easy for Will to tell how frustrating it is for him not being allowed to speak. In fact considering how much he likes Hannibal’s voice, he knows he’s actually fairly willing to relax this rule at intervals…although there’s no denying that the enforced silence is rather gratifying in the meantime. Very slowly he now resumes the rocking motion of his hips against Hannibal’s, enjoying the way it makes him catch his breath.

“Everyone talks so much about alphas keeping omegas,” adds Will softly. “How you own us; that we’re your property. But did you know that some countries used to do it differently?” He pauses then smiles rather sardonically. “I bet you did know that. Parts of Europe and Asia; even North America at one point. Wealthy omegas would keep alphas as little more than concubines, just like a glorified stud farm. If you liked a certain one enough you might even let them breed you, but otherwise their only purpose…” Leaning down he starts to skim his mouth across Hannibal’s throat, punctuating each word with a light scrape of teeth, “…was to be a. Living. Breathing. Fucktoy. Would you like that Hannibal? What if your only responsibility in life was to make me come when I told you to?”

“What a novel concept,” replies Hannibal, sounding genuinely fascinated at the idea of alpha’s fortunes being so radically reversed. “I’m sure I would like it exceedingly; no doubt I’d feel very fortunate to have such a beautiful, cruel omega master.”

“You’d really have to work for your living then wouldn’t you?” adds Will with grim satisfaction. “I could just throw you out on a whim.”
“And could I expect to be instructed in my duties?” says Hannibal innocently. “Or would you require me to anticipate your desires without being told?”

“Both,” replies Will. “It would depend on my mood wouldn’t it?” He gives his hips a final thrust then arches his spine, leaning back a little as he does it to make sure Hannibal gets the best possible view of how hard and wet his cock is getting. Hannibal’s breath promptly hitches and Will slowly strokes his thumb across the head then brushes it against Hannibal’s lips. “If you wanted me to keep you then you’d have to get very, very good at predicting them. I’d expect you to be able to take one look at me – just one – and know exactly how much initiative I wanted you to show.”

“And would a failure do to so be punished?” purrs Hannibal.

“Of course.”

Hannibal’s Sphinx-like smile promptly reappears as he reaches out and cups Will’s chin in his hand, gently turning it one way and another so he can examine his face from several angles. “So capricious,” he says softly. “I suppose you’re very accustomed to the fervour and adoration of your fleet of alphas, so naturally assume that they know your body as well as you do yourself. Normally you’d simply present it to them and expect them to pleasure you without the trouble of giving instructions. Tonight however, I see that you’re feeling demanding – and therefore intend to dictate my actions very precisely.”

“Correct,” says Will, resettling himself until his thighs are nestled snugly round Hannibal’s hipbones. “For once you’re going to stop talking and do as you’re told.”

“And are you this controlling with the others?” says Hannibal serenely. “Or do you just reserve it for me?”

Will tangles his fingers in Hannibal’s hair and gives it a tug. “All of them of course – what do you think? If you want special treatment you’re going to have to earn it.”

“Naturally my love,” replies Hannibal, whose eyes are now closed. “We would all be trying to earn it…all us captive alphas together.” Abruptly he opens his eyes then skims them over Will’s face with a look that’s practically smouldering. “Would you ever allow us to combine our talents, do you think? Would you let two of us take you at the same time?”

“Mmm. Yes.”

“A third present as well perhaps? To watch? It might heighten your pleasure to know you were being admired and longed for as you were being had by the others.”

Will catches his breath slightly at the image of it. “Perhaps.”

“What if we lost control of ourselves, beloved? Alphas are so enraptured by the mere scent of an omega. Would you let us be rough with you if we wanted?”

Will neatly reaches out and gives Hannibal’s hair another tug. “No, definitely not – only if I wanted.”

Hannibal sighs again like he’s enjoying the sensation then twists his head round in an attempt to kiss Will’s wrist. “It sounds like an extremely satisfying situation for you,” he says. “I congratulate you for arranging it. Nevertheless, I can’t deny that I am not at all happy by the idea of your other alphas. Something would have to be done about that.”

Will can feel his mouth starting to twitch with amusement, then remembers he’s supposed to be role-playing severe so makes a quick attempt to hide it before Hannibal can see. “You think so?” he says
“I do. You might keep us as tame and pliable, but even you can’t suppress our natures entirely.”

“So what would you do? You couldn’t complain to me about it – I wouldn’t care.”

“Naturally I would not complain to you. I would take my complaints to my fellow alphas instead.”

“Oh yeah?” says Will, beginning to roll his hips against Hannibal’s again. “Would you fight them?”

“I would annihilate them,” replies Hannibal with relish. “There would be no question as to who was the most dominant among us; no question at all. However, I wouldn’t rely on brute force alone to overpower them. I would dedicate myself to pleasing you so devotedly that their appeal would fade in comparison and you’d eventually grow tired of them and send them away. Their caresses would feel so clumsy and unsatisfying compared to mine.”

Will briefly gives up and starts to laugh, despite it not being remotely consistent with the image he’s trying to convey. Hannibal smirks back and Will breaks character for a few seconds and leans forward so he can bury his face in his neck. “So even then you’d try to manipulate me?”

“I would,” says Hannibal, kissing Will’s temple. “But you’d enjoy yourself so much while I was doing it that you wouldn’t really mind.”

“The ends justify the means I suppose,” says Will. He smiles against Hannibal’s skin then spends a few seconds trying to recapture his previous mood before straightening up and climbing off Hannibal so he can stretch himself across the bed. The sheets are deliciously cool against his flushed skin and he writhes against them rather blissfully, spreading his legs wide open then slowly sliding his hand across his chest and down his stomach. He’s soaking wet from where he’s leaked pre-come all over himself and as Hannibal makes a faint noise of frustration Will moans and closes his eyes, tipping his head back to show off his throat as he leisurely strokes his cock with the other hand. Regardless of the context, he knows he’ll never get tired of this: how Hannibal can always make him feel like an object of desire rather than a problem to be solved or an article of damage.

“I’m still not convinced though,” he says, deliberately making his tone sound dismissive. “Why would I even need you to get me off when I can just do it myself?” A faint rustle of sheets is the only response, and Will immediately senses that Hannibal’s about to move towards him so quickly darts out a foot and presses it against his chest. “No,” he says sharply. “Don’t you dare. Don’t even think about touching me until I give you permission.”

This time Hannibal gives a sigh so low it’s almost a hiss and Will ignores him and arches his back, delicately sensuous and deliberately wanton as he speeds up the movement of his hand. He lets it last for a little longer, teasing himself until he feels the first sharp spikes of pleasure building in his abdomen before reluctantly slowing down again and sliding a palm hand across his chest to massage his nipples. The skin is warm and slippery with sweat and above him he can hear Hannibal swallow audibly as he runs the tip of a finger against where Will’s foot is still pressed against his chest.

“I said no, Hannibal.”

Hannibal sighs but withdraws his hand, and Will bites his lower lip as he gives his cock a few more luxurious strokes. His breath is coming out in a series of ragged pants by now and he spends a few seconds getting it under control before snapping his eyes open and roughly moving forward to push Hannibal against the bed. Hannibal lets himself be moved without complaint and Will straddles him then takes hold of his cock in both hands so he can massage the head with his thumb. “Jesus, look at that,” he murmurs, increasing the pressure slightly. “You’re so hard. Fuck. You’re desperate to get
this in me aren’t you? You always act like you’re above it, like you think you’re better than other
alphas. But all any of you really want is to feel an omega come round your cock then fill us up with a
knot straight afterwards.” Hannibal catches his breath again but doesn’t reply. “I want you to admit
it,” adds Will softly. “Say it out loud. If you do I’ll let you touch me.”

“I admit it,” says Hannibal promptly.

“What do you admit? Be specific.”

“I admit that I’m no better than any other alpha.”

“And?”

“And I am just as base and dissolute as the rest of them.”

“Good,” says Will crisply. “Then I guess you won’t mind proving it will you? I’ll give you five
minutes – fingers only and nothing else. And make it good. Because if you don’t then I’ll leave you
here and finish off without you. Well go on then,” he adds when Hannibal doesn’t move. “Impress
me.”

Hannibal stares back with gleaming eyes and a slow smile – visibly hungry and predatory beneath
the muteness – then picks Will up like he weighs nothing at all so he can flip him onto the bed and
knock his legs apart. For a few seconds Will feels Hannibal’s breath as hot as a brand on the back of
his neck before firm warm palms begin to roam across his skin: caressing the curves of his back and
shoulders, sliding round to skim across his nipples, stroking his stomach and waist. Will tenses with
anticipation, faintly embarrassed by how his thighs are starting to quiver, then gives a low moan as
he feels Hannibal spit onto his hole. Hannibal makes a murmuring noise of admiration and promptly
does it again, then again, until his fingers are soaking wet and slippery with a mixture of slick and
saliva and he can massage Will’s hole in slow circles before moving his hand down to slide along his
cock then back up again in strokes that dip further and harder each time.

“Oh yes,” says Will. He’s swaying in a rather stuttering motion now, struggling between the urge
to thrust down into Hannibal’s hand or push up to where Hannibal’s fingers are exploring his hole.
“Yeah. Fuck. Like that.” A fresh rush of slick courses down his thighs and when Hannibal drags his
tongue across it he gives a helpless kind of wail, madly aware of how tightly he’s clenching round
the fingers in an attempt to keep them buried deep inside him. “It’s driving you crazy isn’t it?” he
manages to gasp out. “You want to fuck me and you can’t.”

Hannibal sighs with agreement, clearly long past the point of being able to hide it, and Will spreads
his legs even wider then shifts backwards until he’s pushing Hannibal’s groin and can grind himself
against it. He chooses a rhythm that’s slow and deliberately torturous, well aware of how frustrating
it must be for Hannibal to have to see Will’s ass sliding up and down his cock without being allowed
to take control of thrusting into it. In fact the thought is impossibly exciting, because he knows how
much Hannibal enjoys taking him in this position simply so he can watch himself pounding into
Will’s body. Not that Will can exactly blame him…he’d actually quite like to see it himself. “One
day I want you to film me,” he hears himself saying. “I want to see what I look like when you’re
fucking me.”

Hannibal’s breath catches again even louder than before. “You always look perfect,” he says. He
pauses a few seconds, slowly stroking and probing. “Tight, wet, luscious…you take it so
beautifully.”

As he speaks he withdraws his fingers nearly all the way then thrusts them in again as Will moans
and buries his face in his arm. “Oh,” he gasps out, and once he’s started he finds he can’t stop
himself. “Oh God…Hannibal. It feels good.”

Hannibal murmurs a snatch of something rapturous in a foreign language then drops forward so he can drape himself across Will’s back and press their faces together. “I’d love to film you,” he says. “I think you’d enjoy watching yourself.”

Will empties his lungs in a shuddering exhale then twists around to search out Hannibal’s mouth for a kiss. It’s passionate and almost painful in the hungry scrape of teeth and stabbing tongues, only parting for a few seconds to breathe before clashing back together. “Next time we’re doing this in front of the mirror,” he says – and it’s not until he hears the words out loud that he realises, with a surge of genuine shock, how something that was unbearable just a few days ago now seems not only thrilling but actively and darkly desirable. Hannibal makes a growling noise deep in his throat to suggest he’s thinking the same then scrapes his teeth against Will’s neck even harder than before. The sensation is electrifying and Will moans loudly and shamelessly as he feels his cock start to spasm with a trail of pre-come. Even so, when Hannibal pushes his legs apart he immediately goes rigid and tries to pull away. “No,” he says sharply. “What did I tell you about waiting?”

Hannibal growls again, burying his face in Will’s hair like he’s trying to breathe him in. His hand is still rammed between Will’s legs and when he shows no sign of moving Will gives a hiss of annoyance then summons all possible strength to snap his body upwards and force Hannibal off. Hannibal lands neatly on his heels next to Will and for a few seconds looks genuinely surprised at the rejection before his face shuts down with an eerie, blank intensity that borders on frightening. There’s a certain glamour and ferocity to it that’s only just concealed below the surface – hunger and dangerousness exuding from every coil of muscle and rasp of breath – and Will simply stares back, privately consumed by a dizzyly powerful sense that in his whole life he’s never wanted something, anything, as much as he wants Hannibal.

“Lie down,” he says instead, refusing to be intimidated by the look. Hannibal’s eyes flash in response, and a wary part of Will’s brain immediately whispers that the situation is becoming too risky by goading an alpha who’s clearly on the edge of losing control and is strong enough to injure him if he wanted to. It’s rather like having a tiger by the tail and he knows that most omega doctors would tell him he was insane to push an alpha this far. Yet despite the initial flash of fear, he instinctively feels that Hannibal won’t do anything to harm him. Not that he can say exactly why he’s so certain, but it doesn’t seem to matter anymore because somehow he just…knows. “Flat on your back,” he adds to prove it to himself. As he’s speaking he’s aware that it’s a similar tone that he’d use with the dogs: calm but with a hint of firmness that’s unmistakable. “Now.”

Hannibal hesitates for a few seconds, looking like he’s on the verge of baring his teeth, so Will leans forward and gives him a rough little push. The contact itself is very brief, yet it’s obvious that the sensation of Will’s skin on his own has had some sort of calming effect as this time he lies very calmly without making any attempt to snarl. Will smiles in response then kneels over him and lays a steadying hand on his forehead, gently rubbing his temples in what’s a classic omega appeasement gesture. “There,” he says. “That’s better. Behave yourself.”

Hannibal closes his eyes and leans appreciatively into the touch and Will can’t resist the temptation to bend down and press a kiss on the bridge of his nose. “Well what are you waiting for?” he adds mischievously. Taking hold of his cock with his free hand, he brushes the head against Hannibal’s lips. “Open your mouth.”

Hannibal obeys straight away and Will moans and lets his eyes fall closed. “That’s really good,” he says. “Fuck. You can use your mouth for more than just talking can’t you? Now listen to me. Are you listening? Because this is what’s going to happen.” He’s keeping his tone deliberately terse and commanding, although in spite of it can’t stop himself from sliding his hand off Hannibal’s forehead.
so he can tenderly stroke his hair. “When I tell you, you’re going to lean against the headboard so I can get on your lap and ride you. I’m going to fuck myself on that thick alpha cock until I come on it – and then if I’m pleased with how you’ve done, I’ll let you come as well.”

Hannibal hums with agreement and Will lets him carry on for a few more moments until he thinks there’s a real chance he’s going to come straight down Hannibal’s throat and has to force himself to pull away. Hannibal immediately sits upright as instructed then wraps both palms round Will’s waist so he can help lift him onto his knee. “Look at you, being so obedient,” says Will, kissing the side of his face. “Or are you just that desperate for sex? I think you’re just desperate aren’t you – alphas are always desperate. It’s actually kind of pathetic.”

As soon as he’s said it he has an immediate guilty twinge that he’s finally gone too far with the insults. But Hannibal isn’t showing the slightest sign of being hurt or offended, instead gazing up at Will with something close to rapture as he skims his palms across his back in a series of feathery strokes. In fact there’s so much longing and urgency in the look that Will can feel his own self-restraint, rigidly held for so long, finally starting to crumble. Leaning down again he presses his lips against Hannibal’s forehead then reaches round to take hold of his cock while holding onto his shoulder with the other hand. “I guess it’s polite to ask first,” he says sardonically, “but I think I can safely assume you’re ready?”

Hannibal, surprisingly, seems past the point of speech and simply kisses Will’s throat then tightens his grip around his waist. “I know I am,” adds Will. “God, you’ve no idea. I’m going to come round you so hard.” Still clinging onto Hannibal’s shoulder he starts to lower himself down, gasping at the way the head of Hannibal’s cock is nudging against his hole as the tight ring of muscle clenches in anticipation. Oh God it really is tight and it’s going to give way any second now…any second. “Fuck,” says Will breathily. In fact the penetration is much deeper at this angle than he’s used to and he moves with care; partly for his own comfort, but mostly because it seems to be driving Hannibal half-insane to not be allowed to thrust upwards into the slippery heat of his body. Then he grabs Hannibal’s other shoulder for some leverage and rises nearly all the way off him, letting several tormenting seconds pass before slowly sinking down again.

Hannibal gasps and shudders then leans forward to press their foreheads together. “Please Will,” he says softly.

The way he does it – loving and sincere – jolts Will in spite of himself. If he’s honest he’s not fully prepared for it, but it makes him feel like something profound has shifted; as if it’s somehow not a game anymore, and in only two words Hannibal has really laid himself open with his total lack of shame or reservation in simply letting Will know how much he wants him. It’s powerful despite its gentleness, and this time Will forgets the urge to tease and just murmurs Hannibal’s name as he willingly pushes past the tightness until they’re locked deep together and he can search out his mouth for another passionate kiss. Then he arches his back and begins to move, moaning loudly as he works himself against the impossibly hard length while Hannibal gently guides his hips with both hands. Desire has taken over now and there’s no sense of restraint at all, just warmth and responsiveness as Hannibal’s cock slides so smoothly inside his ass. “Oh yes, yes,” says Will, low and intense. “I can really feel you.”

“And I you, beloved.”

“You feel so good,” says Will, rather desperately. “Oh God…I’m close. I think I’m going to come.”

Hannibal gasps out something in a foreign language and takes hold of Will’s cock so he can stroke it in a matching rhythm to each thrust. Will gasps too then bucks his hips brutally hard yet gracefully fast; raw and primal – animalistic, almost – and shot through with a heady urge to claim, consume
and own. Like being on fire…like falling. He swipes Hannibal’s jaw with his tongue, tasting salt and sweat, then reaches up to grab a handful of hair and roughly tugs until his throat is exposed. “You’re mine,” he hears himself saying. “Mine. Do you understand?”

“Yours. Always.”

Will cries out again then arches against Hannibal’s lap. “If you ever even look at another omega I’ll give you so much hell,” he snarls. “I won’t share you with anyone.”

Hannibal murmurs his agreement and rakes his fingernails down Will’s spine. But while he’s clearly sincere words just aren’t enough anymore, and Will is suddenly overcome with a need to mark the proof of his ownership that’s vaguely shocking in its intensity. Shifting his hips to give himself more room he leans down and then, without asking permission or even giving any warning, sinks his teeth into the side of Hannibal’s neck until he tastes a coppery bloom of blood. It’s urgent and passionate and, oh God, is making his cock even stiffer than before; but while Hannibal gasps in surprise he doesn’t pull away. Instead he’s frantically touching every part of Will he’s able to reach – hair, face, back – and Will can hear him repeating his name, calling him ’dearest’ ‘my darling’ and ‘my love’, as his lips press against Will’s cheeks and eyelids.

Will’s hips gives a final desperate jolt, his body growing soft and receptive to Hannibal’s as he wraps both arms round his back and clings on. “Oh fuck I’m coming,” he says. “I’m coming. Hannibal. I’m coming.” Then he finds he can’t stop repeating it, throwing back his head and trembling violently as he starts to spill across both of them in a series of thick pulses. His ass is tightening so much around Hannibal’s cock that it makes it seem impossibly large and when Hannibal thrusts his hips it’s enough to make him spasm all over again as a deep ripple of pleasure runs through his entire body. “Now you,” he manages to gasp out. “Oh God. Do it. Come inside me.”

Hannibal lets out a groan of relief, and Will can immediately tell when it happens because it’s so hot and gushing and seems to last an incredibly long time. It’s honestly like he’s being pumped full with it, and Hannibal rubs his palm across Will’s abdomen over and over in a way that’s unmistakably possessive as Will whines helplessly at the intensity of the sensation. In fact it’s a bad angle to be knotted in and the stretch is close to getting painful, but he still has no desire to move – instead sinking forward so he can rest his forehead against Hannibal’s before collapsing against his chest and laying his head on one shoulder.

“Mylimasis,” says Hannibal tenderly. He cradles Will’s head with one hand and strokes his back with the other, slowly shifting his hips to press the knot deep inside Will again and again until Will makes a small mewling noise and comes for a second time. “Look at that,” says Hannibal with obvious delight. “You’re perfect. My beautiful boy. I want you to do that for me again Will, just once more. Would you try?”

“Uhh, no way. I can’t,” mutters Will with obvious exhaustion. “I don’t want to.”

“Yes you do,” purrs Hannibal. Reaching up he strokes Will’s lower lip with his thumb then rests his hand beneath his chin. “Spit. Make it as wet as you can.”

“God You’re insatiable,” grumbles Will, beginning to roll his eyes. But he obeys anyway, and when Hannibal uses the hand to tease his cock back to stiffness he gives a low moan and tangles his fingers into Hannibal’s hair. In the end Hannibal keeps him in his lap until long after the knot has deflated; holding onto his hips in the meanwhile and rocking him against it until Will finally tenses, shudders then comes again with a desperate wailing noise as if his body belongs more to Hannibal than it does to him. Several thick ropes of semen are visible on his thighs when he finally does climb down and Hannibal’s eyes gleam at the sight of it as he grabs hold of Will’s hip to keep him still.
“Let go,” says Will, rather half-heartedly, before giving another soft moan as he feels Hannibal’s fingers deftly pushing it back inside his body. “Stop it. Oh God. That’s…ah.”

“That’s…what?” murmurs Hannibal, whose tone is so smouldering and suggestive it deserves its own age-restriction warning. “Decadent? Obscene?” Will moans even louder and Hannibal sighs appreciatively then begins to kiss his hipbone. “How about ‘appropriate’?”

“How about ‘mad’?” says Will hazily as he twists his fingers into Hannibal’s hair again. “How about ‘ridiculous possessive alpha’? Ah, no, use your thumb. Just there. Fuck. Yeah, like that.”

“Oh yes, I am very possessive,” says Hannibal fondly. “I must remember to buy a plug for you, dearest – to keep this inside your body where it belongs. You’ve no idea how much I would like that. Just a small one to begin with, so it wouldn’t hurt you, then I’ll teach you how to relax enough to take a larger one. You’ll enjoy it so much too Will, I promise. I’ll slide it in so slowly and gently then refuse to remove it afterwards – and you won’t be allowed to remove it either, my love. I want you to spend all day feeling it and thinking of me. Every single step you take, every time you move. I want everyone to run their eyes over you and admire your body and beautiful face, all the while sensing what you’ve been doing and to whom you belong.”

Will automatically rolls his eyes at this speech, although the faint flush on both cheekbones shows he’s not all that opposed to the idea. Then he finally manages to push Hannibal off him and flops across the bed in a boneless heap, letting out a loud sigh before flinging his arm across his face. “Oh my God,” he says. “That whole thing was…fucking hell.”

Hannibal promptly looks smug and Will lowers his arm a little so he can peer at him over the top of it. “Yeah, nice try Dr God Complex, but I’m taking full credit for that one.”

“As you wish,” says Hannibal, looking smugger than ever.

Will grins then rolls over onto his side and props himself upright on one elbow. Hannibal gazes up serenely, and Will smiles again then leans across to run a finger along his cheekbone. “Well, maybe most of the credit. Maybe 90%.”

“I suppose I should haggle,” replies Hannibal. “But I don’t really have the energy, so shall accept my 10% with reasonably good grace.”

“15% then. That’s as good as you’re getting.”

“A full 5%? You are a true philanthropist.”

Will laughs at this, gently moving his finger to stroke the side of Hannibal’s jaw. “Seriously though,” he adds after a pause. “You’re okay?”

“Of course I am. I’ve just gained 5%.”

“Yeah, but all those things I said,” adds Will cautiously. “You know I didn’t really mean it?”

Hannibal, who seems to be basking under the stroking, promptly cracks open an eye and stares at Will rather sardonically. “Yes you did. More to the point, you weren’t entirely wrong.”

“No?”

“No. Alphas are indeed fairly desperate – and more than a little pathetic as a result.”

Will laughs again then leans closer to Hannibal and nuzzles the side of this throat. “I am sorry
though,” he says, carefully pressing the edge of the bite mark. “I didn’t plan to get so carried away.”

“It’s fine.”

“But you’re hurt.”

Hannibal gives the smallest hint of a smirk. “I’m not,” he says. “Don’t be so melodramatic. It’s just a bite.” Will sighs, not looking particularly convinced, and Hannibal turns over so he can stare at him directly; amid the shadows and half-light his eyes are gleaming like a cat’s in a rather unsettling blend of red and black. “Listen to me,” he says. “I’m not remotely uncomfortable about anything we just did, so I insist that you’re not either. I don’t feel belittled by showing how much I need you or want you.”

Will shuffles again then opens his mouth like he plans to object and Hannibal gently covers it with his fingers. “Stop projecting. You’re thinking so hard I can practically hear the gears turning. I understand it Will; I know if our situations had been reversed you’d be feeling exposed right now – possibly even humiliated – so you’re assuming I feel the same. Well you’re wrong. And if the situation had been reversed, you’d be wrong to feel it on your own behalf. Vulnerability isn’t the opposite of strength; it’s not a sign of weakness. When I show you how much I need you I’m simply being open. There’s actually a certain courage in it: I’m showing you that you have the power to hurt me and that I’m trusting you not to – even though you can.”

Will blinks a few times then sighs against Hannibal’s fingers before twisting his face free so he’s able to speak. “Yeah,” he replies quietly. “I know what you’re saying. You don’t just mean physically either, do you?”

“No not at all. After all, you must know by now that you could hurt me by leaving? If you rejected me it would hurt. If I truly showed myself to you…” Hannibal falls silent for a few seconds, briefly looking pensive. “If I really let you see me and you refused to accept what you saw then it would be…painful.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” says Hannibal lightly. “Yes, I suppose you must do; I imagine you felt much the same when you admitted that you’d killed your alpha. Yet here we both are regardless. That’s good Will; we’re going to need it. We’re going to need that mutual trust and vulnerability, because it’s impossible to have a meaningful connection in its absence. And I would have said the same a few months ago when we were still just friends. I’d say it now.” He pauses again then strokes his eyes across Will’s face. “I’d say it in the future if we were bonded.”

This time it’s Will’s turn to fall quiet, glancing at Hannibal rather cautiously before looking away again as he mulls over the implications and gives them the proper consideration. Admittedly the appeal of such complete consuming intimacy is hard to deny; yet at the same time the idea of being bonded to any alpha – even Hannibal – is intrinsically unnerving and something all his instincts rebel at. It’s not just the biological changes either; it’s not even the reduced independence. It’s because deep down he knows he can’t be as cavalier as Hannibal is at leaving himself vulnerable to being hurt. Being bonded, after all, means becoming so exposed to the alpha that you’re no longer a mystery to them and they know you so well they know exactly the best ways to devastate you. Fleetingly he remembers finding that ancient copy of The Velveteen Rabbit; how he’d been so dismissive of its message of authenticity and vulnerability and the notion that your assorted flaws and blemishes can be elevated by love of oneself and acceptance from other people. Real isn’t something you are, he thinks slowly. It’s something you become. But how to even begin the process of accepting such a thing? It seems to require the type of emotional courage he isn’t sure he possesses.
“It unsettles you doesn’t it?” says Hannibal in an unusually gentle way.

“Yeah,” admits Will. “You know it does. It’s something I’ve spent my whole life trying to avoid.”

Hannibal stares back patiently without making any attempt to push it further and Will gazes at him for a few seconds before moving forward until they’re close enough to touch and Hannibal can wrap his arms round his back. “I’m sorry,” says Will quietly. “I find it difficult. This kind of stuff…I find it really hard.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal, equally quietly. Will nods and frowns, then buries his face in Hannibal’s shoulder and mutters something undecipherable. “I beg your pardon?” says Hannibal, pressing his lips against Will’s forehead. “For all your earlier inspections you seem confused as to where my ears are.”

“I said I need you too,” repeats Will in a small voice. “A lot…I need you all the time.”

“Beloved,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to stroke his cheek against Will’s hair. “I know it’s not easy for you to admit to; it’s not easy for many people. Nevertheless, this is a rare occasion where my ability to empathize rivals yours.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes,” says Hannibal simply. “Because you are essential to me.”

Will makes a contented noise and Hannibal tightens his grip on him then kisses his forehead again; prepared, just for once, to simply let the silence do the talking.

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From the back of the auditorium Will squints into the darkness at where Jack’s delivering his ‘You’re all scientists of the mind’ speech, desperately pretending he’s paying attention despite the fact he’s heard it so often he практически knows it by heart. Up on the stage Jack pauses ominously like he’s sensed Will’s disinterest then glares out into sea of faces: clearly someone in full command of their material and a naturally gifted public speaker. A spotlight has been focussed on his podium in a way that always strikes Will as needlessly theatrical – as if they’re at a glittering cabaret evening instead of a glorified government seminar – but the trainees seem to like it and (more to the point) so does Jack. Will can see all them now, gazing up at the stage in rapt concentration and oozing with a sense of solemnity and self-importance at what they’re about to embark on; a few of them even have their lips parted. Will supposes he must be getting old because each new cohort always seems absurdly young to him, even though he knows they’re probably his age or even older. In this respect the other thing he knows is that the starry-eyed rapture never lasts and before many more months have passed they’ll be just as cynical and battle-stained as the rest of the BSU. But they always start out like this and so on it goes on year after year: Jack’s speech and Jack’s spotlight and the deceptively youthful trainees with their naïve eagerness and ideas of the FBI that are often formed in a crucible of movies and novels and are destined to be crushed in merely a matter of days.

“Is he still going?” hisses Price, who’s materialised from Will’s left clutching a couple of wine glasses.

Will nods to indicate that Jack is, indeed, still going, then gratefully accepts one of the glasses and downs half of it in one go. Despite several efforts the lingering sense of paranoia still hasn’t worn off, and the fact nothing’s happened to justify it doesn’t seem to be affecting its determination to stick around. It’s not like it makes any sense though, because nothing has happened – not even close. If he’s honest the worst that could be said about the event so far is that it’s been boring. There have
been over-enthusiastic trainees (embarrassing) and Jack’s spotlight (irritating) and cold food and warm wine (indifferent; it’s not like he’s Hannibal after all) but nothing remotely approaching a source of genuine threat or stress. SURREPTITIOUSLY he checks his watch and gives a small sigh of relief: just another hour or so – maybe two if Jack carries out the threat of the meet and greet – and then he can grab Hannibal and bundle them both into the car to go home.

In his mind Will now begins to visualise Hannibal’s house as a kind of fortress of calm amid all the spotlight bullshit, and he briefly closes his eyes to transport himself there just as Hannibal (who’s refused to touch the wine and is taking unenthusiastic sips of water instead) appears from Will’s right and stares over his shoulder at the podium. In defiance of the limp plastic beakers and beer steins clutched by nearly everyone else he’s somehow managed to charm the catering staff into rustling up some crushed ice, and even a slice of lime, to put in the glass and Will can feel his lips twitching at the sight of it. “You know it’s not bottled right?” he mutters. “That’s come straight from a tap.”

Hannibal gives a faint smirk in response then flicks his eyes over Will’s glass in a way that clearly implies he’d rather be drinking tap water than whatever godforsaken grape urine is being served from the wine bottles. Moving a little closer he ghosts his lips against the side of Will’s ear. “Stop pouting Agent Graham,” he says. “It makes you look impossibly sultry.”

“Go away Dr Lecter,” replies Will, who’s struggling not to laugh. “You’re being creepy and weird. And I’m not pouting.”

“But you are,” purrs Hannibal. “No one can take their eyes off you. Do you think I’m going to have to remind them of their boundaries? They can look but not touch. I would kill anyone who tried.”

Will, who’s well aware of being stared at, sighs rather bitterly. “Nice try,” he says. “The actual reason is because they recognise me from the news.”

“And what are they thinking?”

“They’re thinking ‘there’s that freaky omega who wasn’t the Chesapeake Ripper’.”

Hannibal smirks again then takes advantage of the darkness to kiss Will’s jaw. “Come and dance with me when the speeches are over. I want everyone to watch us.”

“Forget it.”

“But how can I forget it?” says Hannibal, transferring his attention to the delicate skin behind Will’s ear. “I want to hold you close to me against the rhythm of elegant music. I want to gaze into your eyes as I run my hands all over you.”

“No,” hisses Will. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“Why do you think?”

Hannibal’s faint smile begins to broaden. “Self-consciousness is a terrible thing Will.”

“So I’m terrible; I’ll deal. There’s no way I’m dancing with you in front of these guys.”

“Is that so beloved?” murmurs Hannibal. “One day I shall have to endeavour to change your mind.” Then he gives Will’s ear a gentle tug with his teeth and obligingly melts into the shadows with the same silent stealth as he arrived – just in time for Zeller to appear and lodge himself between Price and Will in his place. Will sighs to himself then glances at the stage to where Jack is brandishing his
lecture notes like someone waving a stick for a dog as he leads everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance. A few rows away Siemens is earnestly mouthing along, lips opening and closing like a fish gasping for air, and Will experiences a rush of contempt at the sight of it then promptly feels guilty.

“He is still going?” whispers Zeller.

“I swear, it gets longer every year,” agrees Price. “At least we’re at the back – we can lead the stampede to the bar when it’s over.”

“I was sure he’d be finished by now,” mutters Zeller, clearly aggrieved.

“I gathered. Where have you been all this time? If I hadn’t lost the will to live I’d discipline you.”

Zeller jerks his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the parking lot. “One of the security guards thought he saw an intruder out back. We frisked the area twice but couldn’t find anything.”

“So what was it then?” says Will sharply.

“Looks like it might be one of the trainees who’d had a few too many drinks.”

“More likely driven delirious by Jack’s speech,” whispers Price. “I may soon be reeling around in the carpark myself.”

“Plus the power’s cut out in the foyer. They’re trying to fix it before Jack’s done.”

“Then they’ll be fine,” says Price. “They have until tomorrow at least.”

“That’s odd,” adds Will, even more sharply. “Why would the power go out?”

“Fuse has blown I guess.”

“I blame Jack for its demise,” says Price. “Poor thing’s probably listening and lost the will to live as much as I have.”

Will frowns again then automatically strains his eyes towards the foyer, anxious and uneasy even as he’s trying to talk himself down from the pointless spike of suspicion when there’s no evidence it isn’t something as simple as a blown fuse. And there’s no real reason it shouldn’t be; he’d been nervous when the lights went out at Hannibal’s house after all, and that had turned out to be nothing. Through the door panel he can see a group of janitors with flashlights, grinning and laughing together as one of them fumbles with a toolbox. They look so cheerful and carefree. In fact everyone does: the only one overreacting is him. With an effort he attempts to unhunch his shoulders and relax a little before he notices that Hannibal has reappeared nearby and promptly experiences a fresh sense of guilt for being so abrupt with him earlier. Not that dancing is even remotely feasible, but still – there was no need to snap at him like that.

Casting around Will now determinedly catches Hannibal’s eye and smiles, secretly pledging to track him down later for a proper apology. Hannibal smiles back and Will mouths ‘See you soon’ before forcing himself to look back at the stage again and pretend to be paying attention to Jack. A few more seconds would have been enough to catch it…possibly less than that. But as it is Will turns away with a flawlessly fateful timing, and it means that as he’s staring numbly at Jack he completely misses the shadowy figure that’s just slipped out a few feet away: pausing slightly like its scenting the air, then craning its head from side to side before it creeps along the corridor like a wraith and gets swallowed up in the depths of the darkness.
Despite the very real threat of running all evening, Jack’s speech finally manages to grind to a close. It achieves this a mere 70 minutes after it first started – Will checks his watch in disbelief, because it felt like at least 170 – and the fact it’s overstay its welcome does nothing to convince it to slink off and die quietly: insisting instead on going out in a storm of enthusiastic applause accompanied by a couple of foot-stamps and even some whistles from a group of trainees at the back who’ve clearly been at the free wine since they arrived and have got a bit carried away. Will obediently adds his own applause to everyone else’s, then stifles a yawn as he does so and finally follows it all up with a small sigh of relief. Although the yawn and sigh are admittedly far more enthusiastic than the clapping is – partly because it means this stupid event is one step closer to being over, but mostly because by now he’s almost painfully bored (Jack, after all, being in possession of an uncanny ability to lecture you on one particular topic until it seriously strains the human ability to give a shit). Up on the stage Jack nods magnanimously at the underlings, serenely noble and imposing like he thinks he’s George Washington about to send the troops into battle. Even the podium light has emitted a few twinkling flourishes as if it wants to offer its own congratulations for a job well done.

“Look at him, milking it for all it’s worth,” hisses Price to Zeller. “What an old drama queen. He should be called Joan Crawford.”

“What?”

“Joan Crawford,” repeats Price, exaggerating each syllable like someone dictating to a half-witted secretary. “The legendary Hollywood grande dame. How can you not have heard of Joan Crawford?” Zeller shrugs amicably and Price rolls his eyes. “What a cultural peasant you are Brian.”

“I’m not,” protests Zeller. “It’s just that the reference is too obscure.”

“It is not too obscure,” says Price with dignity. “It was a perfect reference: witty and precise.” Zeller quirks his eyebrows. “It was perfect!” shrieks Price.

“Yeah, well, I bet Will hasn’t heard of her either,” replies Zeller. Turning round he raises his voice then gestures rather manically in Will’s direction. “Hey! Will!”

“What?” says Will, who’s not really in the mood.

“Have you ever heard of Joan Crawford?”

“John Crawford?”

“Yes, which Crawford?” says Jack, who’s been lurking in the backstage area and just now chosen to
materialise from one of the side doors like Banquo’s Ghost. “Who are you talking about?” Price and Zeller develop an unaccountable fascination with their feet and Jack smiles round benevolently, obviously still in the mental mind-set of Glorious Leader.

“Your speech was very good Jack,” says Zeller politely.

“Thanks,” replies Jack with a touch of smugness. “I don’t suppose someone could get me a drink could they? I’m parched. Thirsty work, public speaking.”

Will dutifully joins the queue to offer his own congratulations – partly because they’re deserved but also because Jack will expect it – then glances uneasily towards the foyer, where he’s relieved to see that the maintenance team have finally coaxed the lighting back to life. Jack follows his gaze and raises a questioning eyebrow. “It’s nothing,” says Will; because surely it is nothing? “The lights went out a while back but they’ve managed to fix it.”

“I’ve sent everyone through to the main seminar room,” replies Jack, who’s used to the building’s temperamental utilities and clearly isn’t very interested in their sporadic success and failures. “It’s a big space and the set-up looks nice. Much better than we managed last year.”

Will (who can’t even remember if he attended last year, let alone whether the set-up was nice or not) stares back vaguely then opens his mouth to reply before realising halfway through that’s he’s got nothing sensible to offer and slowly closing it again. Jack, mistaking the silence for attentiveness, reaches over and gives Will a clap on the shoulder; and which is intended to be encouraging, but still manages to be sufficiently hard and badly-timed to nearly send him flying. “Come on then!” says Jack heartily. “Everyone wants to meet you.”

“Don’t tout him round like he’s an exhibit Jack,” says Price with a hint of sharpness. “The trainees have all semester to meet him.”

“No, it’s fine,” replies Will, trying not to sound too martyred about it. “Give me a minute though. I want to catch up with a few people first.” (Well…one person).

Jack nods and smiles like this is no problem, although it still doesn’t stop him herding Will into the seminar room himself as if he’s afraid he’s going to try and make an escape at the last moment. The room in question is an enormous sprawling one on the ground floor, currently in disguise as a kind of reception hall and almost unrecognisable from its usual state due to rows of creaking trestle tables spread out with drinks, the ancient welcome banner that seems to get more moth-eaten every year, and an attempt at a buffet that’s already sweltering sadly under the glare of the lights. There’s even a rather ramshackle-looking string quartet in the corner hacking their way through Claire de Lune. Will recognises the cellist as one of the behavioural analysts from the Counterterrorism Unit, and who glances up now from his music stand and gives Will the ghost of a wink.

“Well, this is all very nice isn’t it?” says Jack, rubbing his hands together like a manic Santa Claus.

“Yeah, it’s great,” replies Will, hoping he sounds sincere. He can’t see Hannibal anywhere and is starting to feel anxious before finally spotting him in the far corner talking to one of the pathologists; strikingly poised and statuesque compared to everyone around him, and still sipping from his glass of water while trying not to wince too obviously as the string quartet begin to massacre Canon in D.

“Hey Will!” calls Beverly, who’s busy fighting her way through the scrum of trainees while holding onto Anneke with one hand and waving at Will with the other. Will spins round to her gratefully, relieved to have an excuse to avoid Jack’s threatened meet and greet for a little longer, then says hello to Anneke as well who’s exuding her usual easy glamour in a shimmering dashiki of copper-coloured silk that wraps round her slender frame so neatly it’s as if molasses has been drizzled over
her and left to set. As always she’s full of warmth and friendliness and Will can’t help basking in the force of it while privately thinking how charming and slightly mischievous she looks from where all her lipstick’s been kissed off. Zeller, who’s been nursing a colossal and poorly-concealed crush on her for over a year, promptly sidles over then asks rather shyly if he can get anyone a drink.

“Beer,” says Beverly promptly. One of the trainees is gurning in the corner in an attempt to get her attention and she neatly turns her back on him and pretends not to see. “All the beer.”

“Beer,” agrees Will.

“Just an orange juice for me,” adds Anneke. “Thank you Brian.”

Zeller wilts and blushes like a Victorian maiden before seeming to recover himself and striding off towards the drinks table in a way that’s more suitable for someone in pursuit of the Holy Grail than a simple glass of orange juice. “You’ll need more than that to get you through this evening,” adds Will sympathetically. “I guess you’re driving?”

Beverly opens her mouth then hesitates just as Anneke smiles and gives her hand a squeeze. “It’s fine sweetheart,” she says. “I know you want to tell him.”

“Tell me what?”

“Anneke’s pregnant!” whispers Beverly excitedly. “Isn’t it wonderful!”

“Oh wow,” replies Will. “That’s…wow. Yeah. Congratulations.” He can’t help darting a covert look at Anneke, half-expecting to see a hint of the same distress he’d feel in her situation, but of course there’s no sign of it. Quite the opposite in fact: she’s brimful of a genuine joyfulness that adds a sparkle to her dark eyes and causes her lips to curve playfully on the brink of a permanent smile. I’m supposed to be empathetic, thinks Will numbly. I should be able to relate…Why can’t I even begin to imagine feeling this way?

“We’re not telling many people at the moment,” adds Anneke, running a protective hand across her stomach. “But yes – I’m due next Fall.”

“So how are you feeling?” asks Will, trying to sound casual.

“I’m feeling fine, thank you Will. Bev is the one with the morning sickness – she had such a hangover celebrating.”

“I’m so crazy about the idea,” says Beverly, leaning over to kiss Anneke’s cheek. “Ana’s been a saint to put up with me. Everyone knows alphas are awful at a time like this.”

Anneke catches Will’s eye with a little conspiratorial smile then leans over herself to return Beverly’s kiss. “It’s okay sweethearth,” she says. “Everyone knows omegas are very good at dealing with them.”

“You’re okay though aren’t you?” adds Beverly anxiously. “You’ve been standing for ages. Your poor feet must be getting tired. Do you want me to get you a chair – I could get you a chair if you like?”

Anneke gives a merry peal of laughter then raises Beverly’s hand to her mouth and kisses the back of it. “So how are you Will?” she says. “It seems like ages since I’ve seen you. You’re looking really well.”

“Am I?” asks Will dubiously.
“Absolutely: you look great.” She pauses and smiles, and Will knows that she’s too tactful to say ‘last time I saw you, you looked like shit’ but is almost certainly thinking it. Why wouldn’t she after all? There’s no doubt it’s true.

“See?” says Beverly. “I kept telling you how much better you’ve been looking recently.”

Will nods rather shyly then automatically lets his gaze slide over to Hannibal who immediately catches his eye and gives a faint smile. It’s obvious that he’s keeping his promise of not crowding Will, while also remaining close enough by that he’ll be on hand if Will wants him; and not for the first time, Will feels a rush of gratitude at the way Hannibal always seems able to predict his needs so precisely without being told. Hannibal’s smile broadens slightly and Will returns it without once breaking eye contact before reluctantly forcing himself to turn away and focus on the others again.

“You should come over for dinner,” Anneke is now saying. “We’d love to see you.”

“Oh yes, do,” adds Beverly. “Bring someone with you if you want?” She casually waves her hand behind her – possibly in Hannibal’s direction, possibly not – and Will clears his throat then gives an awkward shuffle. “Or come by yourself,” adds Beverly, relenting slightly. “Whatever you prefer.”

Will gives another vague smile then finds himself repeating the shuffling movement, mostly because he can’t think of anything better to do. Beverly smiles too like someone enjoying a private joke, and Will is wondering whether he dares to shuffle for a third time before Zeller appears brandishing a tray of drinks and saves him from having to decide. Zeller is closely followed by Price (who’s been raiding the buffet and is now demolishing a plateful of *petit-fours* like someone half-starved) and which means the five of them end up blocking the gangway and need to retreat to the corner to find some chairs instead. No sooner have they sat down then they’re promptly ambushed by Skinner, who seems to come scuttling out of the shadows like a large malignant spider in a crumpled black suit that’s obviously been retrieved from the bottom of some suitcase or other. *All he needs is a trapdoor*, thinks Will derisively, briefly imagining Skinner appearing in a flash of sulphur like a pantomime villain or the Wicked Witch of the West. Then he automatically frowns just as Price rolls his eyes; and Skinner makes a rather sinister rumbling noise in response then proceeds to loom over them and stare accusingly at each person one by one as if their mere existence is a cause of profound personal offence.

“Jack’s looking for you,” he says pointedly when he gets to Beverly. “He wants you to meet the new lab tech.”

Beverly hesitates then glances uncertainly at Anneke. “Go ahead honey,” replies Anneke, curling her long legs further beneath her chair. “I’m fine. I’ll be right here with the others.”

“I think he meant now Dr Katz,” says Skinner in the same overly-formal tone.

“I’ll just be five minutes,” says Beverly, ignoring Skinner. She lets go of Anneke’s hand and gets to her feet, and as she moves away Skinner swivels his pale eyes onto Anneke then holds them there.

“That’s a striking outfit ma’am,” he says with the faintest hint of a sneer. “Very…ethnic.”

“Yes it is, isn’t it?” replies Anneke cheerfully. “I shouldn’t keep all the compliments to myself though. Your suit, for example: it’s very…bureaucratic.”

Will gives a loud snort of laughter and Skinner’s gooseberry-coloured eyed rotate back to him instead like marbles rattling around in a bag. “Did you actually want anything else?” says Will in a bored voice. “I thought you’d just come to get Beverly?”
“I did.”


Skinner curls his lips back from his teeth, bristling with displeasure at what he clearly sees as insubordination from an omega. “You watch your tone Will,” he snaps. “It’s a free country. I can stand here if I like.”

“Indeed you can,” replies Price, who’s finished his petit-fours and has made a start on a large slab of cheesecake. “I can’t say I blame you – we’re clearly the most glamorous of the room’s four corners.” Skinner glares back rather fearsomely then scuffs his feet with poorly-concealed annoyance. “I must say, I’m surprised to see you here actually,” adds Price, beginning to lick cheesecake crumbs off his fingers. “Didn’t I catch you sneaking in late?”

Skinner promptly goes an ugly shade of red, his normally pale features engorging and mottling like hashed beef. “Are you questioning my professionalism Dr Price?”

“Oh do calm yourself,” says Price irritably. “Don’t have a cow. Or whatever it is the young people say. Brian, do young people say ‘don’t have a cow’?”

“No one’s said that since the 90s,” replies Zeller. “And even then it made them sound stupid.”

“The traffic was bad,” snarls Skinner. “I was in town most of this afternoon. A buddy from my last field office has just knocked up his omega and I had to send a gift for the baby shower.”


“Books,” replies Skinner with a hint of triumph. “Best possible present if you ask me. It’s never too soon to encourage a kid to be literate.”

“Oh yes, surely,” says Price. “Babies are voracious readers.”

“It’s one of those talking animal ones,” adds Skinner, who seems oblivious to the sarcasm. “Very popular; they’ve just made it into a cartoon. Richard the Rooster.”

Will – who’s just realised that Richard the Rooster is effectively Dick the Cock and is struggling with a rather childish urge to cackle – stares determinedly down at his glass in an effort to keep a straight face. “People waste all kinds of money on crap for their kids,” continues Skinner with clear contempt. “ especially when the parents are an alpha-omega pair; they act like they’ve just spawned royalty or something. It’s ridiculous. At least betas don’t make so much damn fuss.”

Will doesn’t feel like laughing anymore; not least because Anneke’s sat right by him, and the tone of Skinner’s comment serves as an ugly reminder that the reason he’s not leaving is the real possibility that he can’t bring himself to walk away from two omegas. In fact beneath the initial veneer of ludicrousness the whole conversation has a distinctly unsettling tone. The disdain for omegas is the most apparent, but Will decides he’s not completely happy with the unnecessary level of detail about why Skinner was so late. Somehow it seems overly defensive—the type of thing someone who was lying might do. As with so much else where Skinner’s concerned the suspicion is too frail and insubstantial to do much with, but Will still mentally files it anyway on the chance it might be relevant in the future. Then he realises that no matter how baseless his own suspicions might be he’s clearly not the only one who’s unhappy with Skinner being around omegas; and when he glances up again it’s to see that Beverly is preparing to swoop down on them from one direction like an avenging angel – very closely followed by Hannibal from the other.
“Alphas are like buses round here,” says Price taking a cheerful bite of his cheesecake. “None for ages and then three turn up at once.”

Beverly, with unusual rudeness, completely ignores him and protectively draws up the seat next to Anneke just as Hannibal does the same to Will. “Dr Katz,” says Skinner stiffly, beginning to smooth down his lapels. The gesture looks awkward and overly formal, but whether it’s nerves that’s causing it or just a genuine attempt at preening is impossible to tell. “Back so soon. And Dr Lecter as well. I hope you’ve been having a pleasant evening.”

“Fine, thank you,” replies Beverly without smiling. “Yourself?”

“Fine,” says Skinner in the same rigid way.

Hannibal doesn’t bother answering at all, instead just regarding Skinner with an expression of frank curiosity that reminds Will of the way a cat watches a mouse before taking a leisurely swipe with its paw. “Well I’m not fine, in case anyone’s wondering,” announces Price into the resulting awkward silence. “In fact I’m extremely uncomfortable. It’s hotter than the Hell Fires in here. Someone should open a window.”

Will, who’s been feeling the perspiration bead around his forehead for some time now, nods in agreement. “I never feel the heat,” says Skinner rather smugly.

“Well bravo: good for you,” replies Price in a tone that’s oozing sarcasm. “I salute your resistance to the Hell Fires.”

Hannibal, who likewise always seems able to tolerate high temperatures without breaking a sweat, leans back in his chair with the usual feline grace then rests his arm along the windowsill until his hand is close to grazing Will’s hair. Unlike most of the men he’s wearing an open-necked shirt and light cotton jacket which, considering the dingy surroundings of the seminar room, is making everyone else in their ties and stuffy dress shirts look incredibly stilted and over-dressed in comparison. “I confess I’m also quite comfortable,” says Hannibal with a vaguely sinister smile. “I suppose I must also have immunity to the Hell Fires. Even so, it’s true that the temperature is unacceptable.” Slowly he turns his head and fixes Skinner with a rather glint-eyed stare. “Perhaps you’d be so good to speak with maintenance and ask them to turn the heating down?”

Skinner opens his mouth then closes it again as the urge to tell Hannibal to do it himself visibly struggles with an ingrained fear of disobeying him. In the resulting silence he happens to take a step closer to Will, and while it doesn’t appear to be deliberate Hannibal’s eyes immediately give an ominous flash as he leans further forward in his chair.

“Sure,” says Skinner quickly. “Sure, I’ll do that.”

Hannibal neatly leans back in his chair again and gifts Skinner with a particularly inscrutable smile. “How considerate of you,” he says. “I’m sure everyone will be very grateful.”

Skinner nods his head in a clumsy jerking motion like a puppet with its strings cut then casts a final glance at Hannibal that manages to mingle nervousness with resentment before slinking off towards the exit. “Well played,” says Price, raising his glass in Hannibal’s direction. “Although really, Mr Skinner deserves to be congratulated: he’s elevated idiocy to orchestral and operatic levels. Where do you even get idiocy like that? Did he buy it?” Hannibal smirks again then takes a leisurely sip from his own glass. “I actually thought you were going to snarl at him,” adds Price, turning round to Beverly. “To be honest I was hoping you would.”

“Can omegas snarl?” asks Zeller. The question appears to be a general one, although he glances at
Anneke as he says it before blushing slightly like he’s surprised at his own daring in managing to speak to her.

“No,” replies Anneke, replacing her hand over Beverly’s. “Only alphas can do it.”

“Omegas can make a purring noise though,” adds Beverly. “It sounds beautiful. Alphas can only manage the snarling, which is actually fairly awful. A bit like a dog.”

“Oh yeah?” says Zeller, who now seems to be directing all his comments to the patch of floor next to Anneke’s feet. “Why one and not the other?”

Beverly laughs and gives Anneke’s hand another squeeze. “I’m not really sure; I haven’t read into it since grad school. Do you know Hannibal?”

Hannibal dips his head slightly. “It’s mostly because of the hyoid bone.”

“How so?” asks Zeller to Anneke’s feet

Hannibal gives another faint smile then turns to Will and gestures in the direction of his throat. “I think it would be clearer with a demonstration,” he says. “May I?”

Will has a terrible feeling he might be blushing but does his best to appear casual and obligingly tilts his head back. “Thank you Will,” adds Hannibal calmly. “You are very forbearing. So, in omegas the hyoid bone is ossified.” Gently he presses his forefinger a little beneath Will’s chin. “One can feel it just…here. In alphas it’s more flexible, which permits the ligament to extend further and create a deeper pitch.”

As he’s speaking he slowly trails his finger downwards and Will stares up at the ceiling and does his best not to tremble beneath the touch. “Our vocal chords are also flatter,” adds Hannibal. “In omegas the vocal tract widens and dilates very rapidly when they’re contented, which creates the air vibrations we refer to as purring.” He pauses again then without moving his finger tenderly strokes his thumb along the edge of Will’s neck before turning to look at Beverly. “I happen to agree with you,” he says softly. “It’s extremely beautiful. It has a certain harmony to it.”

Zeller informs Anneke’s feet that he’s never heard it at all, then promptly goes bright pink.

“If it’s any consolation most alphas haven’t either,” replies Hannibal. He gives Will’s throat a farewell caress that the others can’t see then finally removes his hand and leans back in his chair. “Omegas are relatively rare. And even if you happen across one, there’s no guarantee they’ll be inclined to purr for you.”

“Although to be fair, I haven’t heard all that many alphas snarl,” adds Price. “I get the impression you tend to save it up for each other.”

Will assumes what Price really means is that alphas consider it a waste of time to snarl at betas; and the thought of it promptly makes him frown, because while it might be true that they reserve the worst of their aggression for dominance fights there’s no doubt that they’re capable of using it on omegas as well. Will himself has been viciously snarled at several times, most recently by Skinner and Andrew (asshole alphas, in other words) although admittedly not by Beverly or Jack – and never by Hannibal either. In fact now he thinks about it he can’t recall a single instance of Hannibal making a sound like that in anger. Probably that’s because Hannibal is so supernaturally calm most of the time, although it’s true that he’s sometimes done a version of snarling when they’re having sex. That’s not really the same though is it? It’s passion, not aggression. Will’s mind briefly mists over trying to work out the physiological similarities before he gets the recurring sense he might be
That blushing so forces himself to focus on the others again; and where he finds that the conversation has once more moved on without him and they’re busy discussing some recent legislation to increase how much alphas are liable to be fined for failing to secure a bonded omega during heat.


“But it’s to protect the omega,” protests Zeller. “They could…well…you know.” He flails rather helplessly for a few seconds, obviously concerned about offending Beverly and Hannibal on the one hand, or Will and Anneke on the other. “They could get…taken advantage of if an alpha found them.”

“I know that,” replies Beverly with a snap of impatience. “But it’s the principle of holding the omega’s mate responsible that I object to.”

“Yes, but if they were responsible…”

“But do you see the context?” adds Hannibal calmly. “The implication is that omegas aren’t responsible for themselves.”

“The fine isn’t about the omega’s wellbeing either,” says Beverly. “Don’t forget that. It’s because of the fights and disruption an omega in heat creates amongst alphas.”

“Your concern’s very commendable Brian,” adds Anneke in a kinder voice. “But remember that alphas make these laws in the first place. It’s claimed they’re for our protection, but in reality it leaves us very disempowered.”

“In a lot of respects omegas have the same legal status as children,” adds Beverly. “Surely you can see why that’s wrong?”

As Zeller begins to stammer an apology Will turns away and stares pensively down at his glass, briefly closing his eyes as memories of the time with Andrew start to wash over him in a horrible, nauseous kaleidoscope of helplessness and isolation. In fact the whole conversation is making him deeply uncomfortable and he has a powerful urge to simply get to his feet and stride away from it. Not that Hannibal is remotely comparable to Andrew of course…but there’s also no doubt that being bonded makes people act out of character and do strange things. Even Beverly, who most of the time is the epitome of easy-going, is busy bristling at Hannibal at intervals for no better reason than that she doesn’t want any alphas round Anneke at the moment. Glancing up again he sees Anneke place a hand on Beverly’s wrist and rub it reassuringly as an invitation to calm down, and Will watches her then tries to imagine doing the same thing to Hannibal in public and finds it pretty impossible. Admittedly that’s not just because he’s an alpha though, but rather because he’s a…Hannibal (which doesn’t really seem to be the same type of thing at all).

Beverly is now loudly holding forth about omega’s rights to education, and at the sound of it Will realises that his frustration and anxiety have simmered over to such an extent that it’s no longer possible to suffer them in silence. Without even fully intending to he now abruptly turns round to Hannibal, then checks the others can’t hear before leaning forward and blurting out in an undertone: “Would you ever put me on a heat lock-down?” The words come tumbling out in a rush and as soon as he’s said them he immediately regrets being so open. But of course it’s too late now and he can hardly take it back. In fact the whole thing is actually rather surreal: like sitting to one side and watching this version of himself who’s filter has fallen off.

“Possibly,” replies Hannibal without any hesitation. “If I thought your wellbeing was at risk, then yes – I would. Not that I imagine such a thing being necessary. Aside from that error with your suppressants, I’m sure your own judgement would always be enough.”
Will scowls at this then resumes staring at his glass, bitterly disappointed despite not really expecting a different answer. “I thought so,” he says stiffly. “At least you admit it I suppose.”

“Why shouldn’t I admit it?” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. “There’s nothing nefarious about wanting to take care of you.”

“Because it’s controlling,” snaps Will. “Heat lock down is basically house arrest.”

“But surely establishing boundaries could be seen as a sign of care? Let me turn the question back on you; if I’d known before you did that your heat was going to start, would you have wanted me to prevent you going to the crime scene that night?”

“Yeah,” admits Will. “I guess so.”

“Then we have appeared to have solved the problem,” says Hannibal serenely. “Haven’t we done well? It seems all that’s really required is a clear agreement in advance of what your preference is. And fortunately your preference happens to correspond with mine – specifically that if you’re pre-heat you want to be somewhere secure and quiet with no alphas around except myself.”

Will gives a small smile then nudges Hannibal’s foot with his own. “Who says I want you around?”

Hannibal smiles too and returns the pressure against Will’s foot. “For the record I agree with Beverly,” he adds. “The current laws are intended to erode omega’s autonomy, mostly for no better reason than the way alphas prefer to control omegas rather than control themselves. I also have confidence in you to protect yourself as you see necessary; in fact your fierceness is one of your qualities that I particularly enjoy. But yes. If I thought your judgement was compromised in some way, then of course I’d intervene to protect you on your behalf.”

Will goes quiet for a few seconds, mulling this over and ultimately deciding that it’s satisfactory. “So what about travel restrictions?” he eventually adds. “Would you let me keep my own passport or make me travel on yours?”

“Your own of course,” says Hannibal, looking mildly surprised. “Why would I go to the trouble of registering you on mine? You’re not a child.”

“What about my house?”

“What about it?” replies Hannibal with an elegant little shudder. “Your house is exactly that: yours. I’m actually very grateful it’s not mine. Can you really see me wading through mud and dog hair every day in the depths of the countryside?” Will’s face lifts into a smile and Hannibal stretches out so he can brush their feet together again. “I feel as if I’m being vetted,” he says with amusement. “Do you require a copy of my resume as well?”

“Huh?”

“Why have you suddenly started interviewing me for the role of prospective alpha?”

Will immediately squirms with embarrassment, acutely aware that this is exactly what he is doing despite not originally intending to. “Um. Yeah. Sorry,” he says, nodding rather sheepishly to where the others have started debating reforms to The Omega Bonding Bill. “It’s that conversation I guess: shades of Andrew. Even the thought of it makes me anxious.”

“Don’t be anxious around me Will,” replies Hannibal with unusual gentleness. “Although I’m glad you feel you can be open about it; it gives me the opportunity to address your concerns. Alphas have a fairly terrible reputation – which I admit is generally well-deserved – but not all of us are the same.”
He pauses then lightly inclines his head to where Beverly and Anneke are smiling and laughing together. “Remember what I said about wanting an intellectual equal? I’d be lying if I said I don’t find your gender appealing, but it’s not solely what draws me to you. My principle source of fascination isn’t because you’re an omega, it’s because you’re a Will.”

“The Will,” says Will with another small smile.

“Oh yes,” replies Hannibal. “The Will. The one and only; I stand corrected.” He smiles too then casually stretches his hand a little further along the back of his chair so he can stroke Will’s neck with his thumb. Will promptly quivers and goes still. “Is this admissible?” says Hannibal gently. “No one is looking – and even if they were, I honestly doubt they’d care that much.”


“Are you sure?” replies Hannibal, allowing his forefinger to dip beneath Will’s collar. “If you prefer I can leave you alone again to pout in private.”

Will finally laughs then instinctively leans backward to give Hannibal’s hand better access. “I am not pouting. I wasn’t doing it before and I’m definitely not doing it now.”

“Oh well, I suppose it’s not my place to question your judgement,” says Hannibal airily. “Better to question The Almighty than to question The Will. But whatever you choose to call it, the expression has a certain panache. It’s rather irresistible. In fact it reminds me what a shame it is I’m not drinking this evening, as it means I have to drive us back and exercise an inconvenient amount of patience.”

He gives another feline smile then allows his hand to slide a little further down Will’s neck, gently probing and exploring beneath his collar, before dropping his voice so low there’s no possibility the others can overhear. “We could have got a cab otherwise couldn’t we? One of those executive ones with the spacious interiors. That way I could have had you before we even got home. I could have lifted you onto my lap on the back seat…held onto your hips and kissed your throat, then helped you use the movement of the car to find your own rhythm and let you ride me.”

Will promptly goes bright pink and Hannibal smirks then leans back in his chair and stares determinedly into the distance with an overly innocent expression on his face. “Are you all right Will?” calls out Price. “You look a bit flushed.”

“I’m fine,” says Will evenly. Oh holy fuck, he’s getting one of those hugely inconvenient impromptu erections…the kind that you’re really supposed to grow out of after the age of 16. Very carefully he removes his jacket then folds it across his lap; Hannibal’s faint smirk immediately grows broader. “Just too hot.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” replies Price in a peevish voice. “What’s taking Skinner so long? The radiators are still scorching.”

“Yeah,” says Will, desperately beaming stern mental messages to his treacherous hard-on to fuck off until it’s expressly invited back again. Not that it’s showing any signs of listening…it’s almost like the bastard thing’s been conspiring with Hannibal behind Will’s back to cause him maximum possible aggravation. Hannibal smirks again and Will gives a hint of an eye-roll while making a mental note to deliver a severe lecture later on about not training other people’s penises to respond to voice command without permission.

Across the room the string quartet are now attempting Grosse Fuge, accompanied by a lot of wrong notes, a quavering viola player and the cellist sawing his bow back and forth like someone splicing firewood. “Poor Beethoven,” sighs Hannibal in the same innocent voice. “One can only hope they did not restore his hearing in heaven.”
“Are you all right Will?” asks Beverly. “You look a bit uncomfortable. Why don’t you go out for some air?”

“No,” replies Will, cautiously adjusting his jacket. “No, I’ll just…sit right here.”

“Would you like a drink Will?” asks Hannibal serenely. “Something with ice? I don’t mind getting it for you; I’m due for a refill myself.” He pauses then gives another faint smirk. “I’ve decided to abandon caution and have something alcoholic. Someone will have to recommend a reliable cab firm.”

Will readjusts his jacket all over again then throws Hannibal an exasperated look. “Anyone else?” asks Hannibal. “No? Then I’ll see you shortly – and ask Jack about opening a few windows.”

Will watches him leave and grips onto the jacket with the same urgency of someone clutching a life preserver until Beverly takes Hannibal’s recently vacated chair and he’s forced to turn round again. “Why don’t you get off home?” she says, giving Will a friendly pat on the shoulder. “You’ve done your duty by turning up. Jack might be a bit disappointed but he’ll get over it.”

“Yeah,” says Will, trying not to think too hard about the cab journey. “I think I might.”

“You definitely don’t want to meet and greet these guys. The lab technician actually asked me what the letters F, B, and I stood for in the Bureau’s motto.”

_Fucking bullshit investigations_ thinks Will wryly, reflecting on their stunning lack of success in the hunt for both the Sculptor and Ripper. Then he promptly feels guilty for the glibness; after all, it’s not like everyone isn’t doing the best they can. “I’m sure some of the trainees are good,” he says now, attempting to be charitable. Beverly catches his eye and he laughs slightly then shrugs. “But yeah – they can definitely be irritating at first.”

“It’s been nice to catch up with Hannibal,” adds Beverly in an overly casual voice. “I hardly see him anymore.”

“No,” says Will vaguely. “I guess not.”

“He’s looking really well.” Will grunts non-committally, although it’s not as if a proper answer is particularly needed (Hannibal, after all, being the type of person who _always_ looks well). “Has he been on vacation?” persists Beverly. “He seemed like he might have done.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“I felt like giving him a round of applause when he sent Skinner packing.”

Will catches her eye again and gives a small smile. “Yeah, he’s good at that sort of thing.”

“Feel free to bring him when you come to see us. I’m not _implying_ anything,” she adds quickly as Will’s forehead starts to frown into a frown. “I don’t want to pry into your personal life. It’s just that you seem very happy when you’re around him. Relaxed, you know? It’s nice to see. You’ve had a hell of a time recently and…I don’t know. I guess I’m just glad you’ve found an ally.”

Her tone is warm – friendly and sincere – and Will looks at her kind face and feels guilty all over again for his previous defensiveness. After all, perhaps he really _could_ take Hannibal with him…it’s not like there’s any harm in it. Rather cautiously he now begins to rehearse a version of the scene in his head, turning it one way and another and trying it out for size: Beverly and Anneke lolling across the sofa in their apartment in a haze of wine, music and good humour with Will and Hannibal opposite as a kind of mirrored alpha-omega pairing. Possibly Will might sit on the floor with his back
propped against Hannibal’s legs; later, when the wine and good humour have sufficiently outweighed self-consciousness, he might even rest his head on his knee so Hannibal can run his fingers through his hair. And Hannibal will be aloof and inscrutable all evening but still entirely charming; and he and Beverly will have little alpha skirmishes while Will and Anneke roll their eyes at one another and try not to laugh…

In Will’s mind, this version of himself from the future looks content, relaxed and un-haunted with the top few buttons of his shirt unfastened and a mouth that’s rounded into a genuine smile in place of the brittle, pasted-on version that’s become so familiar. This version looks happy. In fact the smile is so genuine and the happiness is so sincere that Will finds himself overcome with a powerful urge to protect it – this fragile phantom of happiness that doesn’t yet exist but so easily could – and gets ready to open his mouth to say yes, he’d like to come and yes, he also like to bring Hannibal. It’s not like it’s even a complicated reply: little more than two yeses, one after the other. But before the words are as so much as half-formed Will finds himself abandoning them as instead he grows rigid and still: every muscle straining and each nerve vibrating as one-by-one the hairs on the back of his neck begin to stand on end.

“Um, okay, I’m sorry,” says Beverly, seeing the look. “I’ve obviously offended you. It wasn’t my intention.”

“No,” says Will urgently. “Listen. Can’t you hear that?”

Beverly’s expression creases into confusion and Will shakes his head again as his sharp ears strain across the rowdy clamour of music and conversation to chase the source of the sound. It’s so faint, so barely-there…and yet so unmistakable.

“Someone’s screaming,” says Will.

And it’s at that precise point that every single light in the room cuts out: plunging everything into darkness as the same exact same moment that everything goes straight to hell.

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For a few nightmarish seconds the only thing Will can really hear anymore is the urgent pulse of his heartbeat in his ears, fatal and free-falling as rationality disappears and chaos and terror take over. In fact the fear is so thick now it’s like being smothered; like being beaten across the head with rusty blood-stained metal. Then he has a brief, disorientating moment of going full-on omega and frantically looking for Hannibal for protection before forcibly snapping himself out of it and jumping to his feet. The initial startled cries when everything went black have now been overtaken by something closer to genuine dread as the sound of screaming, so faint at first, gets louder and louder until it abruptly cuts off in a gurgling cry. It’s wild and terrified like something in an abattoir as its life leaks away: a scream of mortal terror. Will flinches with shock at the sound of it and it’s at that exact moment that the screams die out as the shouts begin instead.

“There’s someone down!” yells a male voice. “She’s bleeding – I think she’s been stabbed!” It’s panicked and fevered, catching and breaking off before renewing in a stream of pleading sobs from several trainees together in what seems like a spiralling choir of horror: “Oh God, oh God, ohGodohGodohGod.”

“Someone call 911,” snaps Will. “Price, we need first aid. Go find where she is; use your cell as a flashlight.” As he’s speaking he quickly unfastens his belt then tosses it over, trying to ignore the way his hands have started to shake. “Use this if you need a tourniquet.”

Price nods in wordless agreement then fumbles in the darkness for the belt before vanishing in the
direction of the screams just as Will reaches out and grabs Beverly’s arm. “Listen to me,” he says, low and intense. “I think this is…” Then he hesitates in spite of himself; bizarrely reluctant to voice the suspicion out loud as if saying it is somehow going to make it real. “Anneke is an omega,” he says, shifting straight to the point instead. “Get her out of here now.”

“But Will, so are…”

“Get her out!” yells Will.

Through the watery trickles of moonlight he can just about recognise a few faces but otherwise the entire room has transformed into a bottomless black pit of charging silhouettes and shadow. Desperately he casts his memory back to try and work out how many qualified field agents are currently here: Beverly’s already disappeared with Anneke, and most of the main staff went home shortly after Jack’s speech…oh Christ, there’s only about six of them left; hardly anybody. How the fuck are they supposed to secure the scene while keeping people safe? It’s like some sort of hellish training exercise, only without the promise of escape in the form of an instructor to flick the lights back on and reassure you that you’ll do it better next time. Because there is no next time, is there? There’s only now; and only one chance to get it right.

*Think*, mutters Will to himself. *Think, think*. Oh God, of course – the lights. Glancing round he strains through the window in the direction of the auditorium and feels a giddy surge of relief at how the faint yet defiant flicker proves whoever tampered with the fuse box at least didn’t get to those ones too. There’s no possible way to make himself heard over the frenzy of screams and yells, so he sprints towards the string quartet and roughly kicks a few music stands out the way to seize hold of the microphone. There’s an immediate screech of feedback and the sound is sufficiently shrill and grating to cause a group of nearby trainees to break into renewed cries of fear.

“All trainees assemble in the auditorium,” snaps Will into the microphone, struggling to keep his tone authoritative without sounding panicked. “Quick and calm: do it now.”

For a few shocked seconds no one moves, then amid the darkness Will starts to see the outline of shuffling figures to indicate the instructions are being obeyed. Dropping the microphone he grabs hold of Zeller’s sleeve. “Go in there too,” he says. “Keep an eye on them and make sure no one leaves. And where the hell is Jack?”

“I’m right here,” says Jack, who’s appeared to Will’s right using his phone as a flashlight. “Jesus this is…” He makes a faint noise of disbelief then with visible effort attempts to get himself under control. “I’ve contacted maintenance – they’re trying to get the power back.”

“Who’s searching the building? The guy can’t have got far.”

“Security are on it,” snaps Jack, who’s misread Will’s urgent tone as an accusation that the situation isn’t being properly managed. “One of the Special Ops agents is still here and she’s coordinating them.”

Will nods with satisfaction then draws a deep breath to ask the most important question of all. “Where’s Hannibal?”

“He was with me when the lights went out so I sent him into the auditorium with the others. That was a good plan by the way; very quick thinking.”

“For God’s sake,” explodes Will. “We could use him here.”

“We could not. What’s the matter with you? He’s a member of the public, not a trained agent.”
“He’s a doctor!”

“Well what do you think Price is?” barks Jack, whose stress is again causing him to speak more harshly than intended. “Get a grip on yourself Will. This isn’t a body dump site, it’s an active crime scene – and that means we evacuate him alongside everyone else.”

Will bites his lip then looks away, stung by the implication that he’s only demanding Hannibal stay for selfish personal reasons when he’d clearly be safer in the auditorium. Of course what Jack’s saying is right and Hannibal shouldn’t be placed in unnecessary danger…and yet how hard it is not to long for his presence anyway as both ally and sparring partner. Fleetingly Will now imagines it: the spark of intrigue in the dark eyes and the lethally coiled energy that’s so white-hot, cold-blooded and ruthless. Hannibal would be calmly controlled and methodical, yet also snapping with relish at how the game is afoot. And he wouldn’t be scared either, not once, not at all…not like Will is. Overcome with a sudden need for contact Will now checks his phone and, on seeing four missed calls from Hannibal, quickly fires off ‘I’m fine. With Jack’ one-handed then returns it to his pocket.

As he does so there’s a whirring noise overhead and he glances up hopefully just in time to see the lights flicker spasmodically back to life, groaning loudly from the charge of the generator the entire time as if they’re in pain.

“Finally,” hisses Jack. “What took so damn long?” Although the question’s clearly rhetorical and he neither expects or even particularly wants an answer; instead swivelling on his heels to join Will in an urgent sprint to the back of the room where Price is kneeling by the crumpled figure of a young woman. The two lab techs who’ve been standing over him offering their phones as flashlights now glance up in confusion, blinking and squinting as if the light hurts them. In fact in the harsh fluorescent glare the surroundings look exactly like what they are: the scene of a catastrophe. Numerous chairs and tables have been tipped over in the stampede to escape and the floor is littered with broken glass that glints and sparkles like tears. But worse – much worse by far – is the pool of blood that smears across the floorboards with the same vivid wetness as the carpark paint. There’s less than Will was expecting but of course it’s still more than enough; and he knows that no matter how often he sees it, he’ll never fail to be shocked by how one frail human body can possibly hold so much blood.

“She’s gone,” says Price tonelessly as Will and Jack grind to a halt nearby. “There’s nothing anyone could’ve done. Her throat’s been cut. She’d have been unconscious in 10 seconds and dead in less than 30.” His voice has shifted into the detached, dispassionate monotone of forensic pathology; a device to sanitize and separate, as if the clinical language can dilute the horror. Will recognises it immediately because they all do it. He’s often done it himself.

“Trachea severed?” he says finally.

“Of course. And both carotid arteries.”
Will nods, by now convinced that the first impression was correct. “So how did she scream?”

Price gives Will a look. “Obviously she didn’t.”

“Then how come I heard someone screaming before the lights cut out? And there was another one straight afterwards – just when it all went dark.”

“Yeah I heard it too,” says Jack. “It sounded like someone choking. Creepy as hell.” For a few seconds he goes extremely still then winces himself as he catches Will’s eye. “My God. You mean…”

“What?” asks the younger of the lab techs, his face stretched pale and thin with fear.

“That was the killer screaming,” replies Will in the same toneless voice. “He was imitating the victim to make it sound like she was still alive; or at least dying rather than dead. This woman was killed earlier, long before the lights went out. And she wasn’t killed here: there’s nowhere near enough blood.”

“Agreed,” says Price. “The body was moved post-mortem.”

Will frowns then casts around for a few seconds before pointing to the fire escape. “There. He cuts out the lights and pushes the body across the floor. Everyone panics, but the priority becomes to find the victim to try and keep her alive. The killer just storms out with everyone else. He makes his escape, but he also gets something equally important: the satisfaction of misleading us.”

“That’s one hell of a risk,” says Jack slowly. “Why go to so much trouble?”

“Perhaps to alibi himself?” offers one of the lab techs. “He might not know about forensics and didn’t realise we could tell she didn’t die here?”

“He knows,” says Will, flinching internally at the implication of the type of mind they’re dealing with. “He didn’t do this for an alibi. He did it because he’s playing a game. There’s no purpose for it at all beyond theatre: drama, sadism and demonstrating his supposed superiority. That’s his design. He’s showing us that he can kill a member of the FBI right under our noses and there’s nothing we can do to stop him.”

The lab tech gives a visible shudder then wipes his hand across his face. “Pull yourself together son,” snaps Jack as he sees it. “You’re supposed to be a professional.”

“What sort of person would do that?” says Price, shaking his head. The tone is almost one of wondernment – the powers of logic and cool rationality vs. cruelty and madness – and rather than replying Will simply kneels down then wraps his hand in a nearby napkin so he can carefully tip the women’s purse to one side. He already knows what he’s going to find, but it still doesn’t stop him drawing in his breath through his teeth at being proved so drastically and horribly correct. Pulling back he lets out another breath then gestures towards the small canister that’s rolled across the floor: a bottle of omega pheromone spray.

“Who else?” he says, and for the first time the horror of the situation really begins to leak into his voice. “The Sculptor.”

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Over in the auditorium Hannibal yawns internally then arches up against the wall like a large panther basking in a tree. From the outside he looks grave and impassive, but the reality is that he’s painfully bored: partly through having to pretend to be sympathetic to the trainees, but mostly because he’s
consumed with a restless desire to find out what Will’s doing. In this respect being dismissed to the safety zone like a normal person (Hannibal’s mouth quirks into a little frown of irritation at the thought of it) might be understandable from a procedural point of view but is deeply insulting on a personal level and Hannibal’s struggling not to feel resentful over it. And as if that’s not bad enough, he’s been marooned with the trainees as a form of insult to injury: all currently stood around in little sheep-like flocks, with one or two being nosily and messily hysterical while the others just have white lips and shocked faces and exchange condolences with one another in fractured whispers. Hannibal glances at them again and allows his internal yawn to become so pronounced it almost dislocates his jaw. Although while the distressed ones might be irksome, there’s no doubt that the majority of his amused contempt is reserved for the ones who want to go and help – all of who are clearly identifiable as alphas, and all of who tend towards expressing their resentment in the form of loud, arrogant protests about how their skill sets are being wasted.

“It’s a crime scene,” snaps Zeller, who has the unenviable task of herding the flock and looks almost as close to wanting to bludgeon them as Hannibal does. “Every extra person increases the risk of contamination. How can you not know that? We’ll be taking witness statements as soon as possible then after that you can leave.”

“The perp might still be in the building,” urges the trainee. “We could help search.”

“It’s already being searched,” says Zeller sharply. “We don’t need students to do it.”

The trainee in question – a blond, lantern-jawed type with a lot of very white teeth – rears his head back like an angry peacock in offence at being dismissed so casually; and Hannibal enjoys a quiet fantasy about what the same head would look like bouncing joyfully across the auditorium floor before deciding to call time on the whole tedious thing and uncurling himself away from the wall so he can prowl up to Zeller himself.

“Oh hey,” says Zeller, who looks even more irate and flustered close up. “What a nightmare situation. Can you believe it?”

Hannibal gravely agrees that yes, it is a nightmare situation (and no, he can’t believe it) then informs Zeller with utmost politeness that he intends to leave the auditorium and get some fresh air. Unlike the trainees before him this is calmly yet clearly announced in terms of telling Zeller he’s going rather than asking his permission; and Zeller, who’s obviously realised he’s now in the unenviable position of being forced to piss off either Hannibal or Jack, hears him out then promptly looks uncomfortable.

“Hey, look, I don’t know about that,” he says apologetically. “I don’t know if I can let you.” Hannibal politely raises an eyebrow and Zeller falters before making another attempt: “I mean, I don’t know if Jack would let you.” Hannibal’s second eyebrow slowly elevates to join the first and Zeller adds rather desperately: “Will said everyone should stay here.”

It’s obvious that he’s hoping a reference to Will might be enough to win Hannibal over and Hannibal mentally awards him a few points for manipulation skills in return – despite not having the slightest intention of obeying. Even so the mention of Will still manages to elicit a rather feline smile, not least because of how endearingly fierce Will would undoubtedly be in Zeller’s position…sternly impassive on the outside while internally blazing away like a small inferno. Zeller, mistaking the smile for agreement, visibly relaxes at the idea he’s dodged a bullet then promptly stiffens again as Hannibal reaches out for the door handle.

“Come on man,” he says rather beseechingly. “You’re going to get me into trouble.”

“I have no desire to get you into trouble,” replies Hannibal with a level of fake concern that’s positively lavish. “But there’s no reason why I should. I don’t intend to leave; merely go outside for a
short while. I’ll still be available to give a statement.”

“It’s dangerous,” says Zeller who seems perilously close to begging. “The killer could still be in the building.”

Hannibal – who’s privately thinking that he’d like to see the killer who’d dare to take him on – smiles appreciatively and says that he’ll keep to the front where the patrol cars are. Then he draws himself up to his full height for maximum looming potential while simultaneously smiling in an overly gracious way – and which means the unfortunate Zeller gets dazzled by the charm offensive while unconsciously disorientated by a sense of threat. “I don’t intend to abscond,” adds Hannibal. “Which would be the only real reason to keep me here. In that respect I also have a fairly impeachable alibi, because I was speaking with Jack when the lights went out.”

“Oh I didn’t mean that,” says Zeller, obviously concerned at giving offence. “I know they don’t think you’re a suspect.”

“No?” replies Hannibal serenely. “Then they’ll hardly mind if I go and get some air.”

Zeller shuffles even more dramatically – although this time it’s less from a sense of awkwardness so much as resentment at being checkmated – and Hannibal gives a satisfied nod before taking hold of the handle again. “Hey!” yells the same trainee as before. “How come he can go?”

Hannibal briefly resurrects his previous fantasy of the bouncing head and the auditorium floor, but is ultimately too preoccupied with finding Will to even bother wasting the time required to turn round and deliver an acid stare. Instead he leaves the trainee to Zeller then glides away down the pitch-black winding corridors, silent as a shadow with his dark clothes and noiseless tread. The seminar room itself is already cocooned in yellow crime scene tape and Hannibal observes it with interest before trying to get a glimpse of Will through the gap in the sliding doors. Unfortunately the only visible sign of life is Jack huffing like a walrus into his cell phone and Hannibal, who always enjoys seeing Will in action, is immediately disappointed. In fact he’d rather like to cross the Rubicon of crime scene tape and enter the room himself; only there’s no doubt such a breach of protocol would make Jack grow shrilly self-righteous and domineering, and it’s not really worth the trouble when a little patience and a bit more waiting might enable Hannibal to slip in and reach Will undetected before much more time has passed. Rather regretfully he now moves past the seminar room and exits the building in order to enjoy the consolation prize of peace and quiet in the cool night air until Will, as the main prize, becomes available. The front carpark is already swarming with patrol cars and assorted anxious onlookers so Hannibal swerves past them and moves round to the back instead, where he locates his phone to send a short message to Will: Are you all right?

A reply comes back almost straight away: I’m fine. Should be done here by midnight.

Hannibal nods approvingly then sends a second message advising Will to be careful. He’s already anticipating what the response is going to be, but still smiles anyway when he reads it: Always am.

“But you are not,” says Hannibal out loud. In fact Will’s dazzling flourishes of daring often border on reckless, yet it’s impossible not to find them captivating when they come from a place of such strategy and brilliance. In this respect Will’s daring is almost poetic in its lack of principles, and Hannibal spends a few entertaining moments imagining him as a figure from some courtly parable who’s full of chivalry and mysticism with a streak of stealthy, luscious darkness. Lancelot, perhaps; or even a young Sir Gawain, with blood-stained sword and air of restless yearning for quests and combat. The image has considerable charm, although Hannibal still begins to frown again as he reflects how even apprentices with the greatest gifts require an older, more experienced mentor to offer them security and guidance – the equivalent of an Arthur, as it were – and how hugely irritating it is that this role’s currently fallen to Jack (who’s not remotely worthy of it) rather than Hannibal
(who quite obviously is). Hannibal’s eyes briefly narrow with displeasure before consoling himself that it’s only a matter of hours before Will is back where he belongs and Hannibal can indulge in the usual sense of ownership tempered by obligation: that Will has undoubtedly become his possession to influence, control and manoeuvre, yet also his responsibility to cultivate, protect and take care of. Just…his.

Overhead the moon is hanging in the sky like a frosty pearl that’s silver, spectral and slightly vaporous from its veil of fog. The usual floodlights that dot around the carpark have also been turned off and it makes the darkness so pervasive that it’s impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Even so, Hannibal’s excellent hearing still serves as an effective early-warning system – and it doesn’t take him long to realise that he’s no longer alone.

To begin with the noise is barely distinguishable from the sigh of the wind, but Hannibal still detects it anyway in the form of a faint crunch of feet against asphalt: soft at first but growing louder and louder through the gloom as it echoes in the otherwise silent night. From the weight and pace Hannibal deduces the figure is a male one, most probably an alpha, and he notes the relative speed over distance before replacing his phone in his pocket and slowly turning round at the exact moment the figure reaches him.

“Oh, hey there,” announces a voice from somewhere in the shadows. “I didn’t startle you did I?”

Hannibal leans back slightly on his heels, typically cool and appraising. “You did not.”

“I don’t suppose you know what’s going on?” adds the voice rather petulantly. “I’m supposed to collect the sound equipment: ten o’clock they told me to be here and now the whole place is sealed off. My boss’ll give me hell if it’s not returned.”

As it’s speaking the shadow finally steps forward into a shaft of moonlight and turns into a young man: slim yet well-muscled with an angular face and staring eyes that gleam rather eerily in the dimness like murky candles. He’s wearing what appear to be overalls of some kind, and as he catches Hannibal staring at him he darts his tongue across his lips in a gesture that seems gauche on the surface while also somehow managing to be both cunning and rather lizard-like.

“There’s been an incident,” replies Hannibal calmly. “You won’t be able to access the building tonight.”

“Oh yeah? What kind of incident? I asked those guys at the front but they won’t tell me anything.”

“An assault,” says Hannibal in the same calm voice.

The young man pantomimes shock: eyes wide open, mouth twisted up in an approximation of alarm. “Jeez,” he says. “That’s terrible. Here of all places: here in the FBI. You’d think it would be the safest place on earth.” Hannibal stares back without answering and the man repeats the display again before seeming to grow bored with it halfway through and slinking a little closer to Hannibal instead. “Who was assaulted?” he adds, and this time there’s a note of quiet intensity to his voice.

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“Terrible,” repeats the man softly. “Just terrible.” As he’s speaking he reaches into his pocket and removes a small syringe, deftly palming it into his hand like a conjurer so that Hannibal can’t see. “The world’s a messed-up place sometimes,” he says, then darts his tongue across his lips for a second time like he’s enjoying the taste of the phrase and wants to savour it a little longer. “Yeah, it’s a messed-up place. You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you Dr Lecter.”
Hannibal raises an eyebrow and the young man tips his head in a way that’s more reptilian than ever when combined with the darting tongue and the rolling eyes. “You don’t recognise me, huh? I guess you haven’t seen me before. It doesn’t matter though because I’m not here for myself.” As he takes another step forward the outline of his body grows clearer and it’s apparent that his clothes, which initially looked like overalls, are actually the uniform of a hospital orderly. “No, I’m not here for myself at all. I only came to find you because of Will.” He pronounces the name almost reverently, crooning the ‘l’ sound in a softly sibilant purr, and when he smiles for a final time his small white teeth glint in the moonlight. “You might almost say that he sent me.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will’s back is hurting. In fact it’s been several hours now and it seems to be the only thing he’s really aware of anymore: not the noise or the lights, not the wail of sirens or the sound of sobbing – just a stupid, trivial ache between his shoulder blades which in the grand scheme of things shouldn’t matter at all. Not that it’s the first time something like this has happened, and as long as he’s doing this job it certainly won’t be the last. In fact the process never fails to fascinate him: how horror distils perception and you end up focusing on the mundane and monotonous as a way to distance yourself from the raw reality of what you’ve been forced to do. So there he is in the midst of carnage and all he can think about anymore is the way his back is hurting. Although come to think of it everything hurts. His feet hurt, his head hurts, his knees hurt from where he’s been kneeling and his eyes hurt from straining into the abyss of bleakly terrible things. If he could think of a less melodramatic way of putting it he’d probably say his soul hurts, only it’s the type of maudlin sentiment that’s ripped straight from the pages of an old-fashioned poetry book and there’s nothing remotely poetic about any of this. Thy soul, it languishes with a sickness of nature…how does the rest of it go? Oh fuck this – fuck all of it. Will grimaces and stands upright, half expecting his spine to start snapping and creaking like a rusty hinge, then peers anxiously at where a scrum of SWAT team members are assembling with their sinister-looking black guns and body armour.

“Any updates on the search?” he says to Jack. It’s a pointless question of course because he’d have been told if there was, yet somehow the fragile hope of getting the answer he wants means he can’t quite stop himself from asking it.

“Nothing,” replies Jack with predictable bitterness. “Absolutely nothing; they’ve turned the whole place upside down and there’s no sign of him.”

Will frowns for a few seconds then starts to restlessly gnaw on his thumbnail. He’s already done the same thing several times tonight and the skin is already sore and oozing from the endless scrape of teeth…in other words just one more thing to start hurting. “How is that even possible?” he snaps, as if Jack’s somehow supposed to know. “He only had a few minutes head start.”

His tone of voice is extremely pointed and Jack’s eyebrows elevate a few inches at the sound of it. “I assume you’re not trying to be metaphysical with that,” he says. “Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?”

“No, not sarcasm exactly,” admits Will. “Just…scepticism.” He raises his own eyebrows then waves a hand in the direction of the auditorium. “Think about it Jack. What if he never left the building? What if he’s still here?”

“You’re not serious?” Will frowns even harder in silent indication that he’s entirely serious and Jack sucks in a lungful of air then lets it hiss out again between his teeth. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Maybe.”

“Let me get this straight,” replies Jack, carefully enunciating each word. “Are you telling me you think the Sculptor works for the FBI?”

When announced out loud in such a bald, uncompromising way it sounds faintly ridiculous, but Will holds his ground and refuses to back down. “I think we shouldn’t discount it,” he says stubbornly.
Jack catches Will’s eye then lets out another long sigh. It’s clear that he’s reluctant to acknowledge the awfulness of the possibility – and is no doubt already imagining what the newspaper headlines would be – yet at the same time has too much investigative instinct to just dismiss the theory out of hand. “We’re getting statements from everyone,” he eventually replies. “The procedure’s been no different than if the room had been full of members of the public. Anyone who can’t account for their whereabouts is going to be examined.”

“At least the majority should be easy to eliminate,” offers Will, prepared to be more appeasing now it’s obvious that Jack’s prepared to take him seriously. “Most of them will be able to alibi each other.” For a few seconds the frown reappears: gossamer-fine lines between both eyebrows with an anxious crease to the forehead. “Not Skinner though. He went to speak with maintenance just before the lights went out.”

“I’ve already checked that one myself,” replies Jack. Behind him the CSI photographers are dismantling their tripods with a noisy scrape of metal and he irritably waves his hand at them to be quiet. “The janitor backed up his story.”

“Yeah, but he was out the room when it went dark. And we know the student was killed earlier in the evening.”

“Okay, stop right there,” says Jack sharply. “You’re on thin ice now Will. You know you can speak your mind to me, but don’t even think about repeating that to anyone else unless you’ve got serious proof.” Will scowls irritably and Jack folds his arms in the officious way he always does when he wants to show he means business. “I know you don’t like the guy. For the record I don’t either. But you need something a lot stronger than dislike before you start accusing him of being the Sculptor.”

Will gives a small shuffle of frustration, resentful at the reprimand despite the awareness that what Jack’s saying is right. “Yeah,” he replies bleakly. “I know.”

“Just watch your mouth,” adds Jack, although not in an unkind way. Reaching out he gives Will a reassuring clap on the shoulder. “You’ve only just been arrested, don’t tell me you liked it so much you want to go back? Carry on like this and I’ll have to bail you out for slander as well.” Will summons a rather wan smile and Jack glances round to make sure no one’s nearby before lowering his voice to a whisper. “I’ll have him checked again, okay? I’ll do it myself – if it’ll put your mind at rest.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” replies Jack, raising his voice to a normal volume. “Anyway, at least we know one more thing about the Sculptor after tonight.”

“Which is what?”

Jack gestures solemnly to where a grim-faced Price is wheeling a stretcher towards the door, his head dipped down across its tragic cargo like a pallbearer at a funeral. “He must be strong.”

“How so?”

“Moving that body so quickly once he’d cut the lights. It’s a good few metres between the fire escape and where she was found. You’d have to be pretty well-built to manage it.”

“Not necessarily. She was tiny – I could’ve easily carried her myself.”

“Oh come on,” protests Jack. “That would have been what; a 100 pounds? Maybe 120? You telling me you could hoist that much in the pitch black surrounded by witnesses fast enough not to get
“Right now, no. But context makes people capable of all kinds of things.” Will pauses fractionally then blinks a few times. All kinds of things...like killing your alpha in a hotel room then displaying the body as Grand Guignol. “If I was desperate enough and deranged enough then yes,” he says out loud. “Yes, I probably could have managed it. And so could he – and he did. Remember Jack, this whole thing is a game to him. He’s high on adrenaline and his own sense of superiority. He’s thrilled...exhilarated. He’s about to display his masterpiece and it gives him a huge surge of physical and psychological force.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” concedes Jack. “It’s a bit like those stories about women lifting cars off their babies.”

“A bit like that. Adrenaline and noradrenaline both have a greater innervating effect on muscle over the course of a few seconds, and that’s really all it would have taken. Of course I could be completely wrong – he might be a body-builder for all we know. We just shouldn’t assume that he is.”

Jack nods again then wearily drags his hand across his face. “My God though Will, this case. An FBI trainee getting cut down in the middle of our own building…I’ve never seen anything like it. People are going to be writing books about this one for years to come.” He pauses then grimaces. “This one and the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“He’s nothing like the Chesapeake Ripper,” snaps Will. “The Ripper is the real deal. This guy’s playacting at it; I’ve said so from the beginning.”

“Well at least they’re not active at the same time,” adds Jack. “The Ripper’s gone quiet again. He takes those two alphas out one after the other and then – nothing. He’s just disappeared.”

As Will opens his mouth to reply his phone goes off in his pocket, loudly and shrilly insistent like a third person trying to claim a place in the conversation, and when he glances down he feels the familiar warm glow at seeing Hannibal’s name appear. “Hey,” he says, allowing his voice to soften slightly from its previous irritated tone. Jack immediately looks intrigued and Will turns his back then shuffles a few paces away so he can’t be overheard. “How you doing?”

Surprisingly there’s no reply: just a faint rustling noise that could be the fluttering of breath. Or maybe it’s not that at all...maybe it’s just static. “Hello?” says Will, a little louder and firmer. “You there?”

Examining the screen he sees that the call’s been disconnected and frowns in confusion before there’s a sudden beeping noise as a text arrives instead. The message, when he opens it, is extremely brief and to the point: I’ve been waiting so long.

No you haven’t, thinks Will fondly, you’ve been waiting less than two hours. In fact Price can make all the jokes he wants about Joan Crawford, but there’s no doubt that when it comes to being a magnificent drama queen then Hannibal, on occasion, can give anyone a run for their money. Right on cue the phone promptly hums in his hand as a second text flashes up: I want to see you.

This time Will gives a faint smile as he remembers their previous discussion about the cab journey and Hannibal waxing scandalous on the impossibility of patience. Quickly he fires back: Yeah, I bet you do.

I knew you’d understand.
Will glances over his shoulder and is promptly greeted by the unappealing sight of Jack (Joan) Crawford’s face folding itself like corrugated iron into furrows of disapproval. Turning round again he hastily types out: *Hardly the time and place though is it?*

*Meet me in the back parking lot. Do it now. Make sure no one follows you though, because we need some privacy.*

With anyone else, Will decides, that last bit would have been followed up with a winking emoji. *I’ll be finished anyway in 30mins, he replies. 40 at most. Then we can just leave…in a cab.*

*No, come now. Please Will. Just for a few minutes. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.*

In spite of himself Will raises his eyebrows, unable to hide his surprise that Hannibal seems so incredibly amorous that he expects them to start banging each other in the carpark like a couple of teenagers. Not that he can seriously expect that. Or even want it, for that matter…after all, it’s hardly very dignified. Even so, Will’s been missing Hannibal fiercely all evening and it’s not as if a few minutes of comfort and contact can do any harm: quite the opposite in fact. Cheering up slightly, he replaces his phone in his pocket then turns back round again and gestures towards Jack.

“I’m just going outside for a while,” says Will blithely, doing his best to sound casual and unconcerned. Jack promptly starts to scowl and Will can’t help wondering, not for the first time, whether he’s more annoying when he’s lecturing Will or being over-protective towards him. It’s honestly hard to say, although to be fair it’s not as if they aren’t both uniquely awful…talk about being caught between shit and shite. “Ten minutes,” he adds firmly. “I want to…” *make out in a car park.* Oh God though, what do people actually say in these situations? It’s rather a pity he doesn’t smoke; a cigarette break would have been ideal. “I want to get some air,” he improvises after a small pause.

Jack doesn’t look especially impressed by this reason so Will sighs internally then does his best to adopt a suitably wan and stifled expression of One Who Is In Need Of Air. “Well…I guess so,” replies Jack reluctantly. “Be careful though won’t you? Don’t go anywhere deserted.”

“Of course not.”

Jack folds his arms, slipping further into defensive alpha mode right before Will’s eyes without even seeming to realise he’s doing it. “If you’re not back in ten minutes,” he says bossily, “then I’m sending someone to get you.”

Jack, thinks Will with irritation, had better be more careful because at the rate he’s going he’s at serious risk of turning into the ultimate grumpy old man. “Fine,” he says, beginning to pull on his scarf.

“In fact scratch that: I’m coming myself.”

“Yes dad.”

“I’m serious,” snaps Jack, who now seems perilously close to wagging his finger. “No wandering off. What if the Sculptor’s still nearby?”

He sounds incredibly foreboding and at the sound of the words Will can feel the initial spark of happiness at seeing Hannibal immediately start to seep away. “I know,” he replies, and there’s no remaining trace of optimism in his voice. “You don’t have to tell me to be careful Jack. I know I do – I know better than anyone. It’s what that display at my house meant after all.”

“What?”
“It meant I’m next,” says Will grimly. “What else would it mean?”

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Outside the air is gun-metal grey and glacially cold, biting through Will’s thin jacket as soon as he steps through the door and stealing every scrap of warmth far quicker than it’s possible to replace it. The darkness itself is of a thick, choking kind without any stars and when he automatically searches for a glimpse of Orion and his dogs there’s nothing to see at all beyond flat matte black like a bottle of ink’s been spilt across the sky. Will shivers on instinct then thrusts his hands in his pockets and quickens his pace, determinedly picturing Hannibal as a source of emotional comfort and physical warmth in an attempt to recapture his previous positive mood. Hannibal doesn’t like seeing Will uncomfortable after all. He’ll make a regretful noise then wrap his arms round him…possibly he’ll unfasten his own coat and envelop Will in the folds.

The scene that greets him by the entrance is predictably chaotic: a seething foaming frenzy of patrol cars, news fans, ambulances and onlookers whose faces are bathed scarlet and yellow from the sirens like someone’s set them alight. The air of fear and urgency reminds Will a little of what he imagines a war zone might be like and he ducks his head and strides past, shoulders hunched and expression grimly resolute as he does his best to ignore the catcalls from those who’ve obviously recognised him from his stint in the news as the Chesapeake Ripper. In fact as impressions go it’s fairly convincing, but inside he can feel himself wilting under the force of their scrutiny. Mistrust is my new normality, thinks Will bleakly, aware of how paranoid looks and hostile whispers are something he’s going to have to get used to for as long as he remains in the FBI. Even so, once he’s retreated to the back of the building he can’t deny that no matter how unpleasant it is to run a gauntlet of staring faces – and it undoubtedly is unpleasant – the sudden isolation is deeply sinister in comparison. Then he remembers Jack’s warning and for a few seconds has an image of the Sculptor lurking in the shadows: lean, predatory and still clutching a blade that glints wetly in the moonlight with omega blood. No, that’s impossible, Will quickly amends to himself – the area’s been thoroughly searched. But now the thought’s occurred to him he can’t quite banish it, and before he goes any further he quickly reaches into his pocket to curl his fingers round the steadying weight of his gun.

From somewhere in the distance comes an eerie clattering sound as the wind blows a can across the concrete. Will jumps violently, each nerve twitching and straining as his heart seems to swell in his chest. Then he draws a deep breath to steady himself before glancing down and realising, with a huge jolt of unease, that he’s currently stood on the remains of the graffiti. In fact if the light was better he’d still be able to see the outline of it…the exact same spot where only a few days ago he scrubbed away the dripping scarlet K of Killer. And it’s then that despite the search and the gun and all his best efforts, Will suddenly finds that his nerves have got the better of him.

“Hannibal!” he calls out sharply. “Are you here?”

The wind snatches the words from his mouth and carries them into the darkness. “Dammit,” mutters Will under his breath. Then he’s about to shout again when in the corner of his eye he sees something that makes every hair on the back of his neck bristle upright…a flickering silhouette who’s height and spindly limbs clearly identify it as human.

The odd, jerking way it moves gives it the appearance of a giant insect, but when Will spins round to confront it there’s nobody there. In fact there are no signs of life at all – nothing beyond the wail of the wind and the mournful clattering of the can – and it’s at this exact moment that Will feels his previous unease tip over into outright panic. Of course the simplest explanation is that it’s Hannibal playing some kind of trick on him, except that it hardly makes sense for him to lure Will outside into the middle of a crime scene simply to hide in the dark. But then again, who really knows what he’d do? He’s Hannibal after all…he could do anything.
From somewhere across the carpark comes an eerie gurgling sound that seems as if it might be laughter. Increasingly frantic, Will spins round the other way to where he thinks it’s coming from and calls Hannibal’s name before searching out the phone to dial his number. As he holds it to his ear he realises his hands have started to shake; but it’s not until he presses the button that his previous fear feels like a dress rehearsal for when the terror finally hits him for real. Because what he hears isn’t Hannibal’s voice as hoped for: it’s only the echoing shrill of a ringtone that cries on and on into the empty air with a hopeless helpless certainty that there’s no one to answer it.

“Hannibal!” yells Will desperately. “Are you hurt? Where are you!”

By now it feels like he’s screaming into the darkness but he still calls out even louder for a second time, then a third – and there’s something truly terrible about the raw anguish that makes him search for a response he knows there’s no realistic chance of getting. It’s like a part of him believes that if he just invests enough emotion then it’ll somehow be rewarded and longing for Hannibal badly enough will finally make him appear. But the only reply is the cry of the phone so Will now starts to sprint desperately in its direction, by this point nearly delirious with fear that something’s terribly wrong. The fear lends speed to his heart and purpose to his pounding feet, and it means that he’s so focussed on finding Hannibal that he forgets about everything else – forgets about the shadows and the silence, forgets about the Sculptor – as his attention grows so narrow and constricted that he briefly loses track of his surroundings. The distance is a fairly large one but adrenaline lends a fleetness and suppleness that helps him cover it in unnaturally quick time before the phone abruptly cuts off mid-ring and the night goes quiet again. Cursing under his breath Will whips out his own phone to redial the number; fervid and frantic and completely oblivious to the swirling silhouettes behind him until one of them finally separates from the rest and leaps out the blackness to wrap an arm around his chest.

For a few feverish moments Will thinks the arm belongs to Hannibal but the impression vanishes almost as soon as it’s occurred to him. He doesn’t even need to see the person or hear their voice. It’s just obvious from their smell and their weight against his back and the way they touch him…somehow or other he just knows. An urge to scream immediately churns up beneath his rib cage, wild and fatal, yet before he can act on it a hand has clamped over his mouth.

“Don’t make any noise,” hisses a voice, the breath hot and rank in his ear. “I’m not going to hurt you. At least…not unless you make me.”

Fear and disorientation have briefly made Will numb, yet it’s still a voice he immediately recognises: eerie, insinuating, and with such a slinking slithering quality that he half expects it to leave a slimy trail across his skin. But it’s also a voice with powerful associations, and it means that for a few bleak seconds Will’s no longer in the carpark at all but back in the haunted desperation of a prison cell as the voice slithered out the darkness for the very first time to murmur ‘I was right about you: I was right about you all along.’ Then almost as soon as it’s happened the sensation is gone and something inside Will ruptures and shifts as he aggressively jerks his head free to snarl out the only question that matters: “Where’s Hannibal?”

Matthew Brown – because of course that’s who it is – makes a damp snuffling sound straight into Will’s ear and tightens his grip. “He was on the phone to you when I found him,” he says. “That worked out pretty well for me didn’t it? Everything I said in those texts was true though. I did want to see you. And I have been waiting.”

“I’m not going to ask you again,” grits out Will, and his teeth are clenched so rigidly that it’s actively difficult to fight the words free from his mouth. “Where is he?”

“He’s fine,” replies Matthew. “I didn’t hurt him. He’s just…resting.” He tightens his grip even
further and for a few seconds there’s a light scrape of teeth against Will’s neck as a set of spindly fingers dig into his ribcage. “It’s your own fault Mr Graham. I warned you. I warned you to stay away from him.”

“I know you did,” says Will tonelessly. “The thing is: I don’t tend to let alphas try to control me.”

There’s a few beats of silence and then Will takes a deep breath, summoning every last ounce of strength before seizing the arm encircling his chest and giving the elbow joint a vicious twist. Matthew gasps with pain and Will swings his entire body weight to give him traction until the arm springs loose like a door hinge and Will can jerk it behind Matthew’s back before delivering a sharp kick to his right knee. He goes down immediately, weighty and lumbering as a sack of cement, and Will gives him another kick in the ribs when he hits the ground. The whole thing is over in seconds and Will neatly stoops down then grabs Matthew’s chin in his hand and forces it round until they’re looking at each other.

“Consider this as a lesson learned Mr Brown,” says Will, very low and intense. “Every so often you come across a person in life that you really shouldn’t fuck with. That person is me. Now don’t make me ask you a third time.”

The completeness and euphoria of his victory are incredibly thrilling. Even so, it doesn’t change the fact that an omega treating an alpha so disrespectfully is almost unheard of and Will is already bracing himself for violent retaliation. Yet somehow what happens instead is even more disturbing – and it’s impossible to suppress his swell of revulsion as he sees the wet gleam of teeth in the moonlight and realises that Matthew’s actually smiling at him. “You’re so fierce Mr Graham,” he says softly. “I knew you would be. I knew I hadn’t underestimated you.”

The admiration in his voice is obvious; an alpha showing pride in its omega. In fact Hannibal often does the same thing, but while his praise makes Will feel empowered Matthew’s tone expresses the same possessiveness as Andrew’s often did: the sense that Will’s behaviour, and even Will himself, only matter in terms of how it makes the alpha feel. “It’s like I always said,” adds Matthew with a weird surge of earnestness. “It’s like I’ve been telling you from the beginning. You’re perfect for me Mr Graham. We’re perfect for each other. I’ll prove it you; let me prove it.” From somewhere out of the darkness his fingers come creeping and curl themselves round Will’s wrist. “I’ll show you where Dr Lecter is, but only on one condition: that you agree to talk to me afterwards.”

“How close by is he?”

Matthew smiles again then jerks his head towards the rear of the parking lot. “Just back there,” he says. “No distance at all.”

“Come on then,” snarls Will, flooded with a powerful surge of relief that Hannibal’s so nearby. In fact he’s longing to just bolt straight off into the darkness to find him, but feels it’s far too risky to turn his back on Matthew in case he’s got a weapon. Instead he retrieves his own gun from his pocket and waves it silently in front of Matthew’s face – and who, rather incredibly, shows no sign of fear or anger at the sight of it and just continues to leer at Will with the same unnerving smile.

Will gives a grimace of disgust then roughly tugs Matthew to his feet so he can follow behind him until they’ve reached an alcove at the far end of the parking lot. By terrible coincidence it’s the exact same spot where Will himself was ambushed by Andrew, and he’s briefly overwhelmed by another plunge of unease before seeing something that makes him catch his breath even more sharply than before. Because while he hardly dared to hope Matthew was telling the truth here’s Hannibal exactly as promised: neatly tucked against the wall with his long legs curled beneath him and looking so serene and peaceful he might simply be waiting for them to arrive except for the fact that his eyes are closed and he seems completely unresponsive. Briefly forgetting about Matthew, Will swoops down
on him to check his pulse. It feels slow and steady beneath his fingers and Will gives a heavy sigh of relief then checks for any signs of injury before gently smoothing Hannibal’s hair back off his forehead.

Glancing up he now glares at Matthew, keeping a protective hand on Hannibal’s shoulder the entire time. “Did you sedate him?” he says sharply.

“Yes,” replies Matthew with obvious pride. “Cinidryl. We use it all the time on the alphas in the hospital: it knocks them right out. He’ll wake up in an hour or two and he’ll be fine, I promise. I didn’t plan to hurt him.” He pauses again then emits an eerily high-pitched scraping sound that Will supposes is intended to be humorous. “At least not yet. I’m not stupid Mr Graham; I’m hardly going to murder him in the middle of the FBI parking lot. No, no, no. I just wanted to prove a point.”

“Oh which one?”, “Have you even heard yourself?” snarls Will. “You’re out of your mind. Why would you think I’d go anywhere with you?”

“You were clever to break yourself out the way you did,” continues Matthew, as if Will hasn’t spoken. “That was smart.”

“I didn’t break out,” snaps Will with contempt. “They released me.” Then he hesitates for a few seconds, oddly aware of how he’s unable to say ‘I didn’t do anything wrong’ even though there’s no one to hear the lie except Matthew Brown. “I’m not the Chesapeake Ripper,” he adds instead.

“I liked how you made them think you were innocent,” replies Matthew, who seems determined to ignore everything Will’s actually saying in favour of what he prefers to hear. In the icy moonlight his thin face looks as pale and bleached as a bone and Will knows his own must look the same: two solitary wraiths confronting one another. Two lost souls. “I would’ve helped get you out myself of course,” adds Matthew fondly, “but you saved me the work. And now we’re both here and there’s nothing stopping us.”

Without missing a beat Will takes the gun and aims it straight at Matthew’s face, right between the eyes. Of course he knows that Jack’s 10-minute deadline is nearly up and he’ll be arriving any second now as back-up, just as he knows there’s no justification to shoot an unarmed suspect who’s not posing an immediate threat. But somehow none of that matters anymore, because the rage and revulsion are so strong the air is choked with them and Will feels they’re starting to colour his vision like a veil of scarlet gauze draped across his face. I want to kill you, he thinks. And it’s impossible not to exalt in the powerful truth of it, even though the statement is insufficient on its own because he knows that killing Matthew is no longer enough. He wants to destroy him. He wants to tear him into tatters and scatter the dripping remains to the wind: demolished so utterly there isn’t even anything left to put in a casket for his family to mourn over.

Matthew Brown takes a step forward. His long-fingered hands are grappling towards Will like pearly-skinned spiders and it’s this gesture more than anything else that’s enough to jolt something in Will and make him come rushing back to himself. He was only a few seconds, half a minute at most,
and yet it feels like a lifetime before something shifts and the world’s no longer monochrome and slow but fast-paced, pulsating and saturated in shades of crimson shot through with silver. Except the something that shifts isn’t just anything; and Will knows it was the awareness that right now there’s something in front of him that dared to try and force its way between Hannibal and himself the same way Andrew did. Then he steadies his hand and fires, just as Matthew takes a staggering swerve to the left and by some miracle of good fortune manages to miss the shot. Completely undeterred Will raises his arm again when there’s a clatter of footsteps from the far end of the parking lot and his face is suddenly lit up in a glare of flashlights.

“Will!” yells Jack. “For God’s sake what are you doing? Put the gun down!”

In the enveloping savage rage Will hardly hears him. Jack doesn’t seem to exist anymore, just as the FBI doesn’t exist, or rules, or laws or consequences, or anything at all except the scent of blood and a promise of righteous retribution. But what does make him hesitate is the expression on Matthew’s face. The change happens so quickly it’s impossible not to be struck by it, and as Will watches the mocking certainty drains away and is replaced instead by fear and disbelief as he stares wide-eyed and open-mouthed at something just behind Will’s shoulder. Then suddenly, shockingly – so suddenly Will can hardly believe it’s happening – there’s a long stretch of warmth pressing along his spine as from out of nowhere a hand covers his and entwines their fingers across the trigger.

“Yes Will,” murmurs Hannibal straight in his ear. “Put the gun down.” His voice is clear and strong without the faintest sign of being drugged, and as he lowers it again he brushes his lips against Will’s cheekbone. “You’ve done so well beloved. I’m proud of you.”

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The drive back to Hannibal’s house is done in a silence so complete and stifling it could practically be sliced with a knife. It also doesn’t occur until many hours after the scene in parking lot, although Will’s can’t say exactly how many because everything between now and then has merged into a kaleidoscope of interviews, statements and accusing looks that could have been 60 minutes or 600. Amid all the silence Hannibal finally pulls the car off the beltway then removes his hand from the wheel and rests it on Will’s leg; and Will roughly pushes it off, then turns away until his forehead is pressed against the window and he can watch the clouds scud past and buffet the moon like a ghostly galleon tossed in a wild and stormy sea. Then for what feels like the hundredth time he starts to replay the scene in Jack’s office, imagining it in his mind as if it’s a film and he and Jack were just actors playing copies of themselves. In fact the analogy feels like a good one, because the whole memory has a twinge of unreality about it that means he can barely recognise that version of himself who’d stood in Jack’s office on the verge of fucking up the life and career he’d worked so hard for. It’s like visiting a set for a movie you were once passionately absorbed by, only to have it exposed as nothing more than an inventive fiction the entire time. This is the actor playing Will Graham, the director would say; and it’d be someone that looked a bit like him, and had the same mannerisms, but close up you’d wonder how you could have ever confused the two.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” Jack had asked, and the sense of weariness and disappointment in his voice had stung Will far more deeply at the time than he was able to acknowledge. He’s still not able to acknowledge it. “You were going to shoot him weren’t you?” Jack had announced into the resulting silence. “Jesus Will. How do you think it’s going to look?”

Will had longed to snap that he didn’t care how it looked, only couldn’t quite bring himself to do it because of how rude and childish the words would sound. It wasn’t even true anyway, because he does care – even though he wishes he didn’t. “Yeah, I know how it looks,” he’d finally replied, and he’d sounded almost as weary as Jack. “It looks bad.” Then Jack had sighed again and Will had found it impossible not to add: “But only because I’m an omega. How is it that if I was an alpha no
Jack had sucked in his breath then: a quick, irritated whistle between the teeth. “What do you want from me Will? You want me to start arguing against the double standards? Fine: it’s unfair that you’re going to be judged more harshly because you’re an omega. It’s unfair that violence is acceptable in an alpha and in an omega is seen as disturbed and unnatural. There you go. You happy now?”

“Yeah,” Will had replied in a flat, toneless voice. “Ecstatic.”

“The point is you’re not an alpha. And I’m not even convinced an alpha would have got a pass for what you tried to do. Brown was stood several metres away at the time. He was unarmed. There was no immediate threat to life to either you or Hannibal and you still tried to take him out. You lost control of yourself Will, and that’s never acceptable for a law enforcement officer. That wasn’t justice. That would have been…”

Will had glanced up then, interested in how Jack was going to describe it. “It would have been murder,” Jack had said, and Will had felt a weird sense of finality that he really had gone there after all. Murder. The M-word. “I mean for God’s sake,” Jack had added, and this time his voice was soaked with a strain of self-righteousness that was even worse than the anger. “What if Brown turns out to be the Sculptor. Don’t you think the victim’s families deserve to have their day in court?”

“Are there any updates on that?” Will had replied; partly to shift the blistering focus of Jack’s anger and disappointment away from himself, but mostly because he’d genuinely wanted to know. “Has he mentioned the Sculptor case?”

“He insists he had nothing to do with the trainee’s death.”

Will had dismissed this with an impatient wave of the hand. “Obviously he’d say that. What about evidence?”

“Nothing we could find.”

“What, seriously? No blood on him; no defensive injuries? Nothing?”

“Nothing on first sight; it’s too early to say for forensic tests.”

Will gone quiet again at that, briefly turning over the night of his own mise en scène with Andrew in his head and the way he’d also managed to evade incriminating evidence. “That doesn’t mean he’s in the clear. If he cut her throat from behind he wouldn’t have got much blood on him. And he could have changed his clothes.”

“Yeah – he could have done that. But according to him it’s just a fluke that he was here the same night the Sculptor struck.”

“That’s one hell of a coincidence if it’s true,” Will had snapped. “Although I’ll tell you one thing that wasn’t a coincidence: he was here because he knew Hannibal and I would be. He saw his chance and he took it.”

“Well at least one thing’s indisputable,” Jack had replied. “Even if he isn’t lying about being the Sculptor – and I’m not convinced that’s the case – he’s still completely out of his mind. What a crazy risk to take. Who confronts someone like that in the middle of the FBI?”

“Isn’t that what alphas do though?” Will had replied in the same toneless voice. “Go to insane, obsessive lengths over omegas?”
“Yeah, you’re closer than you realise. He’s a cunning sonofabitch and he’s made it very clear he’s going to use that in his defence. His official line is that it was an alpha dominance fight over an omega that got out of hand.”

“For God’s sake!”

“I know,” Jack had replied. “I’m really sorry.” And he really sounded as if he was; as if he could really understand the horror and humiliation of it. “I’ll do my best to push for an assault charge, but I’m not confident it’ll stick. He didn’t actually injure Hannibal. Of course if he’d done it to one of our agents we could have got him on a felony charge but it’s most likely going to end up as a misdemeanour.”

At that point Will had picked up a pen from Jack’s desk and begun spiralling it between his fingers, twisting and gouging the edges of it while imagining it as Matthew’s neck. “Then we need to keep looking for evidence to link him to the Sculptor murders,” he’d said tersely. “No stone unturned.”

“Obviously we do. But the situation is exactly the same as the last time we checked him out – nothing remotely close enough to file charges.” Before he’d even finished speaking Jack had frowned and irritably slammed his hand on the desk. “For the record I feel the same way about him as you. But there’s no denying it: if he really is the Sculptor he’s done a perfect job of covering his tracks.”

“So if he gets a sympathetic judge for the attack on Hannibal he could be out on bail,” Will had snapped. “That bastard. I should have just shot him when I had the chance.”

Even as he’d said it he knew he’d gone too far, and Jack had let out another angry hiss before rounding on him with barely-concealed impatience. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. Look Will, I understand you’re frustrated but I don’t think you realise how difficult you’re going to make it for yourself. People are already looking at you strange after you got arrested and then you go and pull a stunt like this? And yes, you’re right about bias and prejudice towards omegas but you’ve just handed the likes of Skinner and Kade Purnell an enormous stick to beat you with. If you and Hannibal were bonded it might be different, but you’ve spent months insisting there’s nothing going on between you. What are people supposed to think?”

Will had finally glanced up again then: pale and impassive as he stared Jack straight in the eye. “They’ll think I’m unstable,” he’d said, and his voice in his own ears had sounded extremely far away. “They’ll think I’m a danger to other people and myself. Just like they always have done.”

Back in the car Will now screws his eyes even tighter closed. In fact he’d probably be happy to stay like that – floating, free-falling and oblivious – but the sensation of drawing to a halt suggests that they’ve arrived back home and it’s finally time to open them again and find a way to start a confrontation he doesn’t even know how to have. Still ignoring Hannibal he slams the car door behind him then stalks inside and into the living room where he dumps his coat on the chair and takes a few steadying breaths before finally swinging round. For a few seconds it seems like the room is empty and he’s just opening his mouth to call Hannibal in when he sees a movement in the corner and realises he’s been stood there the entire time: watching and waiting in the blackness with such eerily silent stealth that Will wasn’t even aware of his presence. The outline of his silhouette looks jagged amid the other shadows and it means his face is so obscured that all Will’s really aware of is his eyes and the way they’re gleaming in the darkness like two cold, flinty stars.

“I don’t even know what to say to you,” Will finally grates out. Even in the midst of the anger and hurt it strikes him a singularly useless opener seeing as he’s had the whole journey to think about it, but he supposes the conversation (fight? break-up?) has to start somewhere. “I mean for God’s sake. What the hell were you playing at?”
“Playing is hardly the right word,” replies Hannibal and Will can’t help stiffening slightly at how flat and menacing his voice sounds. “It implies enjoyment; recreation as opposed to practical purpose.”

For the first time it finally occurs to Will that what he’s seeing right now is Hannibal’s version of anger – and that the reason for it is the way he feels Will is rejecting him. In fact in reality the change only lasts a few seconds, just the length of several heartbeats, but it’s still enough to feel like something’s shifted and Will is now talking to a different person: someone with the topography of a lunar landscape who’s cold, curious, impersonal and lacking any normal human responses or restraint. Then the moment has passed and the impression is gone and it’s just Hannibal again, straight-backed and stony-faced and standing in the living room with his hands clasped behind his back like any normal evening. Despite it Will’s skin continues to tingle with an unspoken sense of threat, but with a huge force of effort he keeps his face steady and refuses to let it show.

“He didn’t drug you at all did he?” he adds now, snapping with resentment all over again at being lied to so spectacularly. “You were faking the whole time.”

Hannibal’s eyes are continuing to gleam, catching the light in steely pinpricks that by now look actively sinister. Still like stars, only not of the romantic cosmic kind but ones which are cold and dead. In fact it reminds Will of a documentary he once saw on the notorious White Dwarves: cannibal supernovas that linger in the bleakness of space then consume any stars around them that are unlucky enough to stray too close. Carnivorous stars. As he watches Hannibal now runs them over his face again, very slow and appraising, as once more they catch the moonlight and seem to flicker. “Partly,” he says, and this time the smouldering tone of his voice amid so much weighted silence is enough to make Will visibly flinch.

“Why? I don’t understand. Why would you do that?”

“Because a certain set of circumstances had already been set in motion. I didn’t arrange for Matthew Brown to appear, he did it anyway. Naturally I chose to take advantage of it.”

“You realise I’ll probably lose my job because of you?” replies Will in something like a snarl. “I nearly shot an unarmed suspect in front of half the FBI.” He can hear his voice starting to spiral, but while he hates how hysterical he sounds the sense of grievance and betrayal are too intense to bring himself to lower it. “Maybe I’d be better off losing it,” he adds with a laugh that’s both bitter and humourless. “Even if they don’t fire me my life’s going to be unbearable from now on. I’ll never shake off the reputation of violent, unhinged omega.”

Hannibal’s only response is to stare at him with those gleaming eyes and Will has a sudden, powerful sense that if he starts to smirk, or smile, or do anything to express derision or amusement then it’ll be almost impossible to stop from springing forward and smashing a fist into his face. Only Hannibal doesn’t do any of these things; just continues to watch Will in intensely unyielding and unwavering silence. “I didn’t force you to do anything,” he finally replies, and there’s a flicker of animation in his voice that Will can’t quite interpret. “No coercion – no compulsion of any kind. The choice to try and kill him was entirely yours.”

“No,” says Will rather wildly, who can’t bring himself to acknowledge this. “I would never have done it if I’d known you were safe.” He takes a shuddering breath, unable to stop a slight quiver that’s threatening to work its way into his voice. “I did it for you.” Hannibal raises a single eyebrow and Will takes a second, deeper breath as he fights to get himself back in control. “What if Jack hadn’t turned up? Would you still have stopped me?”

For the first time Hannibal doesn’t leave a loaded pause before answering and instead takes a step towards Will until they’re nearly close enough to touch. “Of course,” he says crisply. “All that pitch-black energy you have would have been wasted on the likes of Matthew Brown. I’d hardly allow
you to squander it on him when you would have been punished for doing so. No: I was merely interested in seeing how far you would go. And you did go, didn’t you Will? You went beautifully – and you would have gone all the way.”

“Wind me up and watch me go,” says Will in a flat, toneless voice. “I hope you’re happy now?”

“As it happens I am.” Hannibal’s mouth quirks into a faint smile and for a few seconds his eyes seem to gleam more intently than ever. “As regards that scene with Matthew Brown, I am extremely happy.”

“What does that even mean? Why the hell are you happy?”

“Because you were able to embrace yourself,” says Hannibal softly. “See how strong and determined you were? It’s just like I always told you; you had to stop thinking like a victim and begin to think like a predator instead. Because you are a predator Will, no matter how much you like to deny it.” Will flinches and Hannibal’s faint smile grows slightly broader as he takes another step forward: predacious and prowling, and inching closer all the time. “Yes, I know it’s hard for you to acknowledge. But what is a predator after all? It’s merely something whose instinct is to prey upon another. Predation might be in your nature and character, but only you can make the choice whether or not to indulge it.”

“Bullshit,” snaps Will. “That choice was totally artificial. I thought your life was in danger.”

“No, not just my life,” replies Hannibal with the same eerie calmness. “Your concern is also with your own. That murderous energy towards Matthew Brown isn’t simply for what he does but because of what he is. It’s why you recoiled from him so strongly in the hospital: you resent the way he recognised the darkness in you. You fear it, don’t you Will? You want to destroy the contamination in him which strikes an answering echo in you.”

The undeniable truth of this – and the fact that Hannibal has both seen it and named it – is so shockingly raw that for a few seconds Will feels like he’s been slapped in the face. In fact it makes it nearly impossible to either move or speak, and Hannibal takes advantage of the resulting strained silence to prowl even closer forward and take hold of Will’s head; cradling it in both palms before levering it round until they’re facing the mirror on the opposite wall. Will’s breath hitches into a gasp that’s half-anger and half-fear, but while he pulls free almost immediately he doesn’t actually avert his eyes.

“Your Dark Reflection,” says Hannibal caressingly. “Why do you renounce him Will? You need him. He takes what’s soulless and depraved and transforms it into visions of fatal beauty.” As he’s speaking he slowly starts to reposition himself until he’s pressed up against Will’s back and his reflection is staring straight at Will’s into the mirror. “You know you can’t continue to deny your true nature. Bury it all you like, but all you’ll ever manage to do is bury it alive: buried in a shallow grave and screaming. And you know what will happen then don’t you? What will happen if you continue to reject it?”

“What?” asks Will stiffly, despite already knowing the answer.

Across the wall in the mirror Hannibal’s eyes meet his. “You’ll remain exactly as you were when I first met you,” he says, so calmly precise that the simple statement somehow manages to shock Will into silence far more effectively than an elaborate metaphor would have done. “Hovering on the brink of complete and utter despair. And then, after that…you’ll break.”

Throughout this speech Will has gone extremely pale and it’s now impossible not to flinch again as Hannibal’s words from the hospital begin to replay themselves in his head: “Do you know what
makes me such a good therapist? It’s because I know how to recognise a person’s desire. And then, after that, how to help them act upon it.” That long lecture through the bars on how a person can only be fulfilled when they obey their instincts and how repressing them is the greatest act of self-violence that it’s possible to commit. How embracing one’s purest nature is therapeutic, even if the process is painful and frightening at first. Even if it torments you…even if it feels like it’s going to push you past your breaking point.

“Enough,” says Will abruptly. “I can’t do this. Not right now.”

“No?”

“No.” This time his voice has a much steelier tone, and to prove it he takes hold of Hannibal’s wrist and gives it a warning tug. “I want you to stop.”

“Then I’ll stop,” replies Hannibal, who’s still staring at Will’s reflection in the mirror. “We have time in the future, after all – all the time we need.”

Will nods wordlessly then draws in a breath that’s rather shaky on the exhale as he searches for a subject that’s less hazardous than this one. “I’m still glad you’re safe,” he finally manages to say, and once again it’s a struggle to keep the tremor out of his voice. “When I thought something had happened to you, I…yeah.”

“I wouldn’t have allowed anything to happen,” murmurs Hannibal, brushing his lips against Will’s temple. “I’d never go anywhere that I couldn’t take you with me.”

At the sound of this Will catches Hannibal’s eye in the mirror and gives a small smile before clearing his throat. “So how did you even know it was him?” he adds in a much calmer tone. “I merely talked to him,” says Hannibal with a grim little smile. “It was very obvious what his motives were; all I needed to do was find a way to make them complement my own. Fortunately I had no concerns about making myself look vulnerable in order to do it.”

“Disadvantaged then. Remember our discussion earlier in the evening? I told you that I see you as an equal. I don’t consider you to be weaker or less capable than myself, and Matthew Brown provided a convenient opportunity to demonstrate it.”

“Although I saw his face when you stood up,” adds Will, unable to suppress the twinge of satisfaction at the memory of it. “He was genuinely shocked. He really thought he’d managed to drug you.”

“He did,” agrees Hannibal calmly, “because that was exactly what I wanted him to think. It was extremely simple to achieve: merely a matter of twisting my arm to ensure he missed the vein. Given his employment it was safe to assume he’d be using a psychiatric sedative, and Cinidryl is largely ineffective when the injection is a subcutaneous.”
“That was one hell of a risk.”

“That was one hell of a risk.”

“Not at all,” replies Hannibal. “It was a calculated manoeuvre in which all the variables were accounted for. And it worked perfectly.”

Will rolls his eyes then reaches out to pull back Hannibal’s shirtsleeve so he can inspect his forearm. “It’s fine,” says Hannibal as Will makes a regretful noise over the lividly swollen bruise. “Rest assured I’ve had far worse.”

“You’ll keep an eye on it won’t you? It could get infected.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it. Both eyes, in fact.”

Will nods then sighs as he struggles with a sudden temptation to let his head sink back against Hannibal’s shoulder. “I spoke to Jack,” he adds bitterly. “If Matthew Brown is the Sculptor then no one can prove it. Plus he’s almost certainly going to get away with what he did tonight. He could be out on bail soon.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal without missing a beat. “And you’ll be waiting for him, won’t you?”

Will stubbornly refuses to answer so Hannibal merely smiles to himself then reaches up to begin massaging his shoulders, kneading his thumbs into the tight muscle and pausing every so often to skim his lips against the side of Will’s throat. The sensation is immediately addictive and Will finds himself grinding backwards against Hannibal without even fully intending to. Then he sighs again as he registers the familiar conflict of resenting how Hannibal can slip so effortlessly inside his mind while also cherishing the novel sensation of someone being able to understand him. It’s rather like being split in two – neatly dissected into right and wrong – and images of scalpels come to mind in which Will’s innermost thoughts glisten on the blades like blood. His head is beginning to throb in sympathy now and he’s aware all over again of how the sweat is starting to gather at his neck and hairline and the way his heart is thrashing helplessly inside his chest.

“It’s the problem of free choice my love,” adds Hannibal softly. “You can’t deny your predatory instinct; it’s a gift of nature and temperament. All you can do is choose whether or not to embrace it. To take a life or save one, Will: that’s the choice you make. You know that every time you go to work on one of your crime scenes.”

“They’re not my crime scenes,” says Will sharply.

“I know,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to slide his hand down the front of Will’s shirt. “They merely feel as if they are – and it destroys you a little further every single time. You sacrifice your sensitive young self in the service of righteousness, yet all the time you fight the good fight with such very bad instruments. You see your mindset as distorted don’t you? Dysfunctional – monstrous even – and defensible only in terms of its effectiveness.”

“I know,” says Will numbly. “I know, I know.”

“Yet you freely martyr it to Jack Crawford every time he asks. It’s your passion, isn’t it Will. But did you know what the term ‘passion’ meant originally? It meant suffering. It’s why scholars referred to the Passion of Christ and of the saints: transcendence and revelation through the power of one’s own suffering.” Hannibal pauses for a few seconds then buries his face against Will’s neck and inhales deeply as if he’s breathing him in. “Would you like to hear what my passion is? Shall I tell you?”

As he’s speaking he slides his hand a little further down and Will gives a small moan then lets his eyes fall closed. “Yes,” he says rather breathlessly.
“You,” murmurs Hannibal in a tone that’s vaguely frightening in its level of forcefulness. But it’s still a strangely beautiful voice, reflects Will hazily. Husky, slow and caressing…even now. Even when imbued with menace. Even when it’s about to tell him things that he’s not certain he’s ready to hear. “My passion is to see you take your rightful place above all these claimants, all these Sculptors and Matthew Browns, and emerge as a true predator.”

For a few seconds he falls quiet again: serenely staring and wordless as his eyes in the mirror catch the moonlight in an undeniably eerie way. It’s as if he’s lit up from within – a candle set in his skull like the medieval relics – and Will gazes into the darkness of the light with his own eyes wide and lips slightly parted. One breath in and one breath out, thinks Will rather wildly. The trick is to keep breathing. “Of course it’s alphas who are supposed to be the apex predators,” adds Hannibal in the same low voice. “I’m sure you knew that didn’t you? It means we are at the top of the so-called food chain.” Smiling slightly he begins to ghost his lips along the edge of Will’s ear. “So at the top of the food chain are alphas; but on top of the alphas is me. Me, beloved…and now you.”

At the sound of the words Will goes completely rigid in Hannibal’s arms before abruptly coming back to life again and spinning round. He looks flushed and wild with eyes that glitter in the darkness just as fiercely as Hannibal’s do: and for a few seconds they simply stare at one another before Will pounces forward and their faces crash together in a hungry, passionate slide of lips, tongues, and warm breath. Will’s acutely aware of the noises he’s making – fragmented low gasps and high breathy moans – but it’s impossible to be quiet because his entire body feels shot through with sensation. It’s as if his skin is snapping with electricity in the midst of so much desire, and it reminds him of why Hannibal derives such sensuous ardour from food because the language certainly corresponds: hunger, crave, consume, thirst, appetite. In fact the surge of chemistry is breathtaking and utterly overwhelming because of it. It’s like voltage. Like something fierce and living – like a third person in the room.

As Will moans into Hannibal’s mouth Hannibal folds his arms across Will’s back and tugs his head down by the hair, both of them utterly synchronised in the same mutual craving, urgency. It’s like being ravaged and Will can’t help whining slightly at the barely controlled ferociousness that underlies the way Hannibal is touching him: desire and yearning, with the promise of savagery only just concealed below the surface. There’s a frantic white-hot ruthlessness to the whole thing that’s malicious yet delicious, and both thrilling and terrifying; and it’s enough to make Will briefly pull away so he can scrape his teeth against Hannibal’s skin and snarl out: “If you ever pull another stunt like tonight I’ll give you so much hell. Do you understand? If you dare do that to me again…”

Hannibal makes a low growling noise in response then scoops Will up in both arms so he can wrap his legs round Hannibal’s waist and grind his hips against him. As they spin round Will’s back smashes against the wall – head cradled by Hannibal’s hand to protect it from the impact – and there’s the unmistakable sound of something falling and glass breaking, just as Will himself feels he might be about to shatter and each fragment would catch the light on the way down. He’s helplessly arching his body against Hannibal’s now, feverishly clinging onto his shoulders and writhing in his arms; and when they pull apart for a few seconds to draw breath, Will hears himself gasping “Oh yes…yes,” in a frantic, urgent voice that he doesn’t fully recognise. As their mouths crash together again Will tastes a sharp coppery tang from where his lip has caught Hannibal’s teeth, and he wants to care about that but can’t because, oh God, he’s dying for it – desperate and derailed by desire – even though it’s unnerving because it’s too intense. It’s too primal. Too primitive: the kind of mindless longing that propels omegas into heat in which sense and reason are disregarded in favour of an insatiable need to be claimed, consumed and owned. And the realisation is an unnerving one…yet it’s still nowhere near enough to make him want to stop.

By now it’s extremely obvious they’ll never make it to the bedroom on time and Hannibal only takes a few steps towards the door before changing his mind and flinging Will down on the hearthrug
instead. Will gasps loudly as he lands then stares up at Hannibal’s face, trying and failing to catch his 
breath as he braces himself for what’s certainly going to be rough and aggressive with them actively 
attacking each other. But in the end Hannibal just kisses him very slowly and tenderly then spends so 
much time stroking his face and body and murmuring his name that Will finds himself growing soft 
andpliant without any attempt to struggle. In fact he knows he should find his sudden submission 
unsettling; he knows he should contradict it. After what Hannibal’s done, Will should be pulling on 
his clothes then striding out the house and slamming the door behind him without looking back. 
These would be the rational, reasonable courses of action, yet somehow it never seriously occurs to 
him to do any of them – none of these reasonable, rational things. It’s an utter inability to replace 
emotion with judgement, and it reminds him of their conversation from several weeks ago about how 
logic almost always loses against the ardour of instinct and sensation…just another casualty in the 
battle of mind vs. heart.

So instead Will stares up at Hannibal’s face over his, exchanging acknowledgement and quiet 
recognition as Hannibal cradles his cheek with one hand and rubs his thumb against Will’s lower lip 
with the other: gently pulling him forwards so Will can sigh into Hannibal’s mouth as their tongues 
slide together and Hannibal pushes his legs apart. This time when they make love it’s far slower than 
it’s been in the past – yearning and tender, just softly rocking against one another and gazing into 
each other’s eyes – but Will still finds himself growing overwhelmed from the intensity of it, as if 
he’s too brimful of sensation and there’s nowhere to lay it down. The word ‘magnetism’ seems to 
apply: an irresistible force that attracts or repels as a gift of nature, and which has no choice and no 
control, because it just is.

“Hannibal?” he says very quietly.

“Yes my love.”

“It feels so good.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal equally quietly. Leaning down he brushes his lips against Will’s 
forehead. “For me also.”

“Please don’t stop. Please…I need you.”

“I’m not going to stop,” murmurs Hannibal. “You’re so beautiful like this.” He gently nuzzles Will’s 
jaw then pulls away a few inches so he can stroke a palm along his abdomen. “I think it could feel 
even better for you. Can you move upwards a little? I want you at a different angle – you’ll like it, I 
promise. There that’s it. Good boy.”

“Oh,” says Will softly as Hannibal pushes back inside him. “Oh yes…yes.” Then he wraps his legs 
round Hannibal’s back and clings on as Hannibal leans over him again to take hold of his hand. 
Their chests are pressed together in a way that’s aligned in a humming pulse of heartbeats; and the 
timacy is reassuring to Will, but somehow still not enough to stop the broken-off gasps he can’t 
help making or the way his eyes are widening with shock at the surge of helpless, hopeless devotion. 
Because he knows he’s a willing martyr to it – a sacrifice to the pyre of love – and burning with such 
powerful feelings yet fortified with nothing better than a frail human body in which to house and 
sustain them. It’s like free-floating, like flailing and falling…because this forbidden love could be his 
downfall and it terrifies him that he can’t bring himself to care.

“Will,” murmurs Hannibal. “Beloved.” His fingers, skimming over Will’s face, are gossamer-light; 
light as feathers. “It’s all right. Don't be afraid. I don't want to hurt you – I only want to know you.” 
Will whimpers slightly and Hannibal makes a soothing noise, the words oddly cadenced and 
hypnotic, as he rocks his hips until Will is gasping helplessly and clinging onto his hand. “I only 
want you to understand how beautiful you are. How unique. Beautiful, unique and unassailable –
that's all I've ever wanted for you. You, Will. It's always been you. I won't let you go.” For a few seconds it sounds more ominous than reassuring, only Will doesn’t care about that either…doesn't care about anything. “I would kill to keep you,” adds Hannibal, trailing his fingers along Will’s cheekbone; and Will gives a low moan as he tenses, quivers then starts to come, digging his teeth so hard against Hannibal’s shoulder he can taste blood. “Mylimasis,” murmurs Hannibal, soft and intense. “There is nothing I would not do.”

Will makes a small mewling noise in response then buries his face in Hannibal’s neck. “Oh God. Me too. You know I would…you know…”

“I know,” says Hannibal. He gives another hard thrust and then gasps against Will’s skin, twisting their fingers tighter together as Will arches his back and pushes up his hips, desperate to take it as deep as possible. “You’re mine Will – you belong to me. You belong to me and you’re everything.”

“Everything,” repeats Will wildly. “You too…always.” To his horror he can feel tears starting to slide down his face; so many of them, skimming his cheekbones and soaking his hair, yet while his face is motionless and he’s not actually crying it still feels impossible to stop them. Hannibal makes another soothing noise then delicately runs his tongue along the trail of tears and Will just lies completely still without making any attempt to question it or wonder why. In fact all he’s really aware of anymore is a breathless happiness shot through with a powerful strain of grief, all mingled together with a sense that the person he thought he was – and perhaps even wanted to be – is slipping further away as the Dark Reflection takes over. “I’ve lost myself, thinks Will helplessly. I don’t even know how it happened…where did I go? Then Hannibal is kissing him again and Will is kissing him back with a kind of frantic desperation as the implications of their earlier conversation run wildly through his mind: of self-discovery, self-acceptance and of how passion means pain…attaining your own ecstasy and revelation through your own suffering.

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Afterwards Hannibal sits upright against the sofa then pulls Will close to his chest so he can wrap both arms around him. “Too tight,” grumbles Will. “You're crushing me.” But he still rests his head on Hannibal’s shoulder without pulling away as Hannibal kisses his temple then twines his fingers into his hair. In fact Will’s well aware that he’s being gentled, but while it’s a classic alpha gesture that would normally irritate him he finds that he no longer really cares. “You’re touching my head again,” he says instead, rather sleepily. “Why are you always touching my head?”

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do; you do it all the time.”

“Interesting,” replies Hannibal. “I wasn’t fully aware. It’s because it houses your mind, I suppose. Such a beautifully intricate mind Will – how fiercely and brightly it burns. Your empathy’s based in here; your imagination too. And they’re both so artistic in their own way.”

“Oh shut up,” says Will, giving Hannibal’s arm a playful nip with his teeth. “They’re not.”

“But they are.” Hannibal smiles slightly then begins to trace his finger across Will’s forehead. “And why shouldn’t they be? There are so many different modes and methods for art after all: painting, poetry, sculpture, food…so many ways to assume the perspective of an artist. Or even, one might say, to consume it.” As Hannibal pauses the faint smile grows fractionally broader. “Consume. Yes, I suppose one might say that. But as it is I suspect that you, Will Graham, are destined to be my greatest masterpiece. Your empathy for example: I like it very much. Of course I generally lack empathy myself, yet I find myself wanting to remedy that in order to understand you better.”
“Do you really?” asks Will sceptically. Briefly he closed his eyes as he tries to imagine it: his own maladjusted excess of humanity – empathetic and imaginative to a disturbingly dysfunctional degree – and how it often seems submerged by Hannibal’s inscrutable capacity to both conceal and showcase his own moral vacuum.

“I do,” replies Hannibal. “My inability to empathise obstructs my relationship with you; therefore I attempt to improve my capacity.”

“Yeah…about that,” mutters Will, suddenly awkward as he remembers his previous tears. “I’m sorry for how I was before. It was stupid. I just got overwhelmed in the moment.”

Hannibal promptly removes his hand from Will’s hair and gently presses it against his mouth instead. “Don’t berate yourself,” he says. “I hate to see you do it. Your emotions are completely acceptable as they are, you don’t have to apologise for them.” Will nods and sighs and Hannibal moves his hand back up again and smooths Will’s hair away from where it’s tangling into his eyes. “You’re not convinced are you?” he adds in a gentler voice.

“No.”

“Would you like to tell me about it?”

“I guess,” says Will, so quietly that Hannibal has to lean in to him hear. “It’s about what happened tonight.”

“Yes, I assumed it was. I suppose you’re troubled by what it made you realise?”

Will nods again then takes a rather shaky breath. “You’re right,” he says at last. “I would have killed him. I would have killed him in a heartbeat; and not because I needed to, but because I wanted to.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal simply. “I know you would have done.”

“These urges I have,” adds Will with a sudden rush of unhappiness. “I feel… I feel like they’re going to destroy my life. As if it’s going to be dismantled slowly and systematically, and all I can do is stand by and watch it happen. You see Hannibal, the thing is…” He pauses then takes another deep breath. “The thing is, I went to a very dark place when I killed Andrew – and then I brought something back.”

“The awareness frightens you?”

“Yes. Very much.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer immediately, instead continuing to run his hand up and down Will’s back. “Your fear will make you stronger,” he finally replies. “Remember what I told you before about vulnerability? Fearlessness might be a gift of nature, but true courage isn’t the absence of fear – it’s feeling afraid and persevering regardless. And you’ll persevere Will, of that I’ve no doubt at all. Perhaps you do feel as if your life is being dismantled, but it won’t stop you rebuilding something mighty from the fragments.”

“I used to think I was a good person,” adds Will, more to himself than to Hannibal.

“You still are. It’s just you’re not only that – and nor should you be. The Hero and the Shadow are always part of the same individual after all, and one literally cannot exist without the other. You need merely strive for balance. Remember that good and evil are not independent forces Will. Rather they complement each other, like the dark and light sides of the moon.”
“Yes, but… I just feel so alone with it. Like I’m stranded alone in my skull.”

“You’re not alone,” says Hannibal firmly. “As long as I’m here you’ll never be alone.” He falls quiet for a few seconds and then gathers Will closer before moving his head down until his cheek is resting against Will’s hair. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever told you this but you remind me of a poem. A very old one from the 1600s: The Relic. It’s deeply cynical and ironic in many ways, yet the conclusion itself is loving.”

“A poem?” says Will with a half-laugh. “Seriously? There’s nothing remotely poetic about me.”

“On the contrary,” says Hannibal softly. “Now this particular poem opens by a graveside and a chaos of bones, although not in a sense that’s melancholy or macabre. Bones entwined and mingled in the ground are resonant of bodies making love, and the lovers remain united even in death. *When my grave is broke up again/Some second guest to entertain...And he that digs it, spies/A bracelet of bright hair about the bone.* In his low voice the eerie words sound dangerous and sensuous and hopelessly magnetic and as he pauses again he brushes his lips against Will’s forehead. “That scrap of hair is the relic of the title: both mortal existence and immortal connection. The poet believes that he and his lover could accomplish miracles together through the strength of their alliance – he imagines them as a symbol that other people might worship and grow inspired by.”

In the resulting silence Will clears his throat then shifts uncomfortably in Hannibal’s arms. “That’s… Jesus. It’s too much Hannibal. I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“Then don’t say anything,” replies Hannibal calmly. “Merely feel instead; let your emotions guide you. My point is that you see yourself as fundamentally flawed and broken, yet you’ve still created a connection with me that’s transcended both of us. The slender skeletal limb which seems so innocuous at first glance yet retains a token that inspires marvels…the bright hair about the bone. That in turn makes me the poet who rhapsodises about his source of inspiration while wishing the world could share in it. Do you understand Will? We’re so much stronger together than apart. Remember, after all, how Achilles wished all Greeks would die so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone; it took divine intervention to bring them down. There’s such a fine line between beauty and horror – between the bright hair and the bone – yet see how we’ve demolished this line. Because we have, haven’t we Will? You. And. I.”

For a few seconds Will goes completely motionless, staring blankly up at the ceiling as he lets his head tip further against Hannibal’s shoulder. Oh God, such a question… of course he should say no. And yet how can he when he knows that it’s true? Because it is, isn’t it – it’s always been true. That experience of perfect connection, so peerless and flawless, which has flourished between them from the very beginning. Then he casts his mind back to their first ever night together as he laid by the fireplace in Hannibal’s arms with Hannibal’s teeth grazing against his skin: ‘You conceal it so well don’t you, Will Graham...but you know that I can still see you.” Because ultimately it was always about that: that idea of being really seen. That Will’s chaos, confusion and darkly distorted despair was perceived and acknowledged and that Hannibal understood all of it and still wanted him anyway. Being seen by someone else – really seen – meant recognition and resonance; it meant witness bearing and testimony… it was something solemn and sincere and real, and it meant he wasn’t alone. It was as if there could be no greater way to demonstrate regard than those three small words, surpassing even love itself. *I see you.* As if love was just a pale and unconvincing counterfeit of perception: of the acceptance and awareness that comes from being seen.

Hannibal finally turns round, the dark eyes skimming over Will’s face like flares. He seems to be waiting for an answer and Will promptly forgets about everything else in favour of gazing yearningly back – grounded and steadied in a way he doesn’t always know how to be as he slowly drowns in that relentless, soulless stare. Fleetingly he now imagines he can see the Dark Reflection prowling
around nearby: wild-eyed, blood-stained and fully aware of the correct response to Hannibal’s question. But he knows he doesn’t want to answer on its behalf as opposed to his own, so ultimately ignores it and focuses instead on his own sense and feeling. His own truth. Then he dips his head to the side so he can press his lips against Hannibal’s; gently inhaling one another’s breath as he runs a finger along a single sharp cheekbone and murmurs: “Me and you. Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

“Why are you always touching my head?”

He does though doesn’t he? He often touches his head in the show! #LiteralHeadCanon
The next morning Will wakes up early. The house is eerily motionless around him, almost like it’s holding its breath, and Will draws in his own lungful of air then watches the dust motes dancing in front of his eyes as he revels in the solitude of complete and utter stillness. It’s beautifully peaceful. No shouting or sirens, no calls to judgement he’s unprepared for or questions he can’t ever hope to answer: just Will with his own thoughts in the empty air and the sound of silence.

Neither he or Hannibal bothered to draw the curtains the night before so the beginnings of dawn are clearly visible as they steal across the sky: creeping from the east with long fingers which stain the wispy grey clouds with splashes of pomegranate-pink, dusky burnt yellow and deep streaks of crimson the same colour as blood. Morning has broken, thinks Will hazily, because it really does look like someone’s tried to break it– as if it’s bruised and bleeding, yet still stunningly defiant in spite of it. In this respect the sunlight seems to be chasing away the shadows of last night’s events, and the incredible intensity now feels foggy and almost dreamlike to Will. Possibly he’s in shock? He’s not really sure…it seems like the type of thing someone else would be aware of before you are yourself. That’s the main purpose of shock, after all – a little mental insulation to protect you from a world that’s both capricious and casual in its cruelty. But he still spends a few moments trying to recapture what happened and deciding how he feels about it (and failing at both) before finally rolling onto his side to see if Hannibal is awake too. It turns out he isn’t, so Will tilts his head until it’s resting on his arm and spends a few moments enjoying the novelty of simply being able to watch him. The dramatic tints of the sunrise spill across Hannibal’s face like his own personal spotlight, and Will is suddenly aware of an odd feeling of resentment: the sense that he’s currently in a place where Will can’t follow.

Hannibal now frowns very faintly as if his dreams are troubling him, and Will gently breaths across his face while privately deciding that he doesn’t look vulnerable in the way most people would. Even his stillness telegraphs something imposing; as if waking him would bring severe consequences, like a slumbering giant in a folktale. If he actually is asleep…it’s entirely possible that he’s just lying there plotting with his eyes closed (in which case he almost certainly knows that Will’s gazing at him and is internally smirking about it). Will shifts a little so he can see Hannibal more clearly, unobscured by the corner of the pillow, and moving as quietly as possible the whole time so as not to rouse him – either from sleep, or into suspicion of what Will’s up to. He can feel Hannibal’s breath on his face now; how warm it is in the frigid morning air. The rise and fall of his chest is so shallow (is he really asleep?).

I never realised how sad and pale my life was until I saw yours, thinks Will, although he doesn’t say it aloud. I didn’t realise I was barely breathing. He rather wants to kiss Hannibal awake – just the briefest press of lips against the forehead – but ultimately feels too self-conscious about it so just silently stares instead until Hannibal, right on cue, snaps open his eyes in a vaguely unnerving way and murmurs “Labas rytas mylimasis.”

This makes Will smile, because he’s noticed that Hannibal sometimes lapses into what’s presumably his native language whenever he’s tired or inattentive. No matter how often it happens it never fails to be endearing; as does the faint look of irritation which inevitably follows it, as if Hannibal is offended with his mouth for having the impertinence to not catch up with his brain. Hannibal now lets out a small sigh at having been caught out again and Will’s smile broadens in response. Leaning over he presses the tip of his forefinger against Hannibal’s top lip. “I assume that was good
morning?”

Hannibal stretches luxuriously like a large jungle cat then gives Will a side-eye. “You assume correctly.”

Will smiles again, and then just for the hell of it waits until Hannibal is lying still before pouncing on him and climbing onto his chest. Hannibal makes an amused noise and Will nuzzles his jaw then wraps both arms round him and clings on. “Like a monkey,” says Hannibal fondly, kissing the top of Will’s head.

Will decides to ignore this comparison then wriggles a few times in an unsuccessful attempt to get comfortable amid the many angular bones of Hannibal’s shoulder. “How are you feeling today?” he asks, his voice slightly muffled from where his face is pressed against Hannibal’s skin. “Any effects from the Cinidryl?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Let me see your arm.”

Hannibal obediently holds it out so Will can inspect the puncture mark from several angles. “See?” he says. “It’s fine – although I appreciate the concern.”

Will ignores him again and peers a little longer until he’s satisfied the injury isn’t showing signs of inflammation or infection, then resettles himself across Hannibal’s chest and buries his face in his neck. “Look at you,” adds Hannibal in the same fond voice. “How charming you’re being today. Very omegan, in fact.”

Will, who loathes being called charming (charming, after all, being the only slightly more macho cousin of ‘sweet’ or ‘cute’) makes a noise of dissent and nudges Hannibal’s chin with his forehead. “I’m not,” he says firmly. “And it’s definitely not omegan.”

“I’m afraid I must contradict you,” replies Hannibal, beginning to idly twine a strand of Will’s hair round his finger. “Did you know, for example, that this posture is considered a classic sign of submission to the alpha?”

“Ugh shut up, it’s not,” says Will in horror. “You made that up.”

“I did,” replies Hannibal rather smugly. “I knew it. You’re so not funny – I know you think you are but you’re not. It’s like you’ve got some sort of delusion.” Hannibal merely smirks instead of replying then begins to stoke Will’s back with his free hand. “Physician heal thyself,” adds Will.

“Indeed. You make a very good point.”

Will shifts round slightly until he’s leaning on his elbows and can look at Hannibal directly; Hannibal promptly rolls his eyes at him in a long-suffering way so Will rolls his right back. “I suppose you did spend most of last night in a heap in a carpark,” says Will. “You deserve a bit of leeway; you probably hit your head when you went down.”

Hannibal rolls his eyes again even more extravagantly and Will stifles a laugh then leans forward to trace his finger along the bridge of Hannibal’s nose. “What you said before,” he adds. “Do you ever forget words in English? I don’t mean when you’re tired – just generally.”

“Sometimes,” admits Hannibal, with what Will suspects is extreme reluctance. “It seems more likely
to occur round you, although I suppose that’s not surprising. I find your presence very consuming and it leads me to bypass English on occasion and revert to something more instinctive.”

“How many languages do you actually speak?”

“I’m fluent in four: Lithuanian, French, Italian and English. In fact English is the one I learnt last. I would have been around 18, before I came to America.”

“I can’t imagine you as 18.”

“Considering the strength of your imagination,” replies Hannibal with a smile, “I suppose that doesn’t say much for my current state. I also know some Japanese and Russian, and could manage some fairly execrable German if the situation pressed for it.”

“Seven different languages,” says Will, privately deciding it’s a sure certainty that Hannibal can speak fluent bullshit in all of them. “That’s very impressive.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way, I didn’t mean that I couldn’t imagine you at 18 because you seem old. It wasn’t supposed to be an insult.”

“It all right, I understand what you meant. The same isn’t true on my behalf though, because I find it very easy to imagine you as a teenager.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. I think it’s because you’ve retained a youthful quality of innocence and trustfulness which transposes your chronological age. Qualities, I should add, which are not on display in me to anywhere near the same extent – so I can see why you’d struggle to imagine me as younger.”

Will falls silent for a few seconds, rather intrigued by the idea of this. “What do you think I’d have been like?”

“Fierce,” replies Hannibal without any hesitation. “But also sad: the forlorn foal that grazes wistfully away from the rest of the herd and yearns for connection while still eluding it. I suspect that if I’d met you back then I wouldn’t have found you especially interesting – because teenagers, on the whole, are not sufficiently well-formed to be interesting – but that I would have thought you had definite promise.”

“Fair enough,” says Will amicably. “I actually wasn’t very interesting.”

“In contrast with your peers you would have been immensely interesting,” replies Hannibal. “But I’m afraid I’m biased against your younger self, because I have the benefit of hindsight and know what he was destined to turn into by comparison.”

“Thanks,” says Will. “I guess.” Then he yawns and stretches before disentangling himself from Hannibal’s arms so he can get out of bed, hopping slightly at the coldness of the floorboards on his bare feet. In fact the air in general is stingingly chilly, but discomfort aside what’s even more striking is how completely unconcerned he’s become at being naked in front of another person. Such casualness is actually completely out of character for him, and he could never imagine being even half so relaxed with Andrew – not in a million years – yet somehow because it’s Hannibal it doesn’t seem to matter.

As if to prove the point to himself Will wanders off towards the doorway without bothering with a
robe, and there’s immediately a faint rustling sound behind him as Hannibal sits upright in the bed. “Will,” he says softly. “Come here.”

He’s using what Will privately thinks of as his alpha voice: fractionally lower than the normal one, with a certain rich vibration on the vowels that always seems to smoulder on the exhale. If he’s honest with himself Will actually finds it pretty impossible to resist, and the fact he’s normally allergic to being told what to do still isn’t enough to stop him returning to the bed at the sound of it: even going so far as allowing himself to be pulled into Hannibal’s lap then struggling not to laugh when Hannibal buries his face in the back of his neck and inhales very deeply. “Stop it you idiot,” he says, giving Hannibal a playful swat on the arm. “You’re being weird.”

“How you were walking just then,” says Hannibal, beginning to rub his forehead against Will’s skin. “Your back was slightly arched.”

“So? Oh God stop it, that really tickles.”

“You were also moving your hips in a particular way.”

“No I wasn’t,” says Will, trying and failing to grab Hannibal’s arm. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not surprised you’re unaware of it,” replies Hannibal whose voice, if possible, seems to have dropped even lower. “It was barely perceptible. I doubt it would be apparent to anyone else – no one except me.” He pauses then draws another long, languorous breath as his lips ghost along the sensitive skin just beneath Will’s hair. “Your scent’s changed too.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s quite simple beloved,” murmurs Hannibal as he tightens his grip round Will’s waist. “You’re approaching a second heat.”

“No, seriously?” gasps Will in barely-disguised horror. “I can’t be. How’s that even possible? It’s hardly any time since the last one.”

“Your system hasn’t recovered from the suppressants. It’ll take a while to establish a regular cycle.”

“Oh God,” says Will dolefully.

Hannibal makes a soothing noise then tenderly nudges Will’s neck with his forehead again. “You’re trembling. Why so anxious?”

“Why do you think? I’m not used to yet. The whole idea freaks me out.”

“It’ll be easier for you than the last time.” As he’s speaking Hannibal removes his hands from Will’s waist, skimming them up and down his chest instead in a way that’s clearly intended to be reassuring. “You’ll also be more aware of what’s happening – and better able to remember it afterwards. And at least your dogs are still safe on that farm so you’re no longer forced to stay here. Let me take you away to a hotel when it happens: somewhere beautiful and peaceful where I can lavish all my attention on you.”

“I should call my doctor,” replies Will, who’s barely listening anymore and is already consumed with anxiety at the idea of accessing the right kind of contraception. “If I do it now I might be able to get an appointment this afternoon.” Then he begins the familiar, fretful gnawing at his thumbnail because the idea of this is fairly stressful in its own right given that the contraceptives, like most drugs concerned with omega’s reproductive health, come with a list of side-effects that’s enough to make you feel half-dead before you’ve even taken them. Gloomily he spends a few seconds re-envisioning
it: the warning of nausea, headaches, weight gain, and mood swings, on and on *ad infinitum*. The brand he’d got last time was particularly bad. In fact he’d half expected there to be some small print at the bottom informing patients that the tablets would steal your wallet, break your TV, hotwire your car, rain down Biblical plagues on your future descendants and then murder your current ones, just out of spite. Oh God it’s so *unfair*. And alphas, of course, don’t have to bother about any of it.

“There’s no rush,” Hannibal is now saying in a soothing voice. “It won’t happen for at least a month – probably longer.”

“I don’t care,” snaps Will. “I want to get myself sorted as soon as possible.”

“Would you like me to come with you?”

“Ugh, no. That would be beyond embarrassing.”

“Whatever you prefer,” says Hannibal, beginning to kiss the back of Will’s neck.

“You don’t need to sound so happy about it,” adds Will, whose fear and frustration are starting to make him lash out. “It’s all right for alphas. You have *no idea* what it’s like to be in heat.”

“I know I don’t my love. Nor does another omega for that matter; your own experience is always going to be unique for you.”

Will, who’s now spoiling for a fight as a way to vent his emotion, can’t help resenting the way Hannibal’s refusing to rise to the bait and then promptly feels guilty. “I guess it’s not your fault,” he adds, forcing himself to lower his voice to something that’s calmer and less combative. “Alphas can’t help romanticising it. If I was one I’d probably do the same.”

“I understand. And your objection is a very just one – alpha pleasure and gratification at the expense of omega bodies.”

“I mean alphas are only drawn to omegas for sex,” says Will, who’s realised (too late) that he’s now approaching full-on lecture mode but can’t quite bring himself to rein it in. “You could have children with betas if you wanted to. It’s just that sex with betas isn’t as enjoyable. That’s it; that’s the only reason.”

“Not the *only* reason,” replies Hannibal, taking hold of Will’s waist again so he can gently massage his hip bones. “Omegas are extremely rare so there’s a certain level of status attached to being with one. And of course alphas can’t pair-bond with betas. But yes, you’re essentially correct.”

“Oh course I am,” says Will, trying to ignore the fact he’s starting to sound like Jack.

“Although to be fair, there’s also the fact that fertility rates are lower in alpha-beta couples. There’s additionally evidence that the offspring of such partnerships have less impressive attributes: alpha-omega children, on the other hand, have a higher likelihood of superior intelligence and strength, as well as greater physical beauty.”

“For God’s sake,” explodes Will. “That’s just a massive stereotype of alpha and omega traits.”

“Not at all; there’s no reason why one individual can’t embody both. In fact there’s a good example in the room right now.”

“Don’t patronise me.”

“Actually I was talking about myself,” says Hannibal airily. “I am extremely physically beautiful.”
Will starts to laugh in spite of himself and Hannibal kisses the back of his neck again. “I’m joking, of course,” he adds. “I’m also not placating you – it would be absurd to imply that you’re not unusually resilient by any standards, regardless of gender.”

Will grunts non-committally then falls quiet for a few seconds before clambering round until he’s sat facing Hannibal and can hook his arms round his neck. Hannibal smiles down at him in an unusually benevolent way then gently takes hold of his waist again to help him keep his balance. “I’m sorry I snapped at you,” says Will earnestly. “I’m just…I just don’t really want to be in heat again. It scares me.”

“I know beloved. You need to give yourself time to get used to it.”

“The hotel you mentioned,” adds Will with a hint of shyness. “That might be a good idea.”

“Of course, whatever you like. As it happens I already have the perfect place in mind.”

“Do you?”

“I do. It’s the site of an old nineteenth century manor house and is extremely beautiful. More importantly it caters specifically for alpha-omega couples in heat, so everything you could possibly need would be right on hand.”

Will gives a small nod then reaches up and smooths Hannibal’s hair off his forehead. “As long as you’re on hand,” he says quietly. “That would probably be enough.”

At the sound of the words Hannibal’s entire face lights up in a smile, and Will presses his face against his shoulder then allows himself to be stroked and soothed until the first flush of anxiety has nearly completely worn away. In fact he knows he should probably get up, get dressed, and get going, because there are doctor’s appointments to be made, awkward meetings with Jack to be faced, and no doubt Matthew Brown generating copious amounts of paperwork from the depths of his prison cell which’ll have to be dealt with sooner rather than later (that little goblin-faced shit). And yet it’s so incredibly nice to be caressed and cosseted, and the sense of warm palms smoothing along his thighs is so intensely pleasurable – and Hannibal, when all’s said and done, is being as alpha as fuck – that they still end up back in bed anyway.

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The waiting room at the omega clinic is exactly the same as the last time Will was there. Not that there’s any reason it should have changed of course, but somehow the bland constancy still manages to irritate him: the same muffled blue plush, the same mindless magazines, and the same air of stifled delicacy as if the omegas inside are so fragile and insubstantial that the first sign of firmness will make them dissolve into the air and float away like dandelion down. The annoying receptionist is also the same, as is the insipid music warbling over the speakers like the aural equivalent of milky tea, and Will’s about to contemplate keeling over from excess déjà-vu when he realises that one thing in particular is not the same – namely another male omega sitting on a plushy blue chair and flicking half-heartedly through one of the mindless magazines. Omegas aren’t especially common in themselves, but it’s so unusual to see another male one close up that Will finds himself staring at him with unabashed curiosity before realising how rude he’s being and quickly averting his eyes.

“They’re awful aren’t they?” says the other omega breezily as Will sits down. Will promptly looks nonplussed and the omega smiles at him then gestures towards the magazine. “I meant to bring a book with me but I’ve left it in the car.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty bad,” agrees Will, biting back the urge to add that he’d rather stare at the blue
walls for infinity than actually read one himself. “Omega clinics are always full of them.”

“I know right? Although at least they assume we can read. Sometimes I expect them to just give us a pile of colouring books.”

Will smiles at this and the omega laughs merrily then resumes leafing through the magazine again. It means his head is bowed and Will immediately uses it as an opportunity for another covert stare from beneath his eyelashes. Privately he decides that he’s far more typical of a male omega then Will himself is, with the type of dewy skin, full lips, and fine-boned delicate features which are beautiful without seeming feminine. Gloomily he can’t help wondering whether Hannibal would think the same, then on instinct peers a bit further to try and see what his bite mark looks like.

“Have you heard about this?” asks the other omega suddenly, and Will quickly averts his eyes again. “They reckon arranged bondings fell this year to the lowest rate for a decade.”

Will leans over and politely scans the headline of the article. “It’s good I guess,” he replies. “But they’ve inversed the stats. It still means the vast majority aren’t voluntary.”

“Oh yeah,” replies the other omega, briefly looking despondent. “You’re right.” There’s a pause and he and Will exchange the type of conspiratorial eye-roll that only two omegas can ever fully manage. “It sucks doesn’t it?”

“It really does.”

“I’d never sell one of my kids off,” adds the omega with an admirable flash of fierceness. “Never.”

Will smiles approvingly, although can’t help fighting a secret temptation to ask what his alpha has to say about it. “I was lucky in that respect,” adds the omega. “My parents were very liberal. I chose my alpha myself. I mean he still paid for me, but there was no question of being forced to bond with one I didn’t like.”

“I met mine at work,” says Will without even thinking about it, then promptly feels himself starting to blush.

“Oh wow,” replies the omega good-naturedly. “That’s awesome man; good for you. What’s your job?”

“Law enforcement,” mutters Will, who’s still feeling flustered at referring to Hannibal as his alpha and can’t even begin to face explaining what he actually does. The other omega raises his eyebrows with obvious interest; although escape fortunately arrives at that exact same moment in the form of the annoying receptionist calling out Will’s name, which means he gets shunted away from the blue plush and delivered into the grimly gleaming chrome and stainless steel of the clinical room instead. Considering the agonies of trying to gain more heat suppressants the reason for today’s appointment is extremely straightforward in comparison, but past associations means Will’s already conditioned to feel nervous and as he opens the door it’s impossible to suppress a convulsive, anxious twinge.

Dr Reynolds is scribbling into a notebook when he comes in and she glances up and gives him a smile “Hello Mr Graham,” she says in the usual brisk way. “I’m glad to see you looking so much better.”

Will nods appreciatively then sits and squirms with awkwardness as he explains the reason for his visit (and which seems to involve far more euphemisms, clearings of the throat, and duckings of the head than could ever be considered acceptable for someone over the age of 14). Of course the awkwardness is ridiculous – it’s hardly like there’s anything shameful about the request – but his
natural sense of privacy always rebels at discussing such intimate things with a stranger. It’s actually rather torturous. To avoid making eye contact he skims around rather helplessly, pretending to have developed a sudden fascination with the glossily embossed certificate on the wall in front of him proclaiming Dr Elizabeth Jane Reynolds to be a fully licensed practitioner of omega medicine (and secretly suspecting that the equivalent ones for alpha healthcare are far more ornate…the smug bastards).

“Mr Graham?”

It suddenly occurs to Will that it might look as if he’s questioning her credentials by staring so fixedly at the certificate so instead shifts his gaze to a brightly-painted Aboriginal Australian mask that’s hanging next to it, admiring the beautiful eeriness of the sightless eyes and cheekbones that are as planed and angular as Hannibal’s. “Yes?” he says.

“Are you still off the suppressants?”

With an effort Will forces himself to stop looking at the mask and looks at Dr Reynolds again. “Yes,” he repeats, aware of a slight pang of mixed feelings even as he says it. “I haven’t taken any since the last time I saw you.”

“Excellent, make sure you keep it that way. I want you off them for at least a year – you need a chance to get your hormonal balance back to normal.”

Will promptly starts squirming all over again, only this time it’s less from embarrassment as it is from resentment at being told what to do. Dr Reynolds, guessing the meaning, glances up from her notebook then narrows her eyes. “I’m serious Mr Graham,” she says sharply. “You got yourself into a terrible state with them last time.”

The words sound very severe, and immediately remind Will that he never did find a proper explanation for why the side-effects cleared up so unexpectedly. Of course the most likely reason is that the drug dealer gave him the wrong type of tablet, although in the grand scheme of things it’s hardly a mystery worth solving now that his situation has changed so much for the better. Right on cue Dr Reynolds adds: “I’m glad you took my advice.”

“Yes. I’m definitely better now I’m not taking them.”

“Oh, I didn’t just mean that. I meant about finding an alpha to assist during your heat.” Will looks up then clears his throat again, overcome with a sudden demented image of finding an alpha down the back of the sofa the same way you’d find loose change or a mislaid watch. “Is it the same one as before?” presses Dr Reynolds.

“Yes.”

“Two heats in a row?”

“Yes,” repeats Will, struggling not to add: obviously.

“But you’re not bonded?”

“No.”

“Then I advise you find a different one,” says Dr Reynolds firmly. “Consecutive heats with the same alpha could cause you problems.”

Will clears his throat for a third time, unable to stop his lips twitching as he wonders how Hannibal
would feel about being repeatedly referred to as ‘the alpha’. It’s not exactly very dignified after all…
even worse than The Will. “It’s fine,” he protests out loud. “There are no problems at all.”

Instead of answering Dr Reynolds retrieves a form from the filing cabinet behind her, and which Will
is able to read upside down to discover is something called The Adult Omega Attachment Inventory.
“Is the alpha male or female?” says Dr Reynolds, in a business-like way.

“Male.”

“Age?”

“I’m not actually sure,” says Will, privately surprised that it never occurred to him to ask. Why didn’t
he? He’s not really certain…it just never seemed to matter somehow.

“Approximately. Is he older than you? Younger?”

“Older.”

“How much older?”

“Not that much,” says Will defensively. “Only about 10 years.”

“How long have you known him?”

Once again Will find himself hesitating for a few seconds as he tries to formulate a response. It’s an
odd sensation: such an incredibly simple question, yet an answer doesn’t come naturally because it
somehow feels as if they’ve always known each other and it’s hard to refine their relationship in
terms of real-world chronology like normal people. “Just over a year,” he finally says.

“And how did the arrangement for your heat come about? Did you first suggest him staying with you
or did he?”

“Um…we sort of both did.”

“And does he know about correct knotting behaviour? Enough not to injure you?”

“Of course he does,” snaps Will. “He’s a doctor himself.”

“You’d be surprised,” replies Dr Reynolds, marking the form with a large black cross. “Omegas are
relatively rare; most alphas have never had any practical experience with one.”

“Yes, well, he does.”

“So he stayed with you during the oestrus phase of your last heat. Have you had intercourse outside
of that?”

“Yes,” says Will through gritted teeth.

“And have you practiced other sexual activities?” She pauses then glances down at the form. “For
example, fellatio, digital penetration…”

“I’m afraid I’m not prepared to discuss it,” says Will irritably. “Why are these questions even
necessary?”

“I’m not asking you for my own amusement,” replies Dr Reynolds, equally irritably. “The AOA-I is
a standardised assessment. You’re an omega Mr Graham, which means any sexual activity has health
implications – potentially serious ones. And from what you’re telling me you’re currently in the hands of an older alpha who’s had multiple omega partners besides yourself and is now using you for casual sex in both the oestrus and proestrus stages of your heat cycle.”

When described like that it sounds undeniably sordid and Will immediately feels his irritation starting to flare. “He is not using me.”

“You’re not pair-bonded though are you?” says Dr Reynolds in the manner of someone scoring a point. “Yet by staying with him over multiple heats you’re making yourself susceptible to an emotional bond. One without the other could be extremely problematic.”

“Look, can I just have my prescription please?”

Dr Reynolds sighs again then stares at Will rather beadily over the top of her glasses; Will recognises it as a gesture he often performs himself and immediately resolves to stop doing it. “Please bear in mind what I’ve told you,” she says. “Alphas can be very problematic and at the first hint of an omega they completely lose control of themselves. I’ve no doubt that this alpha you’re involved with seems very nice and considerate, but ultimately he’s going to be more influenced by his own needs than yours. They can’t help it: it’s just the way that they’re made.”

Although Dr Reynolds has never gone to much trouble in the past to conceal her low opinion of alphas, this speech still strikes Will as faintly unprofessional. Not that he’d actually disagree with it in the general scheme of things – it’s only because she’s talking about Hannibal that’s made him feel so defensive. Are all omega doctors this maternal and controlling? It’s been so long since he’s had a regular one that he can’t really remember, although the fact it’s one of several times she’s made him feel annoyed or uncomfortable suggests he should probably find another. Perhaps Anneke might be able to recommend a good one?

“Mr Graham, are you listening to me?”

Will wants to say that he’s not but can’t bring himself to be so needlessly rude. “I understand,” he says stiffly. “You think I’m being taken advantage of. I’m not.”

“I’m saying you need to be more mindful of the consequences of attaching yourself to an alpha you’re not bonded with. It’s obvious you feel emotionally close to him, and you’re already dependent on him to take care of you when you’re in heat.” Will opens his mouth to protest and Dr Reynolds holds up a hand for silence. “You’ve made it clear in the past that you dislike the idea of being bonded, but unfortunately you can’t have it both ways. You need to have a serious think about what’s best for your health.”

“It’s fine,” says Will, abruptly getting to his feet. “I’ll discuss it with my alpha; we’ll work it out together.” Then he shuts the door behind him with a sharp little click – and it’s only several hours later that he remembers the conversation, and realises how this time he’d referred to Hannibal as his alpha without any embarrassment or hesitation at all.

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The same afternoon Will gets a message to come to Jack’s office for what he assumes is the inevitable lecture that’s coming his way after the near assassination of Matthew Brown. In turn the fact that Jack has no real choice except to administer the lecture doesn’t make Will any more enthusiastic about hearing it, and as he knocks on the door it’s impossible to suppress the same sense of guilty anxiety he experienced as a child when hauled over to the principal’s office. Except then the worst that could happen was staying after school or extra homework assignments and now the worst that could happen is God Knows What. A psychiatric evaluation seems a likely option to begin with,
although really there are no clear limits as to what Jack could do. He’s on the phone when Will comes in and irritably gestures at him to take one of the visitor’s chairs before continuing to bark instructions into the receiver as Will sits and fidgets. The instructions seem to go on far longer than necessary and it’s hard to suppress a paranoid sense that he’s doing it on purpose in order to ratchet up the suspense.

“Good of you to show Agent Graham,” says Jack with heavy sarcasm once he’s hung up. “Took your time didn’t you?”

“Sorry,” replies Will stiffly. “I got here as fast as possible.” Which I’ll have you know, you miserable old bastard, in the middle of rush-hour traffic at extremely short notice was actually pretty fucking fast.

Jack gives a small flick of the hand, obviously unimpressed by Will’s estimation of what’s possible and what isn’t. “I’ve been in meetings all day sticking up for you,” he says without further preamble. “There are a lot of people right now who’d be very happy to see you fired. A lot.”

He doesn’t actually specify who this lot of people are, although it’s not especially hard to imagine – Kade Purnell and Skinner being fairly high up the list for starters, although no doubt there are numerous others jostling for poll position who Will’s managed to piss off over the years for being too bolshie, too smart, or just too different from how they expect him to be. Will now catches Jack’s eye and gives a hint of a sigh. “Yeah,” he says gloomily. “I can imagine.”

Jack’s stony expression softens slightly before abruptly firming up again, rather as if he’s caught himself out for being too sympathetic and has remembered that he’s officially supposed to disapprove of what Will’s done. Even so, there’s no doubt he’s getting the sort of paternal air that always seems to descend whenever Will strikes him as being particularly tragic; and Will catches sight of it and decides that he might as well exploit it a bit more by looking making himself look as sad and sorrowful as possible. “Our official line is going to be that you thought Matthew Brown was armed,” adds Jack in a kinder voice. “In the resulting panic you acted defensively and took the first shot.”

“How’s that going to sound plausible?” protests Will, briefly forgetting to be pitiful. “It was obvious he didn’t have a gun.”

“That’s your problem isn’t it?” replies Jack airily. “You can either have people thinking you’re stupid or homicidal.”

“Okay…great.”

“Well you should have thought about it before shouldn’t you?” snaps Jack, beginning to brandish his pen in Will’s direction like it’s a duelling sword. “And you’re welcome by the way.”

“Yeah, sorry,” says Will, promptly reverting to pitiful again. He can see his reflection in the frame behind Jack’s desk: he looks like one of the dogs when their chew toys get put away. “I appreciate you going to so much trouble.”

Jack nods in acknowledgement then gives one of his patented world-weary sides as if he’s sick of the whole thing (including, but not limited to, the pen/duelling sword, Will’s stupidity, Will’s homicidality and quite possibly Will himself). Will glances up expectantly, suddenly hopeful that the lecturing is going to be far less extensive then feared. “So then, Matthew Brown,” adds Jack, abruptly coming back to life again – clearly this is one topic he’s not tired of. “What do we do next?” As Will opens his mouth to reply, Jack catches his eye and gives the ghost of a smile. “Apart from shooting him.”
Will returns the smile, overcome with a sudden rush of gratitude that almost makes him want to give Jack a hug. “Yeah, apart from shooting him,” he says. “Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“We keep looking I guess. What else can we do?”

“Of course we keep looking,” says Jack. “But explain one thing to me first. If Matthew Brown really is the Sculptor it means he hates omegas, so how does that fit his fixation with you? Do you think it’s genuine or just some weird attempt at a bluff.”

“I’m not sure,” admits Will. “He might just be a very skilled actor, but my instinct says he’s being genuine.”

“So…what then? How can both things be true?”

“Pretty easily,” says Will, briefly remembering Hannibal’s analysis of Skinner. “The opposite of hate isn’t love after all: it’s indifference. He wouldn’t be the first killer to target a specific type of victim while in a relationship – or at least wanting a relationship – with a member of the same group.”

“True.”

“But we still don’t know for certain what the Sculptor’s motive is,” adds Will, beginning to lean forward in his chair. “And that’s where it gets interesting. Before I came here I decided to take a look at the coursework of the murdered trainee. It seemed like a bit of a long shot, but I figured it was worth a check.”

“And?”

“And – her most recent paper was on the Richard Black case.”

Jack gives a low whistle. “No way.”

“Yeah that was pretty much my response too. And if you remember, Richard’s Black official line when he was caught was that the murders were actually about alphas. Killing omegas was meant to be the ultimate vengeance against a group that had ridiculed and objectified him.”

“Sure,” says Jack. “I remember – it’s why he called himself the Nemesis killer. Didn’t you say that Nemesis was the goddess of retribution and vengeance in Greek mythology?”

“Right,” replies Will with a small shiver. “A nemesis is a source of defeat or downfall that’s inescapable. Of course in reality Richard Black was just a pathetic loner who got it wrong half the time and killed betas by accident, but his reputation from the local press coverage was a lot more sinister. And it can’t be a coincidence that nearly all of the Sculptor’s early victims were in some way related to the Richard Black conviction.”

“Including you,” says Jack grimly.

“Including me.”

“So what do you think? Did Matthew Brown read about Richard Black and get inspired, or is it something more? I mean the surname is very similar.”

Will frowns again then falls silent for a few seconds, silently turning the facts over in his head as he examines them from several angles. “I can’t say for certain what the link is,” he says finally. “And it
may be that there’s no link at all. But when I first met him he had this weird metaphor about hawks –
that is, me and him – getting together to exert superiority over anyone who tried to overpower us. I
can’t help wondering if he meant alphas and has some sort of grudge against them.”

“But isn’t he an alpha himself?”

“He is, but he’s also an alpha at the bottom of the pile. He has a job that he obviously feels is below
his status and no obvious source of control or power in his daily life. He also feels belittled – it was
clear that he had a huge sense of rage at the idea of me seeing Hannibal as better than him.”

This time it’s Jack turn to fall silent as a grim line of concentration starts to etch itself between his
eyebrows. “I know I asked you this before,” he eventually adds. “But I need to ask you again. You
told me that Richard Black died in prison protesting his innocence. Be honest with me Will – is there
any chance that the original team got the wrong man?”

Somewhere in the back of his mind Will feels a vague prickling of fear. “No,” he says, doing his best
to ignore it and focus on the facts instead. “I can’t see how it’s possible.” Jack raises an eyebrow and
Will adds, almost more for his own benefit than Jack’s: “There’s no way that the real Nemesis is here
right now in Baltimore.”

“You sure?”

“As sure as I can be,” replies Will, but this time there’s a faint hesitation in his voice. “From
everything I know about the case there’s no logical reason to assume the true killer went free. As
much as you can be sure of any conviction, I’m sure of that one.” He pauses then shrugs
apologetically. “I meant to look more thoroughly at the Richard Black files; Hannibal did too. But so
much has happened since then…Andrew coming back, the Ripper murder, and now Matthew
Brown.”

“It’s okay Will. I get it.”

Will just sighs and knots his fingers together, overcome by a sudden sinking sensation that Jack
doesn’t really get it, because of course – how can he? “Officially the Sculptor case started here in
Baltimore,” is all he says. “But the more I think about it, the more I feel like it really started much
earlier.”

And this much at least is true, because it feels like a whole other time and place: another city and
state, another version of Will who did the profile that caught Richard Black…a whole other lifetime
ago. It really is, thinks Will numbly. I was a different person back then. After which the ghost of
Richard Black, just like the very living form of Andrew, pursued him from New Orleans without
mercy or restraint – yet were still outpaced and outrun the entire time by the Dark Reflection, who
somehow stayed in control of everything surrounding it. Briefly Hannibal’s words in the prison echo
through his mind: ‘The real spectres are the living, not the dead. We haunt ourselves – never forget
that Will. Drifting through the remains of our lives consumed with all the burdens and regret we
never found the strength to dispose of.’

“We need a proper profile,” Jack is now saying. “The whole thing might become clearer if we got a
sense of his motive.”

Will blinks a few times, forcing himself to abandon the phantoms of the past in order to ground
himself in the reality of the present and a job that needs to be done. “Omegas and alphas aside,” he
says grimly. “I can already tell you what his main motive is: he enjoys it.”

Jack nods wearily then drags his hand across his face. “Me of all people shouldn’t find that hard to
believe, but no matter how long I do this job it never fully registers. Killing for money I can understand. Or for jealousy, or revenge, or to cover your tracks. Who kills for no better reason than just enjoying it?” He shrugs then leans back in his chair, the question clearly rhetorical and neither wanting nor expecting an answer. “God knows,” adds Jack with another sigh.

It’s so strange, reflects Will hazily, how people always tend to appeal to a benevolent higher power to answer questions like this – as if cruelty and madness are something only the forces of good have the power to unravel. ‘God knows’. ‘Heaven knows’…what has God got to do with any of it? Not that he can really blame Jack, because it’s a refrain he’s heard at intervals throughout his entire career: the same repeated quote announced in the same weary tone of voice of how ‘society is at the mercy of a murderer without a motive.’ Yet no matter how many times it’s uttered he can never bring himself to accept it, because there’s always a motive – it’s just not one that other people can readily understand. Although there’s also no doubt that a lack of traceable motive makes such people harder to see, and this in turn makes them far more frightening by removing them one step further from the realm of typical human reasoning. Something unknowable and unrelatable that strolls around humanity and is fascinated by it, and dependent upon it, and perhaps even a little in love with it, and yet the whole time is never truly a member of it. The ultimate outsider, in fact…a species apart.

On Jack’s desk his laptop is open at the TattleCrime and as Will glances up his eye is caught to where the Sculptor’s most recent murder is splashed across the homepage, interspersed with predictable outrage at how the Chesapeake Ripper is still at large. Jack, obviously embarrassed to be caught showing interest to the opinions of Freddie Lounds, awkwardly shifts the lid down and Will stares bleakly at it until all he can see anymore is the top half of the headline, flashing in front of him in a series of scarlet pixels that writhe across the screen like a gruesome semaphore: *RipperRipperRipper*.

In spite of himself, he shudders.

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Outside the building the air is cool and crisp and Will draws in a few lungfuls of it before searching in his pocket for his phone. It really makes more sense to wait until evening so he can speak to Hannibal in person, but now his idea’s occurred to him he’s anxious for an answer and shuffles impatiently from one foot to the other until he hears the sound of the dial tone. The fact it goes straight to voicemail suggests Hannibal’s with a patient, but Will still hangs up then tries the office number instead on the off-chance he might be free. Contrary to expectation the receptionist puts him through immediately, and Will can’t help feeling touched by this – suggesting, as it does, that Hannibal’s left instructions for any call from Will to always be connected.

Hannibal’s voice, when he answers, has a slightly formal tone that immediately confirms Will’s suspicions that he’s not alone. “Sorry,” says Will rather sheepishly. “I guess I’ve disturbed you?”

“Not at all,” replies Hannibal. “As it happens my appointment’s just ended.” There’s a small pause and when he speaks again he’s rather muffled in a way that suggests he’s shifted the receiver so he can address someone else in the room. “My apologies Franklyn,” Will now hears him say, “but I need to take this call. I’ll see you at the same time next week.”

From somewhere in the background Will can hear a male voice responding in the sort of querulous, yappy tone that reminds him all over again of how the dogs react when something they want is taken away from them. “Naturally,” Hannibal tells it, and Will can’t help smiling at the carefully concealed irritation which he feels no one but him would be able to detect. “I’m sorry Franklyn,” adds Hannibal as the voice begins to yap even louder, “but I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”
“You’re such a liar,” says Will. “You’re not sorry at all.”

“What a singularly offensive opinion,” replies Hannibal into the phone. “I’m not very pleased to hear it. Please tell Agent Graham that I intend to deal with him later.” Will starts to grin to himself and Hannibal shifts the receiver once more and informs the yapping voice that it needs to excuse him so he can contact a colleague at the FBI. “So you intend to deal with me later do you?” adds Will once it’s clear that Hannibal has his office to himself. “I thought you’d given up on that.”

“I may have given up,” replies Hannibal, “but I still have some standards left. Such incredible rudeness can’t possibly go unpunished.”


“It was, indeed, undeniably true. It’s also one of the boundaries of my profession, because I can hardly inform him of my genuine feelings.”

“No, I don’t suppose you can. Although somehow I find it odd that that’s enough to stop you.”

“There are one or two others like him,” adds Hannibal leisurely. “Not all, fortunately for me, but certainly several. Why do you think I always used to see you at the end of the day?”

“I don’t know Dr Lecter, why did you?”

“Because you were my reward to myself for enduring the idiocies of the others. Saving you for last…like an especially delectable dessert.”

“Oh God,” replies Will, who’s now struggling not to laugh. “Do you have any idea how weird that sounds?”

“No doubt,” says Hannibal in a rather sardonic way. “Of course the analogy fails regardless, because it would imply the others are the main course and they’re really not that substantial.”

“It fails period. I don’t want to be the dessert – too fluffy and saccharine.”

“Then in that case you should be whatever you want to be. This particular meal can be service à la Française; all courses served simultaneously.”

“I’ll be the after dinner cigars.”

“Naturally you will,” replies Hannibal, who now sounds like he’s smiling as well. “Incendiary, highly addictive, and potentially hazardous to one’s health.”


“Is that so?” replies Hannibal. “To quote something I heard recently: ‘you’re such a liar, you’re not sorry at all.’” Will laughs out loud and Hannibal adds, with obvious fondness: “Of course it’s very diverting to be insulted by you, but I assume it wasn’t the only reason you phoned? Or perhaps it was; in which case feel free to carry on. I seem strangely content to stand here and have you lecture me about my shortcomings.”

“Your comings are never short.”

“Oh, shocking,” says Hannibal. “What a filthy mouth you have Agent Graham. Do you read people their rights with that mouth?”

“I do,” replies Will with another smile. “I also talk to Jack with it as well. In fact that’s why I called;
we’ve just had a long discussion about the Sculptor case.”

“And what were your conclusions?” asks Hannibal, and there’s a clear flicker of intrigue in his voice.

“Not conclusions as such, more like theories – namely the possible link with Richard Black. You remember that right?”

“Of course: the so-called Nemesis.”

Will nods in response, despite knowing Hannibal can’t see him, then proceeds to outline the same general points he’d made to Jack. “The whole thing got side-lined once Andrew showed up,” concludes Will, “but the more I think about it the more I’m convinced the two cases are related. The time’s come to try and prove it one way or the other.”

“Interesting. And how do you intend to do so?”

Will takes a deep breath. “To go back down South,” he says. “I want to go back home and re-visit where this whole thing started. Where I started. Only…only I don’t want to do it alone.” Then he waits as he takes another breath, biding his time as he prepare himself to ask the question that’s been preoccupying him ever since he left Jack’s office. “Hannibal – would you come to New Orleans with me?”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who’s read my first fic and enjoys podfics, a second one for it is now available here (also a WIP) courtesy of the lovely Andthe_cellabration. Anyone who even considers reading my monster-length rambles out loud deserves a medal for massive stamina, so please say hi to her if you have a chance :-D
Chapter 34

Will yawns and stretches, flexing his legs into empty air before folding and refolding them into increasingly outlandish angles in an attempt to get comfortable. Although his belt digs into his hipbone every time he does it (annoying) so in the end he just rolls onto his back instead, then retrieves his jacket for good measure and pulls it over his head to block out the light. Not that it makes all that much difference. In fact the whole enterprise is deeply frustrating – rather like some fiendishly insoluble riddle from a folktale which by definition is completely impossible to achieve. Carry water in a sieve. Count out grains of sand. Make yourself comfortable on an aeroplane. Will sighs loudly at the unfairness of it and Hannibal’s hand immediately appears from overhead to rub soothing circles across his shoulder as the other strokes across his scalp and twines its fingers into his hair.

There’s a small pause before the jacket starts to twitch. “Pull my hair again,” says Will’s voice from underneath it. “Go on. I dare you.”

Hannibal smirks slightly then gives Will’s hair an experimental tug just as another voice interjects with “Good afternoon sir, would you care for some coffee?” The tone of the voice – overly deferential and seasoned with artificial cheerfulness – immediately identifies it as belonging to an air steward, and Will sighs again at the sound of it then renews his efforts to wriggle out the reach of Hannibal’s hand.

Hannibal waits until Will’s head has gone still then neatly pounces on it and twines a strand of hair round his finger. There’s an angry rumbling sound from beneath the jacket and the steward glances down at it then raises his eyebrows.

“Thank you, no,” replies Hannibal serenely.

“A cold drink?”

“Not at the moment.”

“No problem sir,” says the steward. His voice is now saturated with a degree of false cheerfulness that’s positively lavish, and Will can’t help feeling a twinge of sympathy for him at having to sustain it for so long…seriously, that shit must be exhausting. A merry little tinkling sound of crockery follows and the steward then adds: “Nothing for you then sir. Would your omega care for a beverage?”

From beneath the jacket Will feels himself start to flush with embarrassment as he realises, far too late, how the way he’s draped across Hannibal must be making him look like the Team Mascot for omegas everywhere. Hannibal, on the other hand, is clearly irritated by the patronising tone of the question and Will now hears him reply with obvious displeasure: “He’s not my omega. But even if he was, that wouldn’t prevent him from answering for himself.”

Despite resenting the steward for reducing him to generic omega, Will can’t help secretly wishing that Hannibal had just answered for the both of them – not least because it’s now pushed him into the deeply mortifying position of having to emerge from beneath his jacket (blinking like a cave dweller) and announce with as much dignity as possible that he doesn’t want any coffee. An extremely awkward pause then follows in which Hannibal stares blankly at the air steward, who proceeds to shuffle and blush unhappily at having caused offence, while Will glances from one of them to the other the whole time like someone at a tennis match (before getting ready to just disappear beneath the jacket again and leave them to it) when the steward finally clears his throat and says in a rather
tragic way: “I do apologise sir.”

His smile is as plastic and brittle-looking as the coffee jug and Will suddenly stops feeling annoyed with him and feels sympathetic instead. After all, it’s a sure bet that the poor bastard’s recently been yelled at by another alpha for speaking to their omega without permission, only to find himself on the receiving end of Hannibal’s uniquely glacial disdain (which is somehow worse than being yelled at) for trying to do the exact opposite. It’s not like the comment is even that much out of context, considering Will’s spent the last half hour dozing across the seats with his head on Hannibal’s lap while clinging onto his hand and basically impersonating the Patron Saint (and Team Mascot) of every omega stereotype ever conceived. Will now cringes slightly at how it must have looked then takes another glance at the steward’s unhappy face and decides to make a show of solidarity against bossy alpha bullshit by telling him he’s changed his mind and would like some coffee after all. The steward nods gratefully at the sense he’s been forgiven, then pours it out like its sacred communion wine before bolting off down the gangway again; possibly to answer the call from the flight deck, but most likely to escape from Hannibal’s withering stare which has now reached sufficient force and intensity to quell a lump of granite.

Will gives a final stretch then forces himself upright and gives Hannibal’s arm an affectionate nudge. “Don’t worry about it,” he says, nodding at the steward’s departing back. “It’s fine. I don’t care.”

“Then you should,” replies Hannibal briskly, who’s finally stopped watching the steward himself in favour of casting looks of horror at the airline coffee. “Talking over you like that is incredibly rude.”

“I guess,” says Will, giving Hannibal another nudge. “But it’s hardly going to ruin my day.”

Hannibal makes an ambiguous noise (possibly agreement, possibly not) then glances at the cup again with a tiny shudder. “You’re not actually planning on drinking that?”

“Yes,” says Will defiantly. “By the way, how long ‘til we land?”

“Not for another hour. Get some rest again if you need to.”

“I’m all right,” replies Will, taking a cautious sip of the coffee; it is, indeed, repulsive and he puts it down on the seat tray again. “I’ll hang on until we get to the hotel.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” says Will firmly. In fact he’s hopelessly tired, although it seems to have surpassed normal drowsiness by now and reached the pitch of fretful, restless exhaustion that excludes actual asleep. In this respect last night had been wretched and he’d spent the whole thing disturbed by gnawing worries as to whether any good could possibly come of his plan and he was making a terrible mistake in going to New Orleans – as well as if Hannibal might refuse to go at all, considering how easy it was to imagine Hannibal refusing to go anywhere it wasn’t possible to fly first class. Hannibal’s response to the former had been to book an entire row of seats, and which Will had initially grumbled over as a ridiculous waste of money but for which he’s secretly now quite thankful for seeing as it’s provided an opportunity to lie down.

In contrast his other worries are infinitely harder to shift, and the foolish little skirmish with the air steward has served as an ominous reminder of how dynamics between omegas and alphas are almost certainly the malign force that’s driving the Sculptor…not to mention the Nemesis killer Richard Black. Anxiously he begins to bite his lower lip at the thought of it and Hannibal reaches out a hand to make him stop.

“It’s fine Will,” he says. “I’ll be right with you.”
“I know,” replies Will bleakly. “That’s partly what I’m worried about.”

“How so?”

Will frowns a bit more then finally turns round to look at Hannibal directly. “I want you to be careful,” he says, and there’s an urgent undertone to his voice which wasn’t there before. “I mean it – no unnecessary risks. Don’t go anywhere by yourself after dark.”

“You think there’s a threat down here too?” asks Hannibal with typical calmness.

“I don’t know,” admits Will. “Possibly not. But after everything that’s happened it would be stupid to take it for granted.” Fleetingly he now remembers Matthew Brown’s face – the snarled teeth and crazed yellowish eyes – then reaches out himself and rests a hand on Hannibal’s arm in a casual gesture of possessiveness. “Just be careful,” he repeats grimly. “You might be with me but I’ll be right with you too.”

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The hotel is far enough away from the city centre to count as tranquil while still close enough to be convenient and is constructed of a lot of varnished rosewood and soft creamy limestone that looks similar enough to nougat to make Will want to sink his teeth into it. The air is much warmer and balmier than at home and is also spiced with assorted aromas that feel unfamiliar at first but gradually slot themselves into his memory like a kind of mental pot pourri: the tang of jasmine and the sting of streetcar diesel, a savoury hint of fried chicken, and the earthy brackish tang from the bark of the sweet olive trees. In fact if he closes his eyes the surge of familiarity is like a snug, nostalgic blanket being slung across his shoulders that reminds him of childhood and sunshine and a purer, simpler time when life was so much easier and the summers never seemed to end. Of course it’s only an illusion, and yet it’s such a comforting one that it makes him reluctant to destroy it again too soon by opening his eyes and getting forced back into the adult world of hazards, strife and Sculptors. Not that any of these grimy things admittedly have any kind of role in his current surroundings. In fact the peacefulness itself is a reminder of how different things are now; not least because if he’d been here on his own he’d be taking his chances in the sort of cheap motel where you wipe your feet on the way out, whereas now he’s stood in front of a luxurious colonial-style pile where the bellhops have uniforms that cost more than his luggage that they’re currently competing to pick up.

Hannibal – who booked the hotel in the first place and is (of course) completely unfazed – tips the cab driver then saunters through to the foyer while Will trails behind and tries not to brood too obviously over how scruffy he suspects his ensemble of plaid, denim and dog hairs must look compared to everyone else. Although on the plus side there’s little risk of him being outed as an omega here…if anything, amends Will gloomily, he’s more likely to be classed as a male prostitute that Hannibal picked up on his way from the airport. In contrast the other omegas are clearly identifiable by how incredibly glossy and well-groomed they are and the way they float round arm-in-arm with their alphas in little scented miasmas of dollar bills and good-breeding. In fact this, thinks Will, is what most people typically imagine when they hear the word ‘omega’: fragrant, slightly ethereal-looking creatures that are as long, leggy and pale-skinned as unicorns with coils of shiny hair and clothes that never seem to crease.

Hannibal now turns round from the desk and scans the foyer to see where Will’s gone, and Will walks up behind him and mournfully props his head on his shoulder: overcome with a new surge of tiredness, yet still checking for any rival omegas that might need fighting off (and wondering, slightly hysterialy, if the receptionist is going to ask Hannibal whether sir’s rent boy would care for some coffee). In this respect he privately decides that Hannibal is equally easy to identify as an alpha as the expensive, fae-like creatures are as omegas: just as tall, broad and imposing as the stereotypes would
suggest, but with an additional air of calm authority that few of the others seem to have.

Hannibal, as if sensing this admiration, pauses in filling out the register and curls a palm round the back of Will’s neck. “Tired?” he says.

“No.”

“Then why have you suddenly collapsed?” asks Hannibal fondly. “It’s as if your batteries have gone flat.”

“I’m all right,” replies Will, narrowing his eyes slightly as one of the other omegas moves past and glances in Hannibal’s direction. “Just sick of sitting down for so long.”

At this point the receptionist now politely interjects with the usual spiel about newspapers, valet services and wake-up calls, and which means Hannibal has to let go of Will’s neck in order to retrieve his credit card and sign across assorted dotted lines with his typical flourish. “You don’t have a Southern accent do you,” he adds as he returns the forms – and which immediately makes Will smile, because it’s obvious he’s been struggling to decipher the receptionist’s and doesn’t want to admit it. “You sound as if you’ve lived in the north all your life. I thought you grew up here?”

“I lost it I guess.”

“But you did have one?”

“A little,” replies Will. “It was never very strong. And we moved around a lot when I was younger.” Briefly he closes his eyes again as he remembers the stifling summers in the boatyards: lolling around in frayed denim and sunscreen while gabbling away in Cajun French or yelling ‘where y’at?’ to his father. Not that lost is really the right word, because it implies an accidental separation as opposed to the arduous process over many years of deliberately ironing it out. Moving north had been the final nail in the coffin of his rounded vowels and clipped consonants, although he’d been struggling to eliminate them long before that – mostly because of the response they’d created in Andrew. You sound like such a hick, Andrew had announced when they first met, it’s really kind of adorable. Later Will had overheard Andrew on the phone to one of his rich alpha friends from Manhattan, indulgent yet smugly possessive the entire time like someone describing a new pet: He sounds as if he’s just climbed out of a bayou. It’s the cutest thing you’ve ever heard in your life. Even though Will’s accent had already softened a lot by that time, he’d promptly re-doubled his efforts to get rid of it.

Abruptly he now nudges Hannibal with his forehead and says: “Do you like the way I speak?”

Hannibal looks faintly surprised. “You sound fine,” he replies after a pause. “To be honest, I’m more interested in what you have to say than how you manage to say it.”

Will gives a small smile at this then allows a bit more of his weight to rest against Hannibal and has another surreptitious scan of the foyer, trying not to sneer too obviously at the way the other omegas hover deferentially by their alphas as if they think they’re attending royalty. Andrew had loved every opportunity to parade him round in a similar way, but somehow Will had always largely managed to avoid it and seeing it so close up again after all this time is vaguely surreal. Even so – and despite their more ludicrous elements – it’s hard to deny that he’s starting to feel slightly intimidated by such a flagrant display from people who are not just well-off but rich. Given that he’s repeatedly stood there with his slight 5’11” frame and glared down the criminally-minded of every possible persuasion of viciousness and depravity means the fact he’s being overwhelmed by wealthy socialites is rather ridiculous and the irony of it isn’t lost on him. Nevertheless, there’s no avoiding the fact that he feels distinctly out of his depth. Incredulously he now thinks back to the type of hotels he’d usually be in,
with their battered plastic reception desks and permanent smell of stale coffee and damp rubber, and
how the contrast to this is so dramatic that it might have been a creation from the hands of a whole
different species.

The room itself is similarly overawing…if room could even be considered the right word for what’s
more like an actual apartment with a separate bedroom, living area, and even an open-plan kitchen.
“This is great,” says Will, who would have preferred something simpler but doesn’t want to seem
ungrateful. “Thanks for arranging it.”

“It’ll do I suppose,” replies Hannibal, who’s inspecting the supply of cooking utensils with obvious
displeasure. “It was the best suite available at such short notice.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Why? It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should probably have put a bit more planning into it,” says Will, beginning to rummage in his
briefcase to retrieve his laptop. “Maybe it was a bit impulsive just coming down here.”

“Maybe it was; it still doesn’t make it wrong.” Will makes a vague humming noise of agreement then
drums his fingers impatiently as he waits for the WiFi to connect. “You had an intuition,” adds
Hannibal. “So you followed it…although there’s no need to follow it right now.” Will shrugs but
doesn’t reply. “Surely you’re not working?”

“I need to hire a car.”

“Leave it to the morning. Or get reception to do it for you.”

“I’d like to just get it sorted,” says Will stubbornly. “There’s a lot to arrange.”

“Starting with what?”

“Starting with Richard Black’s daughter,” replies Will, trying to suppress the little shiver of
foreboding that always seems to happen at the thought of it. “I was able to trace her and she’s agreed
to speak with me.”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal with interest. “I remember you mentioning that you wanted to locate his
family. You think she can shed any light on her father’s motives?”

“Honestly? I have no idea. But I’ve felt for a while that the Sculptor might be an acquaintance of
Richard Black, or has at least been influenced by him. His daughter may have an idea of someone
who fits that bill.” He pauses then sighs, briefly overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead. “I
have to start somewhere, right?”

“Yes, I suppose you do,” replies Hannibal thoughtfully. “Somewhere literally being here. To be
frank Will, I find it rather fascinating. You, Richard Black, and possibly the Sculptor too – all formed
in the same crucible.” A pause follows this statement and Will stiffens slightly; well aware, without
even looking, that the dark eyes are currently running over his face. “Be honest,” adds Hannibal.
“How much of this trip is about revisiting the Nemesis’s origins and how much is concerned with
examining your own?”

Will gives a rather crooked smile but still doesn’t glance up from the laptop. “It’s good to hear I’m so
transparent.”

“Not at all: why shouldn’t you excavate your past? Considering how preoccupied you’ve grown
lately with your sense of yourself it makes sense that you’d wish to retrace your…steps.” Hannibal pauses again, allowing the implication to hover unspoken in the air, and Will immediately knows he’s referring to the past generally (and Andrew specifically) as the steps which paved Will’s way on his journey to kill for the first time. “I’m just pleased you invited me to accompany you,” adds Hannibal more casually when it’s obvious Will isn’t going to respond. “You require a witness bearer so I’m happy to perform the service for you. And if you can combine it with the more practical purpose of investigating the Sculptor – so much the better. Speaking of which, I assume you plan to see the daughter tomorrow. Do you want me to come with you?”

“Yes,” admits Will. “But it’s probably better if I go alone. She sounded nervous over the phone; two of us might be a bit much for her. I’ll tell you about it afterwards though. I’d like your opinion.”

“Is there anything I can help with while you’re gone?”

“There is actually,” says Will, gesturing to a large document bag that’s propped next to his suitcase. “Those are Richard Black’s prison files.”

“The ones Jack had to go to so much trouble to obtain,” replies Hannibal, rather sardonically. “You want me to read them?”

“I would, yeah. Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. I’m genuinely interested – if you hadn’t offered I would have asked anyway.”

“I’ll go through the court records in the meantime,” adds Will. “I’m due to meet some of the original team on the Black case and could do with refreshing my memory.” Taking off his glasses he sighs rather loudly then runs his hand through his hair. “It’s weird. When you’re in the middle of it you feel like it’ll stay with you for life, but you always end up forgetting when a new one takes its place.”

“Understandably so,” says Hannibal. “The economy of memory is very precise; no doubt you’ll find the original team feel much the same.” He pauses again, then adds with the same tone of interest as before. “Are they your former colleagues?”

“Some of them were, yeah.”

“And did they know you were an omega when you worked with them?”

“No,” says Will stiffly. “Not at first. But Andrew soon fixed that.”

“Ahh, I’m sorry. That must have felt very exposing.” Will nods without elaborating then starts to type rather furiously, rather as if he’s venting the unhappiness of the memory on the keys. “Do you want me to come with you when you meet with them?” adds Hannibal in a gentler voice.

“Maybe. Probably. Yes…I think so. I think that would be helpful.”

“Then I’ll come with you,” says Hannibal calmly. “What about the remainder of the time – do you have any other plans? Any friends or family you want to visit?”

“No,” says Will. For a few seconds he doesn’t move or speak then abruptly slams down the lid of the laptop and gets to his feet. Hannibal continues to stare without speaking either, and Will deliberately turns his back on him then begins a rather restless pacing across the rug.

“What’s the matter Will?” asks Hannibal in the same calm voice. Will shrugs but still doesn’t reply. “You’re incredibly tense.”
“You reckon?” replies Will sarcastically. “Is that your medical opinion?”

“It is. I prescribe immediate rest and relaxation.” Will shrugs again, obviously frustrated by the idea of it. “I would also prescribe gentling, except I know…” Hannibal waits a few seconds and smiles, “except I know you’ll make that *exact* face you’re making now and tell me you don’t want it.”

“You’re right,” snaps Will. “I don’t want it.”

“Then you don’t have to have it. Coerced gentling rather defeats the purpose after all.”

“Just because I’m an omega doesn’t mean gentling is the answer for everything.”

“No,” says Hannibal in a soothing tone. “Of course not.”

Will sighs in an irritated way then opens his mouth as if he wants to argue before appearing to change his mind and resuming the fretful pacing motion instead. Hannibal in turn, who’s now extremely used to the way Will uses anger to conceal fear, resolves to let him come out of it when he’s ready and settles onto the sofa instead without saying anything else. In fact Will’s mercurial moods and acerbic temperament make him undeniably hard work at times, yet somehow neither manage to change the fact that whether in the capacity of a friend, a colleague or a lover he’s almost unbearably charming. Will, oblivious to this silent approval, paces round a bit more before finally seeming to run out of energy and heading over to the sofa himself so he can fold himself onto the floor next to Hannibal’s knee.

“Welcome back *mylimasis*,” says Hannibal. He leans down to remove Will’s glasses, neatly folding them away and then beginning to run his fingers through Will’s hair. “Have you got it out your system now?”

“No,” says Will gloomily. “Not really.”

“You’re so relentless Will. Sometimes I think you only have two speeds: full throttle or utter exhaustion.”

Will sighs again then leans forward to give Hannibal’s hand better access. “You might be right.”

“Of course I am. The Will will stop at nothing.”

“Oh God,” says Will, even though he’s starting to smile. “Don’t even think about starting with The Will.”

“Or what?” says Hannibal fondly. “Would The Will start on me?”

“I will start on you and then I will *end* you.”

Hannibal smiles himself then neatly flicks open the top few buttons of Will’s shirt so he can slide his palm across the back of his neck. “I understand that it’s unsettling to be back here,” he adds in a more serious voice. “You must be surrounded by ghosts from the past.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Naturally you are. Pursued by all your phantoms…no wonder you feel on edge.” Hannibal pauses again then trails a finger along the side of Will’s throat. “In fact that was the first time you’ve mentioned Andrew since you arrived. I was curious as to whether you’d want to talk about him.”

“Not especially. I don’t feel like there’s anything else to say.”
“No, perhaps you don’t,” agrees Hannibal, shifting slightly so he can begin to massage Will’s shoulders. “His death was of far more significance than his life after all – and we’ve already discussed that a great deal.” Will squirms slightly but doesn’t reply. “I suppose this must be quite close to where you first met him?”

“Yeah, just a couple of miles. Although I didn’t exactly meet him; it was more a case of him seeing me and thinking ‘I want that one.’” Hannibal convulsively tightens his grip and Will flinches then tries to pull away. “Ow, stop it. You’re hurting me.”

“I apologise,” says Hannibal, giving Will’s neck a tender stroke of apology. “Only I find the thought of it…intolerable.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” replies Will with unusual venom. “The first time I ever laid eyes on him he was sat at my dad’s kitchen table with an ownership contract: signed, sealed, delivered. Although of course to most people that’s not even a big deal. It happens every day; it’s probably happening right now.”

“I know Will. But it won’t happen to you – not ever again.”

“Because it’s what the alphas want,” adds Will, with a clear flash of contempt. He falls silent for few seconds then swivels his head round so he can look at Hannibal directly. “Be honest with me: can you ever imagine yourself doing that?”

“Possibly,” says Hannibal without any trace of self-consciousness. “I suppose it would depend on the circumstances. Knowing you as I do then I’d have to say no, I can’t imagine it, because coercing you to do something could never be as satisfying as persuading you to want it on your own terms. But if I’d met you back then…well, who can say that I wouldn’t have been overcome with the same urge to possess as he was?”

“Yeah, I figured,” says Will, who’s starting to arch like a cat beneath Hannibal’s fingers. “At least you’re honest I suppose. Oh God though, what an image: turning up at my dad’s house and finding you glaring at me over the kitchen table.”

“I would hardly have glared at you. I would have gone to a lot of trouble to make myself as endearing as possible.”

Will gives a short laugh then tips his head back against Hannibal’s knee. “Endearing?”

“Naturally; I would be trying to win you over.” Will laughs again and Hannibal smiles down at him in an unusually benevolent way and gently smooths his hair off his forehead. “I suppose the same could not be said of Andrew,” he adds. “No doubt in that first meeting he was putting more effort into charming your father than he was you?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Why wouldn’t he? My father was the one with the power to give him what he wanted.”

“So what would have happened if you’d objected?”

“My dad knew I wouldn’t object,” says Will with evident bitterness. “Not if he told me he wanted me to do it. It’s hard to explain, but I was so different back then. I mean I was younger, obviously, but I was just so…passive, I guess. Most omegas are. We’re conditioned pretty much from birth to believe we don’t have any other choice.”

“Beloved,” says Hannibal softly. Briefly he pauses from the massage and strokes his thumb against Will’s cheekbone.
“Yeah, well – it is what it is.”

“So how quickly did things move after that?”

“Incredibly quickly. Andrew was smart about the money for starters.”

“He offered a large sum?”

“It was a lot, yes, but he also brought it in cash. If he’d had a cheque my dad might not have given in so fast; once he saw that huge wad of bills in a briefcase it was game over.”

“The contract was signed that same day?”

“The contract was, but the full deal wasn’t formalised until a few weeks later. Andrew had a few chaperoned meetings with me first.”

“What about bonding rights? Did he try and examine you?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t let him,” replies Will with typical fierceness. “I made him arrange for a doctor to do it.”

Hannibal nods with approval then possessively tightens his grip on Will’s shoulders. “What a shame it is that he’s dead,” he says lightly. “You denied me the satisfaction there beloved – I should rather have liked to kill him myself.”

Will laughs at this, despite knowing it’s not really all that funny, and stretches his hands behind his head so Hannibal can take hold of them. A slight pause then follows while they gaze at each other and when Will speaks again it’s so quiet that Hannibal has to lean in to hear him. “I wish it had been you instead of him,” he says softly. “I really do.” Hannibal gently cradles Will’s face in his palm and murmurs his name and Will abruptly clears his throat, obviously self-conscious at this display of emotion and wanting to lighten the tone again. “Not least because it would have been hilarious to watch you bullshitting my dad and pretend to be ‘endearing’.”

“Is that so?” says Hannibal, beginning to massage Will’s shoulders again. “Don’t be too triumphant beloved; your plan might have backfired there. After all, if it had been me you wouldn’t have been successful in referring me to another doctor would you? I could have insisted on examining you myself.”

Will tips his head further back across Hannibal’s knee and grins up at him. “Hmm, yeah. I bet you would.”

“It’s an alpha’s privilege,” relies Hannibal, deftly flicking open another button on Will’s shirt. “We pay so much money for you after all. Custom dictates that we’re allowed to establish what we’re paying for in advance.”

“You just can’t control yourself can you?” says Will, whose breath has started to speed up. “No alphas can.”

“Of course we can’t. Therefore I’d have refused to sign until I’d had an opportunity to inspect that beautiful omega body of yours. Not because it would have made any difference you understand – like Andrew I would have been determined to have you regardless. But you wouldn’t have known that, so an examination would have been a perfect excuse to touch you before you were even officially mine.”

“Shameless aren’t you?”
“Indeed – I am entirely shameless.”

Will laughs again then resettles himself against Hannibal’s legs and gives his foot a nudge. “So go on then,” he says. “What would you have done?”

“Well…” replies Hannibal thoughtfully, “most omegas don’t want to be examined in front of a family member so to begin with I suppose an external chaperone would have been sent for. One of your neighbours most probably; some neutral, well-meaning beta. I imagine they would have been very excited on your behalf, because betas invariably romanticise omegas being carried away by their alpha suitors."

“Actually I did have a neighbour exactly like that.”

“Of course I would have contrived to get rid of them as soon as they arrived,” adds Hannibal with a hint of smugness. “And you know I would have been successful because I can be extremely persuasive when I wish to be. Then I would have taken your hand and led you into your living room, closing the door behind so we could be alone.”

“And are you still being endearing?” says Will innocently. “Or has the strain of it worn you out? Maybe you need to lie down for a bit to recover.”

“Not at all beloved. On the contrary, in fact: I would be supremely energised at having you all to myself. Although to begin with I think I would have just sat on the sofa, rather like I’m doing now, and spent some time simply watching you. You’re very striking after all: I’ve always liked looking at you. And here I have you in your native habitat. I am like a naturalist observing something very rare and wary and trying to win its trust…a little wild thing. Although of course it couldn’t last indefinitely, because I have a job to perform don’t I?”

“Yes,” says Will, dipping his head and pretending to bite Hannibal’s forearm. “Your completely unnecessary job, you idiot. Have you forgotten that you’re going to buy me anyway?”

“Although how exactly does one examine an omega?” muses Hannibal, leaning down himself so he can rest his cheek against the top of Will’s hair. “It’s not something I’ve ever had sufficient interest to look into before. Do you have any advice for me?”

Will laughs and then twists his neck round so he can nuzzle Hannibal’s jaw with his forehead before searching out his mouth for a quick kiss. “Yes,” he says. “But I’m not going to give it to you.”

“How incredibly heartless you are,” says Hannibal. “Where has all your famous empathy gone? Omegas are supposed to take pity on their mindlessly captivated alphas. You should feel sorry for us when we lose our heads over you.”

“Not this omega: cry me a river.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal with amusement. “Then I shall have to improvise shan’t I? I imagine I’d begin by checking your neck.” Slowly he now smooths his palm across the back of it; the touch is warm and firm and makes Will quiver slightly. “Yes, very good,” says Hannibal approvingly. “No bites or scratches, so I can be confident another alpha hasn’t had their hands all over you. Or at least not here – I’d have to see your entire body to be completely certain. In fact I’d also want to establish your obedience, so it would be a perfect opportunity to investigate both at the same time.” He pauses again then continues to stroke Will’s neck for a few seconds before calmly adding, almost as if it’s an afterthought: “Take your clothes off.”

“Is that your idea of being endearing?” asks Will. He pulls himself free then turns round to look at
Hannibal, his mouth quirking into a smile as he does it. “Aren’t you going to ask me *nicely*?” Hannibal smiles himself then leans back on the sofa and steeplets his fingers in front of his face, never once taking his eyes off Will. “I take it that’s a no?”


“Or what?”

“Or else,” replies Hannibal. Will grins again and throws him a rebellious little eye-roll, although still reaches up with one hand so he can start to unfasten his shirt. “That’s it,” says Hannibal fondly.

“Good boy. Pull the collar down and show me your chest. You see? It’s not so difficult to obey for once, is it? Now the rest: pull it open, but do it slowly. Very good, Will. Keep your eyes on me. Now slide it down over your shoulders.”

This continues for some time, with Hannibal choreographing the precise timing and placement of every piece of clothing with increasing relish until Will is stood in front of him completely naked and trembling slightly from an obvious chaos of helpless, hopeless arousal. He still looks rather wan, Hannibal decides: as slender, willowy, and demon-haunted as an El Greco saint in which the recent run of sleepless nights have smudged shadows round his large eyes and made the luminous skin even paler than usual. In this respect a sumptuous palette of slim white scars are also clearly visible on his arms and torso, although they seem less like imperfections than they do embellishments; blemishes that would be sad or unsightly on anyone else, yet gain a certain distinction through having the good fortune to wind across Will’s body. Like *craquelure* on a particularly arresting portrait or patina on stone: testimony and witness-bearing to a lifetime of resilience. In turn the smattering of bruises on his thighs and throat (faintly purple like violets and put there by Hannibal) stand out with a bright-edged bloom that makes him appear deceptively fragile and, if possible, even more appealing. In fact, decides Hannibal, his boy is completely *glorious*: as sculptured, elongated and exquisitely loose-limbed in the buttery lamplight as the favourite model of Raphael or Michelangelo.

“Come here *mylimasis*,” he says now in a gentler voice. He takes hold of Will’s waist, rubbing his thumbs in the delicate hollow of both hip bones before reaching up to stroke his throat. Will makes a soft purring noise as he leans into the touch and Hannibal notes with pleasure the quick healthy thrum from the carotid artery and the delightful abrasiveness of Will’s stubble, so different to the velvety softness of his hair. “Look at you,” he says approvingly. “You’re not self-conscious at all.”

“No,” replies Will, who’s clearly impatient for more attention and is now busy trying to climb onto Hannibal’s knee.

“You would have been at the time though wouldn’t you?” says Hannibal, taking hold of Will’s waist again to make him stay still. “If I’d been trying to buy you all those years ago: you would have been embarrassed.” For a few seconds he closes his eyes, obviously enjoying the image of it. “Of course you would have been, you didn’t understand how beautiful you are. You’d have been flushing with resentment and humiliation and trying to prevaricate for as long as possible. Perhaps you would have told me you didn’t want to.” As he’s speaking he slowly runs his hands along Will’s thighs, relishing the way it makes him tremble. “All the resistance would have been in vain of course,” adds Hannibal softly, lowering his head so he can kiss the tip of Will’s hipbone. “Because at that point you wouldn’t realise how very patiently I’m prepared to wait. Yet now we’d have an interesting situation on our hands, because no matter how much I tried to hide it you’d still see my admiration for you. You’re so perceptive, you’d notice it straight away. And you’d like that wouldn’t you? It would excite you: you yearn so badly to be celebrated and accepted. So even though you’d be glaring at me, I would know that the rather charming flush on your cheekbones was no longer from embarrassment alone, but also from the first stirrings of desire.”
“Hmmm, yes,” says Will, who’s loving how unhinged he’s starting to feel with the heady, exhilarating longing of the whole thing. It’s almost like being high: eyes welded shut, breathing ragged and frantic, his entire body a kaleidoscope of sound and motion and deliriously lost in the sensation while suspecting that maybe it’s all too much – except for the awareness that it’s also nowhere near enough.

“So now would come the next part of my examination,” adds Hannibal in the same rhythmic voice. “An alpha buying an omega expects to be the first lover she or he has ever had. That way we can break you in however we like. So of course I would have to check for any signs of sexual experience; it would be irresponsible for me not to. What do you think Will? Would you have let me do that?”

“Oh fuck, yes…I’d have let you.”

“Turn round for me then,” says Hannibal, gently taking hold of Will’s waist again so he can lever him to the side. “That’s it. Now bend over from the hips and spread your legs. Good boy. So obedient for me aren’t you?” Will bites his lip then gives a low whine as he feels a broad thumb beginning to massage his hole; helplessly excited, even as he’s faintly self-conscious, at the way he can feel a glistening trail of slick start to slide down his thigh.

“Perfect,” murmurs Hannibal, neatly bracketing his own legs between Will’s so it’s impossible for him to close them. “Very lovely and sensuous. You know, I think I would have wanted to photograph you like this: a memento of the occasion for me to savour at a future date.”

“Oh God, you would not have done that.”

“But I would beloved. Which would humiliate you the most do you think? The fact I’d have pictures of you with your legs spread wide open? Or the fact you were so wet and excited while I was doing it?”

“Both,” says Will rather wildly. “Oh fuck. You can do that if you want – for real. I don’t care.”

“I know you don’t my love,” purrs Hannibal. “You like the idea of it don’t you? You like that I desire you so much I can’t hide it; you think it gives you power over me. Although of course,” he adds, beginning to stroke the side of Will’s thigh, “you wouldn’t have been this audacious back then. You’d have been growing anxious because you’d know that my examination was going on far longer than it should. I’d be able to sense your unease and my alpha instincts would have taken over – I’d have started to gentle you without even realising I was doing it. I’d have put my hand on the small of your back, I think. Partly to provide reassurance but also, I confess, because I’d want an excuse to see if your skin is as velvety as it looks. Then I’d have murmured your name very tenderly as I caressed you. My palm would probably have felt rather cool and it would have made you tremble. Please try and relax Will, I would have said; but of course you wouldn’t have been able to relax, because by now you would have grown quite frantic with anticipation.”

Will obligingly moans at the thought of it, spreading his legs even wider then gasping again at the awareness of a fresh trail of slick sliding downwards. “You’re so responsive aren’t you?” murmurs Hannibal, running his thumb across it. “It’s perfect. How delighted I would have been to see this: that we’ve only just met and my beautiful omega boy is already so attuned to the scent and touch of his alpha.” Leaning forward he scrubs his teeth against Will’s thigh, just hard enough to sting. “Although perhaps a little punishment for him too, for being so wanton and shameless.”

“Don’t you dare,” says Will, who’s breath has started to catch.

“But how could you stop me, dearest? I’m much stronger than you are. Anyway, you want me to
buy you, remember, so you’re trying to make the best impression possible.” As he’s speaking he starts to rub the pad of his thumb a little harder against Will’s hole and Will promptly moans again then goes quiet. “The colour is beautiful,” adds Hannibal caressingly. “A very pale pink. Along with your neck that confirms to me you’ve never been bonded with anyone – although it doesn’t prove that you’ve never had another alpha inside you. To establish that I’m going to have to examine you properly.”

“Oh God, yes – do it. Hurry up.”

“Patience,” says Hannibal with another slow smile. “And not like this either. I want you over my knee.” Without any warning he takes hold of Will’s waist and scoops him off the floor, turning him round mid-air and then tenderly laying him face down again across the sofa so he can arrange his body exactly how he wants him. Will gasps at the suddenness of it but makes no attempt to pull away, instead writhing luxuriously over Hannibal’s lap as he spreads his legs further apart.

“That’s it beloved,” murmurs Hannibal, skimming his hand along Will’s spine. “Very good. Make yourself look beautiful for your alpha.” He waits a little longer, enjoying Will’s growing impatience, then slowly slides a hand between his legs; massaging in exquisitely teasing circles before finally giving Will what he wants and pushing two fingers deep inside his body. Will gives a low moan and goes completely rigid. “Can you feel that?” murmurs Hannibal, expertly exploring and probing until Will’s breath is coming out in a series of panting gasps. “It’s exactly as I supposed. They’re sliding in far too easily: it’s a sure sign you’ve had other lovers before me. And yet you’re enjoying it so much. Would you have been trembling the way you are now if this had happened for real? I rather suspect you would. This beautiful little omega is becoming so excited, I would have thought to myself. He needs me to take care of him.”

“Yes,” gasps Will, frantically grinding his hips against the hard length of Hannibal’s thigh. He can feel a flush of wetness spill across his abdomen where he’s leaking pre-come all over himself and the awareness of it makes him shudder then cry out again. Hannibal’s other hand promptly glides across his stomach, followed by a quiet noise of satisfaction as he feels it too. “Oh God, Hannibal,” gasps Will. “I like that. I really like it.”

“So beautiful Will,” says Hannibal in a soft, intense voice. “I’d be giving myself away now, wouldn’t I – just as much as you are? There’s no conceivable way that this could be for examination after all; its only clear purpose is to give you pleasure. And so much pleasure. You hardly know how to bear it, despite the fact we’ve scarcely even begun. I’d already be imagining how you’d feel when I make love to you for the first time; I’d just want to buy you and take you home straight away – back home and straight onto my bed. I wouldn’t care anymore that you weren’t the innocent, virginal omega I was promised.”

Will moans again then plants his feet against the edge of the sofa to give himself better leverage for thrusting his groin against Hannibal’s. “You know, it’s rather perfect seeing you this way,” adds Hannibal reverently, gripping onto Will’s thigh to force his legs wider apart. “So vulnerable and desperate. The way you’re writhing and shuddering you could almost be struggling; like something fragile and breakable fighting for its life. I would have to keep clinging onto you through the final throes, wouldn’t I; hold you in my arms until you grew silent and still? And yet there is so much life in you.”

“Oh God. Just...oh fuck, just let me come.”

“Patience, beloved. Not until I’m inside you. Mmm, that's it. Good boy. I love to watch you enjoy it. You’re stunning like this. Yet those beautiful noises you’re making might be the sounds of distress as much as desire.” Reaching up he gently presses a hand across Will’s mouth. “I’d have to keep you
quiet wouldn’t I? Someone might overhear otherwise and come to investigate. After all, you’re worth
tens of thousands of dollars. I’m supposed to be sitting here admiring you from a respectful distance:
to look but not to touch. What would your chaperone say if they walked in and found you over my
knee with my fingers inside you?”

Will bites Hannibal’s hand then manages to gasp, rather malevolently: “You’d get sued.”

“Yes,” purrs Hannibal. “And for a huge amount probably, but I still wouldn’t care. It would be more
than worth it just to see you like this and explore your body. Besides, whatever Andrew paid for you
I would have paid double. Treble. I would have paid twenty times the amount if I’d had to.”

As he’s speaking he slows down the movement of his hand then teasingly strokes Will with his
are you doing? Don’t. Just…ah, I need this.”

“Don’t worry beloved, I know exactly what you need. And you know you can trust me to take care
of you.”

Will groans again even louder then tenses for a few seconds before abruptly flipping over and
hauling himself upright so he can straddle Hannibal’s knee. Hannibal takes hold of his waist to help
him keep his balance and Will gives another small groan then draws a few laboured breathes as he
struggles to get himself under control. Hannibal, sensing the enormous effort this is taking, smiles up
beatifically and Will pants out a laugh when he sees it. “God, you’re so authoritative,” he finally
manages to say. Leaning forward he presses their foreheads together then gives Hannibal a nudge.
“Even for an alpha you’re impossible. Anyway, you’ve forgotten something.”

“Oh yes? What have I forgotten?”

“Would you really?” says Hannibal, beginning to smooth his hands up and down Will’s spine. “How
very enterprising of you.”

“I’d want to see if you’re any good,” replies Will. He draws another shaky breath then starts to
roughly pull off Hannibal’s shirt, speed making him clumsy and completely oblivious to the pinging
sound as some of the buttons hit the floor. “I’d want you to prove that you know how to fuck me
properly. I mean for all I know you’re just some rich, useless alpha who wouldn’t know what to do
with an omega if he got one.” For a few seconds he abandons the shirt then angles his neck into a
painful twist so he reach Hannibal’s mouth instead, pillaging hungrily as if his life depends on it and
clawing both hands against his neck and shoulders. “Oh shit, look at that,” he adds as he pulls away.
“You’re so hard. You’re desperate for this aren’t you? I bet you’re not going to last five minutes.”

“You think so, do you?” replies Hannibal, who’s started to smile again. “In that case you’re simply
going to have to try me and see.”

Will grins back then starts to teasingly rock his hips against Hannibal’s. “You know my doctor tried
to warn me off you,” he says, beginning to unfasten Hannibal’s belt with his free hand. “She thinks
you’re just a slutty alpha who’s using me as a notch on your bedpost. Ironic really, isn’t it? If you’d
bought me you’d have been checking my history but you’d never have described your own.”

“Assuredly not,” agrees Hannibal, reaching down to help Will remove the belt. “Alphas don’t tend to
divulge such things to their omegas. But you can ask if you want to. I’m at your disposal.”

“Really?”
“Really. What do you want to know?” Will, who wasn’t expecting this sort of openness, raises an eyebrow; and Hannibal smiles again then adds “You have my permission to be as invasive as you like.”

“As invasive as I like?” repeats Will. For a few seconds he goes quiet then carefully resettles himself until his thighs are nestled snugly round Hannibal’s hipbones and he can take hold of his hands in both his own. “Okay then,” he adds. “For starters: how many omegas have you slept with apart from me?”

“Four,” says Hannibal promptly.

“Seriously? As many as that.”

“As many as that.”

“You’re terrible. Most alphas have never even had one.”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal with a hint of smugness. “But I am not most alphas. And before you ask, none of them were as remotely memorable as you are.”

“I wasn’t going to ask that,” lies Will. “It’s not a ranking system.” Hannibal promptly gives another smirk which Will pretends not to see. “So…what about other alphas then? Have you ever had one of them?”

“Yes.”

“Have you really?” asks Will, surprised in spite of himself. “When?”

“When I was younger. Much younger, in fact – I would have been about 18 and still living in France. He was around the age you are now; perhaps a few years older.”

Will raises his eyebrows, visibly struggling to imagine this. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes very much, although it’s not something I’ve repeated since.”

“Why not?”

“I would have thought you of all people could guess why. Namely that most alphas tend to be extremely irritating, so it’s hard to find one appealing enough to desire any sort of intimacy with.”

“I wish I was an alpha so I could fuck you like that,” says Will, rather wildly. “I’d do it better than he ever did.”

Hannibal immediately starts to smile. “Of that,” he replies, “I have no doubt at all.”

Will catches Hannibal’s eye then falls quiet again for a few seconds before making a small growling noise and roughly pouncing on him: tugging at the rest of his clothes as he does so then pushing him down against the sofa so he can rake his fingers against every bit of skin he can reach. “Perhaps I should be grateful you’re not an alpha,” adds Hannibal, trying to take hold of Will’s hands. “You would probably have wrecked me on our first meeting.”

“Get on your back for me,” mutters Will, as he pulls away. “Do it now. And for God’s sake stop talking.”

“What a terrible tyrant you are beloved,” replies Hannibal serenely. “I shall have to see a doctor myself so they can give me a similar warning about you.”
Will laughs again at this then leans in for another, gentler kiss before forcing Hannibal backwards until he’s lying down and Will can climb on top of him. By now it seems fairly impossible that either of them can last very long, so he makes sure he takes his time over it: lowering down extremely slowly until he feels Hannibal’s cock pushing into the hot, slippery tightness of his body – pushing in deep – and so thick and hard and perfect that it fills him up in a way he never imagined he could have needed outside of being in heat. “Oh,” says Will, sounding almost shocked. “Oh yes, you feel so good.”

“As do you my love. You feel perfect.”

Will moans in agreement then rocks downwards, just as Hannibal pushes up to give it to him in a series of rhythmic, powerful thrusts that Will can really feel. “God, yeah,” he says helplessly. “Just like that.” Hannibal pivots his hips even harder and this time Will makes a sound that’s embarrassingly close to a wail. “So what’s the hell’s my chaperone going to say now?” he manages to add with a half-laugh. “When they walk in and find me riding my alpha’s cock?”

“They will not say anything to you.” Hannibal strokes along the curve of Will’s spine then takes hold of his waist, slowly pushing him back and forward with his hands until Will is starting to quiver and make small mewling noises. “As the alpha I’ll get the entirety of the blame.”

“Then you’d better make it worth our while hadn’t you?” says Will. He gives his own hips a final thrust then gracefully drops forward so he can press his face against Hannibal’s neck. “Seeing as how you’re going to get sued – and I’m going to get locked in a chastity belt for the next few years.” Hannibal makes an amused noise and Will smiles too as he begins to suck a bruise below his jaw, relishing the fact everyone will be able to see it and the sense of ownership this implies. “I’m not going to touch myself,” he adds. “And I won’t let you do it either; I want you to make me come just from fucking me. And if you manage it, I might consider letting you buy me.”

“Oh I see,” says Hannibal, tipping back his head to give Will better access. “That’s the deal?”

“That’s the deal.”

“Then I accept your terms,” says Hannibal. For a few seconds he just smiles rather wolfishly and then hooks both hands round Will’s shoulders to kiss him – tenderly and sincerely and on and on and on – before grabbing his waist and abruptly hoisting him upright. Will, who wasn’t expecting this, gives a gasp of surprise; then promptly gasps again even louder as he finds himself being flipped onto the floor and onto his back. Hannibal leans over him straight away and repeats the previous predatory smile. “Ready?” he says softly.

Will groans with impatience instead of replying and Hannibal smiles even more as he takes hold of Will’s legs and pushes them up to his chest. “You know I wish you did have a chaperone,” he adds in a voice that’s much more intense than before. “I’d want them to see you afterwards. See you reeling around from having a knot deep inside you: dishevelled, disorientated, and completely insensate with pleasure. For everyone to see you like that and to know I was the one who’d done it to you.” Leaning down he now grasps hold of Will’s chin, gently yet firmly moving his face round until they’re looking at one another. “One day I want you to do that for me Will. I’m going to have you, and then I’m going to take you out afterwards to show you off. It’s time people knew who you really belong to.”

Will opens his mouth to reply only to lose it all in a choked-off moan as he feels the thick, blunt head of Hannibal’s cock pushing up against him. “That’s it my love,” murmurs Hannibal, taking hold of Will’s hand. “Is this what you want? If I give it to you are you going to come for me? You are, aren’t you – I know you will, you always take it so well. Let me see how much you need your alpha.”
“Oh God,” gasps Will. “God…Hannibal…” He tips his head back, exposing his throat so Hannibal can graze it with his teeth, then clings onto his shoulders and hangs on as Hannibal sinks inside him with a single hard thrust. By now his hands seem to be stroking Will everywhere and Will’s whole body is trembling as he rolls his hips and arches his spine, lithe and graceful in the utter ecstasy of it as he gasps out Hannibal’s name. In fact he can’t fully process what’s happening anymore: can’t separate between the feverish cacophony in his head and the rapturous swell of desire in every part of his body. Every cell, every fibre, every drop of heated blood, as their damp skin slides together and Will feels himself tightening around Hannibal’s cock while his own grows slick and heavy against his stomach. Then he rolls his hips again and knows in that frenzied moment that while neither of them have touched it he’s going to come anyway. Oh God it’s going to happen any second now, it definitely is – he can’t possibly last much longer. He can feel teeth digging into the fragile skin of his shoulder blade and, oh fuck, he’s actually being bitten; and then: “Oh,” gasps Will, and his voice sounds perilously close to breaking. “I’m going to…Oh God, Hannibal. Oh I’m coming, oh God I’m coming, I’m coming…I…"

“Will,” says Hannibal reverently, with a sigh so low it’s almost a hiss. “Mano meilė. Beloved. Look at you: you’re perfect.” Will cries out again and Hannibal wraps both arms round his back to hold him through it, kissing his throat and murmuring praise and encouragement the entire time until Will’s finally stopped shuddering and gone still. Easing back a little he then covers Will’s body without making him bear his full weight, and Will sighs with contentment and buries his face in Hannibal’s neck, giving a small moan as he feels the tight stretch of a knot pressing against him. “My love,” murmurs Hannibal, delightedly starting to stroke Will’s face. “Did you like that?”

Will huffs out a laugh then reaches up and tangles his fingers into Hannibal’s hair. “It was blissful,” he says. “But also…kind of demented.” Hannibal gives the most appalling smirk in response and Will wrinkles his nose at him then gently tugs at his hair. “And as soon as we can move again we need a shower. We’re sweaty and smelly and covered in come.”

“Excellent use of alliteration there Will,” says Hannibal serenely. “A touch of iambic pentameter too – what a poet you are.”

Will laughs out loud at this before eventually falling silent again; visibly becoming more serious as he slides his hand away from Hannibal’s hair to cradle his cheek instead. Hannibal stares back with a rather intense expression, and Will reaches out with his other hand so he can take hold of Hannibal’s: entwining their fingers together as he gazes up at Hannibal gazing down at him. Hannibal’s eyes are very soft and dark, almost glistening, and in that moment Will’s breath hitches as he’s overcome with a renewed sense that right now Hannibal is really seeing him: stripping back the layers and artifice and truly seeing Will for everything that he is – everything that’s flawed and fatal and damaged – as if it’s endlessly artful and fascinating. As if it’s something beautiful, in fact: Hannibal’s life endeavour and masterpiece…his personal work of art. Will now swallows audibly, aware of how suspiciously damp his eyelashes are starting to feel. Oh Christ, surely there can’t be tears there? He blinks a few times, suddenly overwhelmed, and Hannibal leans down and kisses his forehead. “What is it Will?” he says quietly. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” mutters Will, briefly closing his eyes. Hannibal’s breath feels so soft against his skin: tender heat and humidity as he brushes his lips across Will’s eyelids. “I’m fine.”

“You seem so pensive.”

“Not really.” Hannibal nuzzles his face again without responding and Will takes a slightly shaky breath and finally adds: “I guess I just sometimes find it comforting to watch you.”
“Do you?” asks Hannibal after a slight pause. In fact there’s a trace of emotion beneath the usual deadpan tone that’s not normally there, and Will can’t help feeling hugely touched by the sense that this wasn’t an answer Hannibal expected to hear. “And why is that?”

Why? thinks Will silently. Because you’re lethal in construction and destructive by design; yet you’re inventive and inspirational, and while you might not have made me a better person you’ve encouraged me to be a better version of myself. Because you’re full of mystery and yearning and things left unspoken; and because you elevate and enlighten me, and because I never know myself as well as I do when we’re together.

But in the end he just smiles very faintly then runs his finger along the edge of Hannibal’s cheekbone without trying to elaborate. “Because,” he says quietly, “sometimes when I look at you I feel like I see myself staring right back.”

*****

Will’s had detailed directions in advance but even without them he’d still have known which house was the right one. In fact the building itself seems unremarkable on first glance: as charmingly picturesque as a child’s drawing of a house that snuggles in the centre of its neat suburban street with the same green window shutters, same painted veranda and same trailing sweet gum trees as its neighbours. But then an observer could look closer and would finally realise that it has another feature that’s not shared by any of the others: the word Killer dripping down the wall in scarlet letters which gleam slick and wet in the afternoon sun. In fact the resemblance to the FBI’s parking lot graffiti is striking, and it’s this eerie similarity that initially registers more with Will than the meaning of the word itself. Although he also feels it looks worse here, because the vandalism is far more shocking against a backdrop of jungle gyms, family-sized jeeps and the fragrant scent of magnolia than it ever was against cars and asphalt; like a rotten tooth in an otherwise immaculate mouth. Evidently, Will decides, this is one part of the world in which certain crimes have neither been forgiven or forgotten.

Right on cue there’s a twitching of curtains from a house across the street, and Will stares at them defiantly before knocking on the door once, then twice, until it eventually creaks open and a pair of eyes peer at him from behind the security chain. Will introduces himself then shows his badge, and the eyes briefly disappear before the chain’s pulled away and Will is allowed through. The woman standing on the other side is frail and slight with cropped dark hair and a face on which anxiety has prematurely etched a number of gossamer-fine lines around the mouth and forehead. Will knows that as far as official records go her name is Helena Johnson, owner of a successful real estate firm, alumna of Loyola University and, as far as a quick Google search could ascertain, a passionate fundraiser for a number of local animal charities. But what he additionally knows – and what the wielder of the scarlet spray-paint clearly knows too – is that she’s also Richard Black’s youngest daughter.

“I’m sorry,” says Will now, waving his hand in the direction of the door. “That must be really...” He pauses for a few seconds, struggling to find the right adjective. In fact this is easier said than done, because it has to be something that won’t minimise it (annoying, frustrating) while also avoiding sensationalism (horrific, sickening). He finally settles for ‘hard’ then immediately regrets it as inadequate; Helena’s only response is a shrug. “Do you need some help getting rid of it?”

“It’s fine. Thank you. I called one of my girlfriends and she and her husband are coming round this evening.” She swipes her hair back from her forehead – a restless, fidgety gesture that Will can immediately tell she’s performed a hundred times before – then stares at him rather blankly as if she’s struggling to focus on his face. “Can I get you a coffee?”
Will’s privately dying for a coffee but can see the way her hands are shaking and is genuinely concerned she might end up scalding herself. “I’m good thanks,” he says. “Maybe later.”

“Sure.”

Her expression closes down again and Will gets the sense she’s scrabbling through some mental script of what she’s supposed to do next now that the coffee’s been offered and refused. “I appreciate you agreeing to meet with me,” he prompts. “I know it’s difficult.”

Helena merely shrugs again, and Will supposes that in the grand scheme of things it’s probably not that difficult – at least not compared to the grim, grinding reality of living day after day with the memory of her father and what he did. It’s actually rather impossible to imagine it, even with an imagination like his is supposed to be. After all, how do you possibly cope with knowing that the essence of someone like Richard Black is woven into the fabric of your very cells – that everything from your hair to your toenails to the worry lines on your anxious face has been grown from him? Perhaps it’s obvious to her on a surface level too and she feels that she looks like her father... perhaps she sees his face staring back every time she passes a mirror?

“You want to sit down?” says Helena eventually. She immediately looks concerned again, as if she thinks he’ll refuse a chair the same way as refusing the coffee and then there’ll be nothing left to offer. Will smiles encouragingly and Helena nods in response then abruptly turns round and disappears down the hallway while Will follows wordlessly behind into what he assumes is the living room. Given the grimness of the atmosphere he’s somehow expecting it to be sombre and sad in its décor, and is pleased to realise that it’s vibrantly cheerful instead with a lot of lush glossy-leafed plants, walls of bright Byzantine blue and a large bay window to let in the light. A gigantic ginger cat, slumbering across the sofa and shedding fur across the cushions, adds a pleasantly domestic touch. From where he’s stood he can see that the bookcase is filled with travel publications, and the collection of objects arranged at intervals on the walls and furniture lend an exotic air in which grinning Chinese Buddhas compete for space with engraved kangaroos, Andalucían wickerwork, colourful painted masks of both modern and traditional design and assorted ceramics that look like they’ve been chosen with care from all four corners of Europe. It gives him a measure of comfort to think that this stricken woman has at least one source of consolation in her life and he makes a point of admiring them before finally taking a seat on the sofa next to the cat. Helena perches opposite him and clasps her thin hands around her knees, hugging herself as if she’s in pain.

“It’s been a long time since something like that’s happened,” she says quietly. “The graffiti I mean. It used to be much more frequent.”

“Do you have any idea why it’s happened again now?”

“Oh sure,” replies Helena as her shoulders arrange themselves into a little anxious hunch. “It’s because of the Sculptor case. Someone else killing omegas – it’s obviously stirred a few memories.”

“I’m sorry,” repeats Will; mostly because he is, but also because he can’t think of anything else to say. “It must be very distressing for you.”

“Yeah, well, what can you do? I often think it might be the victims’ families and if it helps them to take it out on me...I feel like I can’t really complain.”

Will makes a sympathetic noise in response while privately deciding that there’s something extremely familiar about Helena, even though he can’t place exactly what it is. Pretending to stroke the cat he leans forward then peers a bit closer, trying to make sense of the surge of recognition he’s getting from the contours of her face. Yet it’s difficult to pin down what’s causing it, because the recognition isn’t so much from the composite features as much as the way they look in isolation. Frowning to
himself he slowly drags his gaze across the lips and cheekbones, taking in the dark eyes and hair as he tries to work out where he’s seen them before. But the impression is so fleeting that it’s impossible to define it with any degree of precision and he’s ultimately forced to admit that the features could belong to any number of people. Just like the Sculptor’s business cards in fact, whose twins have been shown not only to be carried by Jack and Price, but also by Skinner, Dr Reynolds, Andrew’s private detective – and even by Andrew himself. In this respect not even her original surname is entirely her own, seeing how similar it is to Matthew Brown’s. Perhaps it’s only that after all – that she reminds him of Richard Black’s mugshot. Clearing his throat he now says: “Have you ever considered moving?”

“Yes,” says Helena simply. “I mean I sell houses for a living, it should be the easiest thing in the world. But I never have. Call it… I don’t know. Penance I guess.”

“For what?”

“I feel like I should have known,” replies Helena, and her tone sounds increasingly strained. “Like I should have seen it.”

Will shifts against his cushion, hesitating slightly before he responds. “Sometimes you can’t,” he says quietly. “Trust me. I’ve been there myself.”

“But I was there the whole time: I lived in the same house as him. I should have done more to stop it.”

“How could you?” says Will gently. “What your father did was his sole responsibility – no one else’s. Certainly not yours.”

Helena repeats the same hunched shrug as before then stares at Will with a kind of raw unhappiness that’s truly haunting. It rather reminds him of the famous photographs of soldiers returning from the First World War: the blank numbness like a stretch of water thick with ice, the tortured shadows flickering behind their eyes. Such things that I have seen. “It’s why you’re here isn’t it?” is all she says. “Because of the Sculptor?”

“Yes,” replies Will, glad to have had an opening into what he really wants to ask her. “Like I said on the phone, we think there may be a link to your father’s case. Would you still be willing to look at that photograph for me?” Helena nods her agreement and he rummages in his briefcase to retrieve a copy of Matthew Brown’s mugshot. “Can you tell me if you recognise this man?”

Helena gives the photo the briefest flicker of a glance. “No.”

“No,” repeats Helena without looking at the photo a second time. “I’ve never seen him before in my life.”

Will sighs to himself then stows the photo back in his briefcase; through the opening Matthew Brown’s feral face seem to be staring at him and he automatically reaches out again and snaps it closed. “Well, okay then,” he says. “Thank you anyway.”

From across the sofa the cat cracks open a single yellow eye and gives Will a look of contempt that’s so magnificent in scope even Hannibal might be slightly envious of it. Helena reaches over to rub the feathery cream-coloured fur on its belly and as it rolls on its side its purrs fill the room like a tiny pneumatic drill. “He’s cute,” lies Will. “He seems very friendly.”

“He’s one of four. I got them from a rescue shelter.” Will nods approvingly and Helena gives a tiny
smile as she tickles the cat’s silky ears. “The others are all outside but Jimmy’s kind of a homebody.”

“Our pathologist is called Jim,” says Will as the cat gifts him with yet another withering stare. “He often looks at me just like this one does.”

Helena gives another small smile. “You could have emailed that to me,” she adds without raising her eyes from the cat. “Don’t tell me you came all that way to show me a picture?”

“We can’t really share information like this electronically with a member of the public,” says Will. “But no, I’m chasing up several things while I’m here.” As he’s speaking the cat stretches out its front paws and gleefully sinks its claws into his shirt cuff and he has to quickly move his hand away to avoid it. “Tomorrow I’m going to the precinct to talk to some of the officers originally involved in the case.”

“I hope it’s helpful.”

“Thanks,” says Will, wondering if it really will be. “I hope so too.” Then he clears his throat again, trying to think of a way to broach the next question that won’t sound too accusatory. “I understand you have a brother and sister,” he says carefully, “would you happen to have contact details for them?” Helena nods without elaborating any further and he adds: “I couldn’t find any kind of record for them when I looked.”

“No, you wouldn’t have done – for the simple reason they don’t want to be found.” She pauses then jerks her head towards the window in the approximate direction of the graffiti. “I can’t say I blame them. Liz is still here in the States, but she won’t agree to talk with you. She’s spent the last few years completely distancing herself from everything to do with the name Black. She does support work for omegas now. Mostly healthcare, but also advocacy and campaigning, things like that…as if it could make up in some small way for what our father did.”

“So what about your brother?” asks Will. “How did he cope with it all?”

“Pretty much how you’d expect: he cut himself off from us all and wanted nothing to do with it. In a way I think it was hardest for him because he was our father’s favourite growing up. They went hunting together, played football, fixed cars. You know – father and son stuff.” She waves vaguely in Will’s direction, obviously appealing to his maleness to understand what she’s talking about, and Will nods encouragingly despite never having had that kind of cordial hunting-football-cars relationship with his own father. “So when the arrest first happened he completely denied it,” adds Helena. “He insisted they’d got the wrong man. Then when the evidence mounted up he changed his mind and became terrified that he was tainted in some way himself – the so-called ‘bad seed.’ It was like that whole Kübler-Ross thing: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, whatever else. I forget how it goes.”

“Acceptance,” says Will. “So did he accept it?”

“No. He went abroad after the trial. He was in Australia for a while, then China, a few months in London – it was like he was trying to outrun the whole thing. I get the occasional cards, Christmas and birthdays and such, but we’re not really in touch that often.”

“I see.”

“I don’t have his current address but I’ve got a number for him. To be honest I doubt he’d speak to you either, but I can give him your details and ask him to call.”

“Thanks,” says Will, making a mental note to investigate this more thoroughly himself. “I’d
appreciate that. So what about your mother?”

“My mom’s dead.”

“Ah, I didn’t realise. I’m sorry.”

“A heart attack was the official cause,” says Helena bitterly. “But as far as I’m concerned she was dad’s last victim. She was only 43. Who has a heart attack at 43? She was slim and fit, never had any illnesses her whole life. It was the shock and grief that killed her.”

Will makes a sympathetic noise, privately deciding that this might very well be the case. “How long had they been married for?”

“Oh they’d been divorced for years when he was arrested. It wasn’t like she was in love with him or anything like that. But the knowledge of what he was…that she’d lived with him for years; had children with him. And all the time he was a monster.”

“I can imagine,” says Will gently. “I’m so sorry.”

Helena nods numbly and when she speaks again Will can see a faint gleam of moisture on her eyelashes. “The thing is…” she says hesitantly, “the thing is he didn’t seem that way. I know it sounds crazy, but sometimes I think I’d feel less guilty if he’d treated us as badly as he did everyone else. But he didn’t; he was good to us kids. He just seemed like a regular dad. I mean he’d have these outbursts of anger but they were never at us.”

“They were about alphas?”

“Yes,” says Helena simply. She pauses then peers at Will rather forlornly from over the top of her glasses with a gesture that immediately reminds him of himself. “He hated them. He felt they’d stopped him getting ahead in life. Typical really; he always blamed everyone except himself.”

“How so?”

“Oh he lost his job quite early on. We ended up having to move: get a smaller house, sell the car; you know, the usual stuff. According to him it was all down to alphas. I think us kids bought into that belief too for a while before we finally saw sense and grew out of it. Only dad…dad never grew out of it.”

“So did you believe what he said – that the murders were about revenge?”

“I think the only one who knew that for sure was him.”

“Yes, but what did you think?”

Helena shrugs, briefly looking haunted again. “I think he killed those people because he wanted to Mr Graham; and because he enjoyed it.” For a few seconds she falls silent again before finally raising her head – one of the few times during the whole meeting where she’s actually looked Will in the face. “You think the same don’t you?” she adds quietly. “That’s how you caught him.”

“Ah, I wasn’t sure if you’d remember me.”

“I remember you all right. The prosecution called you at the trial; you testified.”

“I did, yes.”

“I remember everything,” says Helena in the same anguished tone. “I wish I didn’t but it’s like I’m
frozen in time; like I never moved past that morning when the police first knocked on the door. Do you know what I mean? It’s why I don’t even try to escape it. I just live my life in the shadow of what my father did.”

“The events in your past are just that,” says Will gently. “Past events. They can affect you but they don’t have to define you; and they definitely don’t need to dictate your future. It’s your father who got the life sentence, not you.”

“It affects everything,” replies Helena, more to herself than to Will. “My job, my friends, my social life. I mean I’ve been dating this guy for about six months now and I still can’t face telling him…I don’t know how.”

“If he genuinely cares for you he’ll accept it,” says Will. “And if he can’t accept it then one day you’ll find someone who can. But just take your time and do it when you’re ready – you’ve got nothing to prove to anyone. Your main priority right now is yourself.”

“Thank you,” says Helena quietly. She gives Will another small smile – faint and tremulous but definitely there – then dabs at her cheek with a scrap of tissue paper. Her eyes are extremely beautiful: large, dark and shiny as sloes. “You’re probably one of the only people who’s ever said that to me. And I appreciate it; I really do. But I don’t think you can understand what it’s like.”

“No,” agrees Will. “I don’t know what it’s like to have a father like yours. But I know about trying to outrun your past – and I do know about fear.” He gives a faint smile of his own, remembering Jack’s parade of motivational posters and the way he’d been secretly cursing them the day the graffiti turned up in the parking lot. “My boss likes putting slogans up at work,” he says now. “To be honest they just annoy me most of the time, but there was one in particular that stuck in my head. It was about fear and how it has two meanings: Forget Everything And Run, or Face Everything And Rise. Both options are useful of course – but you have to know when it’s the right time to choose each one.” He pauses then gestures round the room at the assorted travel paraphernalia. “You’ve already started. You have things you enjoy. You have a job; you have friends. You have…him.” He points less enthusiastically towards the cat while secretly wishing it was a dog. “You can live for what your own life has to give you – not what your father tried to take away.”

“I know,” replies Helena quietly. “I know what you’re saying is true.” Will can hear there’s a ‘but’ coming and smiles reassuringly. “But I just…I just don’t feel like it is.”

The bitterness and self-blame are palpable, burning in her voice like flares. An unhappy silence then follows in which Will bites his lower lip with sympathy, hesitating a few more seconds before slowly leaning forward so he can look at her directly. He can't take it away – he knows he can’t; can’t undo what's been done – but he’s suddenly determined that if the visit achieves nothing else, he won’t allow himself to leave while she still believes this. “It’s okay to have doubts,” he says in the same gentle voice, “there’s no reason why you should take my word for it after all. But do me a favour. Just for one day – just for a few hours, even – try living as if what I’m saying is right. Even if you don’t believe it yet.”

Helena gives another small smile. “Fake it ‘til I make it?”

“Sure, why not? Call up that guy you mentioned and go see a movie or have dinner. You don’t have to tell him about your father, just focus on having a fun evening. And if it’s too much to feel like you deserve it, just practice acting as if you believe you do.”

“I don’t know,” says Helena beginning to nervously shred the tissue paper between her fingers. “I don’t know if I have the courage.”
“Listen to me,” adds Will gently. “You’re still here: your brother and sister couldn’t deal with it and left. There’s nothing wrong with that, and nothing to be ashamed of, but it reinforces what I’ve been saying.”

“What?”

“That what your father did hasn’t broken you,” replies Will. “It turned you into one of the bravest people I’ve ever met.” There’s a slight pause and when he speaks again he knows he’s talking to himself as much as to her. “The ghosts from our past are always going to call us up Ms Johnson, but it’s not like they ever have anything new to say. What we really need to do is learn how to get too busy living to answer them.”

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When Will finally leaves a few hours later the first thing he does is get in the hire car then locate his phone to call Hannibal. It’s not really necessary of course, and on one level he feels vaguely self-conscious at being so over protective – rather like a fussing parent – but the temptation is too strong to resist by now. Besides, he wants to hear Hannibal’s voice.

“Hey,” says Will fondly when the call is picked up. “You sound sleepy. Did I wake you?” There’s a faint sound of classical music in the background and he briefly tries to picture the scene: Hannibal roaming around the hotel room with shirtsleeves rolled up, possibly holding a glass of wine, and exuding casual glamour the entire time without even trying. “I did, didn’t I? You were having a nap.”

“I do not nap,” replies Hannibal with dignity.

“I bet you were. You should be careful with that; isn’t it what old men do?”

“I have no idea,” says Hannibal. “If I see one I’ll ask him.”

Will grins to himself then turns round to where Helena is stood in the doorway and gives her a farewell wave. “Seriously though,” he adds. “You’re all right aren’t you? Nothing happened while I was gone?”

“Nothing at all – it was entirely uneventful. How about yourself?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“And how was Richard Black’s daughter?”

“Sad,” says Will. “And traumatised; I felt so bad for her. She claimed not to recognise Matthew Brown though, which was disappointing.”

“Tell me about it when you get back,” replies Hannibal. “Which I want you to do immediately by the way, because you’ve been away far too long already and I miss you. The hotel is unbearably dull without you in it.”

“I’m setting off now. I should be back in an hour depending how the traffic is.” Will checks his watch then grins again. “You can have another nap while you’re waiting.”

“What a horror you are,” says Hannibal. “I don’t suppose I should be rewarding such rudeness, although I’m going to anyway because I’m planning to make you dinner.”

“Don’t you want to go out?”
“Not especially. I’d rather we had some time by ourselves.”

“Okay then,” says Will, immediately cheering up again. “That sounds great. I’ll see you soon.”

“Not soon enough.”

“I’ll run every red light I can,” says Will with a smile. “Behave yourself in the meantime won’t you?”

“Only if you do too.”

Will smiles again then reluctantly hangs up the phone and starts the engine, manoeuvring away from the kerbside straight afterwards with all the usual caution that comes from driving someone else’s car. In the wing mirror he sees that Helena is still stood in her doorway so waves to her for a final time before speeding away; and Helena waves back and smiles again, then watches until he’s disappeared from view before replacing the security chain and padding back into her living room. Once there she hesitates for a few moments then retrieves her purse from the table and rummages around to locate her own phone.

“Hi honey,” she says when it’s answered. “How you doing? Sorry I haven’t been in touch sooner… I’ve had a few things on. No it’s fine I’ll – I’ll tell you about it some other time. But I was wondering if you were still free tonight for a movie? Okay, that’s great! Yes of course you can, no problem: if you come round here at nine I’ll be all done.”

Helena carries on the conversation for a few more minutes before she finally hangs up; although even when the call’s over she doesn’t put the phone down. Instead she waits for a while, gnawing her lower lip and frowning to herself, before taking a deep breath and hitting the call button once more. This time the phone rings and rings and rings, and when it’s finally answered it still takes a while for a series of receptionists to connect her. Helena waits restlessly the entire time, pacing up and down on the rug like someone performing penance as her thin face contorts into increasing folds of anxiety.

“Hello?” she says suddenly. “Hello? Is that you?” There’s another pause and her face sags slightly. “Yes, I’m sorry. I know it’s been a while.”

The person at the other end of the phone raises their voice. Their tone is rasping and metallic and at the sound of it Helena’s cat stiffens slightly then leaps from the sofa and stalks off into the kitchen. Helena watches it go in silence, shivering slightly in the cooling air as the sun starts to fade from the bay window and shadows begin to seep across the floor.

“I just…I just needed to unload to someone,” she says finally. “I’ve had a difficult day and I didn’t know who else I could tell. Someone from the FBI came by…no, nothing like that. He was asking about the Sculptor case and how it might relate to dad.” There’s another pause as the voice on the other end grows louder and harsher and Helena gives a small wince. “Of course I spoke to him; I had to. But I was very careful what I said.” For a few seconds her strained face softens slightly and there’s a trace of warmth in her tone when she speaks again. “No. No, you’re wrong – he was a very nice person. I liked him a lot. What? Yes of course I know his name: I recognised him actually, he’s the one who testified at the trial.”

For a few seconds the person on the other end goes completely silent. Then abruptly they start to speak again: the tone is different now, much lower than before – almost a hiss. “Why are you so angry?” says Helena unhappily. “It’s no big deal. But yes, that’s right, it was Will Graham. He’s come back to New Orleans…”
For Will the next few days are a kaleidoscope of several different emotions, all of which seem to contradict each other in a way that shouldn’t really be possible in the same mind at the same time. In fact the sensation is a distinctly odd one, and doesn’t even make total sense to him until he really sits down to think about it – and it’s only through sieving through his responses that he begins to understand how easily dread can be counterbalanced with anticipation, how a preoccupation with the future can blend with an obsession for the past, and how his own anxiety can get augmented by the almost constant calmness provided by Hannibal’s presence. Will supposes that in theory these contrary emotional states should neutralise one another like acid and alkali and leave him in a state of blankly comfortable numbness; but of course that’s not what happens, and instead he finds himself spinning through several extremes with almost dizzying speed that leave him silent one moment then snapping the next. Rather guiltily he’s aware that it’s Hannibal who seems to bear the brunt of these mood swings, although he always absorbs Will’s volatility with excessive patience and never makes any obvious signs of complaint. At times Will even gets the sensation that Hannibal is actively enjoying the spectrum of his emotions like they’re something infinitely artful and fascinating that should be savoured; and after a full week of it Will still can’t quite decide whether he finds this faintly endearing or outright creepy.

“I’m sorry,” says Will on the final evening, “I know I’m being a massive pain in the ass.” Hannibal gives a faint smirk in response and Will sees it and finds himself struggling not to smile. “It’s okay,” he adds, “you can agree if you want to.”

“I wouldn’t describe it in quite those terms,” replies Hannibal in the usual leisurely way. “But yes, it’s true that you’ve been very…reactive since we arrived.”

Will quirks an eyebrow and says “Reactive?” at which point Hannibal promptly smirks again. “That sounds suspiciously like a euphemism,” adds Will, and Hannibal opens his eyes very wide in a display of innocence which finally makes Will laugh out loud. “Yeah, well, I’m still sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry for being a reactive pain in the ass.”

“Not at all.”

“I appreciate you being so patient with me.”

“I don’t take it personally,” replies Hannibal. “It’s understandable considering the stress you’ve been under.” Reaching out he takes hold of Will’s hand, skimming a thumb across the knuckles then stroking along the delicate bones of his wrist. The attention he’s lavishing on this task is extremely obvious – like an archaeologist marvelling over an especially rare excavation – and when he sees Will watching him he gives another feline smile without actually taking the trouble to let go.

Will now removes his wrist from Hannibal’s grasp himself (partly because if left to his own devices
Hannibal will go on examining it all night, and partly because all the stroking is starting to tickle) and
then announces, with a touch of envy: “You don’t really get stressed do you?”

“I do,” replies Hannibal. “I’m just able to mask it more effectively.” Will nods self-consciously,
assuming this to be a reproach for the way he’s been acting, and Hannibal takes the opportunity to
pounce on his wrist again before adding: “Don’t look so forlorn; it wasn’t meant as a criticism. In
fact in some respects I’d say you’re more emotionally resilient than I am, because you have a higher
capacity to accept and endure negative feelings.” Will promptly looks sceptical and Hannibal pauses
for a few moments, suddenly looking thoughtful. “Loss, for example, is something I have almost no
tolerance for at all,” he adds. “To lose someone you love, whether by their own volition or someone
else’s, touches something primal in me. In fact I find it insufferable – and it makes me strike out.”
Will now looks intrigued instead and Hannibal briefly catches his eye then gives a small, elegant
shrug. “It’s also a conversation best postponed for another time,” he says lightly. “You need
something to help you relax and meditations on loss are not the way to do it.”

“Hmm, I guess,” says Will, tactfully prepared to change the subject now he’s got the sense that
Hannibal seems genuinely reluctant to discuss it any further. “I should finish packing. And I could
probably use a massage later if you don’t mind – my back’s killing me.” Hannibal makes a regretful
noise and Will adds: “It’s always the first thing to happen when I’m overworked: that and my skin
gets awful. In fact it’s happened now. I’ve got a horrific spot.”

“Where?” asks Hannibal. Will obediently pushes his hair off his forehead. “There’s hardly anything
there.”

“It’s enormous,” says Will with gloomy satisfaction. “Everyone will think I’m growing a second
head.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not. Don’t you know a massive spot when you see one? I thought you were supposed to be a
doctor.”

“You need some proper food,” replies Hannibal briskly. “That and some rest. And I want to give
you a bath later.”

“Jesus, you will not give me a bath. I’m not a dog.”

Hannibal starts to smile. “You’re right,” he says. “The choice of verb was a poor one. But that
doesn’t change the fact you’re extremely utilitarian in your approach to self-care; one might even say
Spartan. Food and cleanliness are not merely duties to perform after all, but opportunities for
pleasure and recreation.” Will gives a small sigh at the sense of being lectured and Hannibal adds
with a touch of firmness: “So what I mean to say is that I intend to sit in a bath myself, then put my
arms round you and prevent you getting out again until I deem you sufficiently rested.”

“No way are you doing that.”

Hannibal raises a single eyebrow in a way that’s clearly suggestive of battle-lines being drawn. “Yes,
well,” he says. “We’ll see won’t we?”

“Yes we will,” replies Will, who’s struggling not to start laughing again. He rolls his eyes at
Hannibal instead (who rolls his right back) and Will finally does laugh before strolling over and
standing behind him so he can wrap both arms round Hannibal’s chest then nuzzle the back of his
neck with his forehead. In fact this is the type of classically omegan gesture he’d normally avoid like
the plague, yet somehow he doesn’t feel self-conscious about it anymore. When did that happen? He
doesn’t even know. “Did you say you were going to book a cab?” he adds. “We need to be at the airport by 10.30.”

“I have, yes,” replies Hannibal, leaning slightly forward to give Will better access. “I did it just before you got back.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome; considering everything else you’ve had to organise booking a cab was the least I could do. I suppose you’re looking forward to getting home?”

“Yeah, I guess,” says Will, who hasn’t really thought that far ahead. “It’s weird though: it still feels like we’ve only just arrived. In fact I might go for a walk in the morning before we leave – have a bit of a look round and say goodbye to the place. It’ll probably be years before I’m back here again.”

“Not necessarily. We can visit again anytime you like.”

“I think I want to ride on the streetcar,” adds Will rather dreamily. “I haven’t done that since I was a teenager. Although they’ll probably charge me two tickets: one for me and one for my second head.” Hannibal makes an amused noise and Will nudges his neck again, just below his hair. “Did you say you were going to make some food?” he adds hopefully. “Could you do that thing with the redfish you made the other night?”

“I can,” replies Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s forearm where it’s wrapped across his waist. “I think there are enough ingredients left. But only on the condition that you stop working and agree to be given a bath.” Will makes a sighing sound then nudges Hannibal’s neck for a third time. “You don’t have to submit to it graciously,” adds Hannibal. “I give you permission to sit there resenting me the entire time. In fact you can lie on me if you wish, and inflict maximum possible discomfort as your revenge.”

Will laughs at this then gives Hannibal a final nudge before reluctantly letting go again so they can make a start on preparing dinner. In fact cooking together has become a semi-regular custom by now, despite the fact that Will’s contributions always seem to end up more on the side of unambitious duties like mixing sauce or chopping vegetables as Hannibal always refuses the offer of more substantial help. At first Will had dismissed this as a sign of him being controlling, but has since revised this opinion to one that’s a bit more benign: namely that Hannibal seems to genuinely enjoy feeding him both as a form of caretaking as well as a sincere and almost artistic appreciation of the food itself. Will now draws up a stool at the side of the counter and says, as usual, “Can I do anything?” just so Hannibal can reply (also as usual) “Thank you but I think it’s fine,” before finding Will some completely undemanding task so he can still feel involved while taking care of all the intricate work himself.

This ritual out of the way Hannibal now starts assembling ingredients together with extreme deftness, coordinating all the different components like a conductor guiding an orchestra in a way that Will never fails to find engaging to watch. “So what are your conclusions about the past week?” adds Hannibal, beginning to mix paprika, oregano and thyme into a little bowl. “Do you feel you’ve accomplished what you hoped for?”

“No,” says Will bluntly. “There’s still no clear lead for a potential copycat for Richard Black. Not that I necessarily expected there to be, but it’s still disappointing.” He pauses for a few seconds from today’s allotted job (cutting lemons into tiny wafer-thin slices) then frowns rather intensely into the distance. “I was convinced it would be someone local. The press coverage was so limited it’s hard to believe any outsiders would even know who he was.”
“It seems plausible,” agrees Hannibal. “After all, he only thought he was killing omegas. Had he been successful he would have become as infamous as the Sculptor is today.”

“And yet there’s nothing,” says Will irritably. “No correspondence to Richard Black in prison, no similar murders locally, and no record of any accomplices.” He frowns again then puts down the knife to help Hannibal retrieve the fillets of redfish: in the soft lamplight, their flesh looks as pearlescent and pale as slabs of wax. “More to the point there’s no one recognising Matthew Brown. In fact that’s the most disappointing thing of all.”

“Yes indeed. I should say that the absence of information about him is suspicious in itself.”

“Exactly,” agrees Will with obvious frustration. “I’ve been through it so many times but it’s impossible to find any records for him before he started working at the hospital. It’s like he didn’t exist before then – like he just burst fully-formed into the world two years ago. I’m convinced he’s changed his name.”

“From Black?”

“I don’t know,” replies Will with a small shudder. “Maybe. My only consolation is that he’s still in prison so we know where he is. In fact the ultimate test will be if there are any more murders in the meantime. Another Sculptor killing would prove he’s innocent.”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal idly. With great precision he lays the strips of fish across the skillet and Will watches, rather fascinated, at the way the plump white skin immediately starts to smoulder. “Not unlike yourself in fact.”

“What do you mean?”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately, instead delicately drizzling the pan with melted butter then standing back at the resulting plumes of steam. The image is a slightly infernal one: fire and smoke framing his face and bringing out the faintly reddish tinge in his eyes even more than usual. “What I mean,” says Hannibal caressingly, “is that for a while everyone assumed you were the Chesapeake Ripper. That is until the actual Ripper conveniently intervened on your behalf.”

For a few seconds Will goes completely still before picking up his knife again and resuming the chopping even faster than before. “Yes,” he says stiffly without looking up from the counter. “Exactly like that.”

Hannibal’s eyes slide over Will in a leisurely way, allowing the silence to stretch out until it borders on uncomfortable before abruptly pouring more butter across the fish to make it sizzle and smoke. The noise is unexpectedly loud amid the silence and Will’s shoulders immediately arrange themselves into a small flinch. You suspect, don’t you my love? thinks Hannibal with interest. You’ve always suspected; you just don’t want to acknowledge the suspicion. “Of course they can’t keep Matthew Brown in custody forever at the whim of the Sculptor,” he now says out loud. “Does Jack have any other schemes in mind?”

“He called me this morning,” replies Will in the same stiff voice. “They’re still trying to file an assault charge. He said he’d been trying to get in touch with you about it but you weren’t answering your phone.”

“Of course I wasn’t,” says Hannibal. “Why would I speak with Jack if I didn’t have to?” Will’s tense expression relaxes slightly into a hint of a smile and Hannibal adds: “Although the operative word there is trying, which implies a lack of success.”
“Yeah exactly,” replies Will, allowing the fledging smile to immediately disappear in place of a ferocious glare. “His lawyer is moving to dismiss the assault charge and insist it was an alpha dominance fight that got out of hand. And it might just work because Matthew Brown seems to have been telling a few lies about you and a lot about me – particularly how I’m supposed to have acted towards him while I was in the hospital.” He makes an angry sighing sound then begins to grind away with the knife even more vehemently than before. “You can probably imagine.”

“Then they may let him go soon,” replies Hannibal serenely. “Released back into the wild…perhaps you and I might have an occasion to pay him a visit?”

“Perhaps,” replies Will, who now sounds faintly uncomfortable and is going to a lot of trouble to avoid catching Hannibal’s eye. “Either way, as far as the Sculptor goes Matthew Brown is temporarily on hold.”

“And yet no evidence for any other known accomplices or admirers of Richard Black,” says Hannibal. “So where does that leave you?”

“I guess we’ll find out won’t we?” replies Will. He darts his tongue across his lips rather nervously then begins to graze his knife across the chopping board in a restless, fidgety gesture that Hannibal finds endlessly fascinating to watch. “But there’s still one stone that is unturned, and that’s Richard Black’s family – specifically his son.”

“Yes indeed,” says Hannibal with obvious approval. “You were right to pick up on that particular detail: the son who used to go on hunting trips with his uniquely bloodthirsty father.” For a few seconds he falls silent as if envisaging the image of it. “One can’t help but wonder at the type of conversations they must have had.”

“Tell me about it. But so far he’s been impossible to locate.”

“The daughter won’t give you any further information?”

“No, and she’s stopped returning my calls. I can’t find any record of her brother at all – or her other sister for that matter – although it’s not surprising considering the trouble she said they’d taken to hide their identities. In fact she was incredibly cagey about both her siblings. It’s a pity I can’t insist on getting their details but there are no legal grounds to demand them, so…I can’t.”

“And she’s aware that the case in question is the Sculptor?”

“Yeah – she’s aware. I did consider not telling her, but it seemed like the best way to get information. I’m also not sure if she’d have agreed to meet with me otherwise. Even when I was open with her about the importance of it she still took a lot of persuading.”

“Hardly surprising,” says Hannibal crisply. “It’s an overwhelming legacy to be forced to live with. Yet as it happens I agree with the course you’re taking: you were right to try and eliminate other options, but in the obvious absence of them the family of Richard Black is a promising avenue to pursue.” He pauses then gives a grim little smile. “The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons.” There’s another pause as the smile grows faintly broader. “And evil shall with evil be expelled.”

Will hums absent-mindedly then slowly becomes aware that Hannibal’s still staring at him and glances up. “What?” he says irritably. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because I can see the game that you’re playing,” replies Hannibal in an oddly caressing tone. “Be honest Will. The fact you were so quick to link the Sculptor case to her father’s – it wasn’t only to
gain her cooperation was it? There are all kinds of cover stories you could have given her instead of the truth. No, I believe you did it by design; I believe you’re hoping that if one of her siblings does have knowledge of the Sculptor then you intend for her to mention your visit to them. A call from the FBI would make them panic wouldn’t it? And if they feel the net is closing then they may be more likely to be lured into the open.”

“No exactly,” says Will with a touch of irritation. “You’re making it sound like I’m using myself as bait.”

“Then what would you prefer to call it?” continues Hannibal, calmly undeterred by the obvious opposition. “I would have thought bait was the ideal term. Do you know what it reminds me of Will? It reminds me of you describing your fondness for fishing. Because fishing is a form of hunting is it not? It necessitates planning, persistence and patience. Infinite patience: one sets the bait and casts the lure, then waits for the prey to ensnare itself on the line.” Will stares fixedly ahead without answering and Hannibal watches him for a few seconds then softly adds: “So tell me: how disappointed are you going to be if it turns out that you cast your line into the wrong waters and are denied an opportunity to confront the Sculptor personally?”

“And of course I’d be disappointed,” snaps Will. “Someone has to stop him.”

“Naturally they do,” replies Hannibal, whose tone’s now taken on a low, smouldering thrum like a purring jaguar. “But you’re not simply referring to putting him in prison are you? No, you have something else in mind. Because the hunt really is personal now which means merely arresting him will no longer be enough. Not anymore. It’s going to require intimacy, isn’t it Will? It’s going to require your own bare hands.” Will stiffens slightly but refuses to reply. “It’s a bold strategy,” adds Hannibal after a pause. “I congratulate you – although I wish that you’d discussed it with me first.”

“No much to discuss.”

“No indeed,” says Hannibal sardonically. “Apart from the possible consequences.”

Will shrugs again then gnaws fretfully for a few seconds on his lower lip. “It’s ironic really,” he adds, half to himself. “My work on the Richard Black case was one of the main things that persuaded Jack to hire me. It made escaping Andrew possible. And now because of it I’ve got some deranged imitator threatening to kill me. And – if it really is Matthew Brown – to kill you too.”

“There’s a degree of symmetry, certainly.”

Will stiffens again then finally glances up and looks at Hannibal directly. “Why are you saying it like that?” he asks sharply. “You sound as if you’re happy about it.”

“I am,” replies Hannibal, briefly looking even more Sphinxy and inscrutable than usual. “I appreciate equilibrium in all its forms and it pleases me enormously whenever I find it. Life is so full of fragments after all, and symmetry allows us to appreciate them in their isolation while relishing them when they come together in ensemble. It’s so elegant Will. You should respect the power of symmetry. Consider the various pieces: you hunt Richard Black, the Sculptor hunts you, and Andrew’s path is influenced by both which drives his retribution accordingly. You ensnare one, destroy the other, and are destined to commit a combination of either upon the third. In doing so you discover and embrace your own true nature – and thus the circle is complete.” Hannibal smiles again. “All from a love of symmetry.”

“Then I guess you really will be delighted if it turns out Richard Black’s son is mixed up in this,” says Will tersely. “Can’t get more symmetrical than that.”
“Indeed,” replies Hannibal. “The archetypal Family Affair.” Will nods rather numbly, suddenly looking extremely pale and tired, and Hannibal runs his eyes over him then adds in a gentler voice: “Either way there’s nothing you can do about it right now – and in the meantime the food is ready.”

“Is it?” asks Will, who hadn’t even noticed.

“It is. So sit down: eat. One cannot think well, love well, or sleep well if one has not dined well.”

“That’s as clichéd as hell,” says Will. “You got that off a bumper sticker didn’t you?”

“I most certainly did not,” replies Hannibal. “I got it off a greeting card.”

Will barks out a laugh and Hannibal smiles again then takes hold of both his shoulders so he can steer him towards the table. Will obeys without much enthusiasm then sits and fidgets rather irritably with his napkin, only perking up again when he catches sight of the fish and gives an appreciate sniff at the smell of herbs and butter that have now formed a richly tantalizing crust the same colour as caramel. Hannibal moves aside Will’s laptop and a large stack of files then sits down himself, and the meal is ultimately eaten in a companionable silence with Hannibal casting the occasional amused glance at the way has Will abandoned his usual reserve and is busy devouring everything put in front of him like someone half-starved. “That was delicious,” says Will afterwards. “Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome,” replies Hannibal, neatly folding his knife and fork together. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. But I’m afraid it’s now time for you to fulfil your half of the bargain.” Will raises an eyebrow and Hannibal smirks slightly then gestures in the direction of the bathroom. “You have precisely two minutes to go in and take your clothes off,” he adds with mock severity. “Or else I’m going to pick you up and carry you.”

“Oh yeah? Going to carry me are you?”

“I am.”

“Good luck with that,” says Will firmly. “I’d like to see you try.”

This is followed by an exaggerated grimace which immediately makes Hannibal smile again before reaching up to smooth away the frown line between Will’s eyebrows with his thumb. “I know you don’t like thinking about it,” he adds in a gentler voice, “but we need to consider preparations for your heat – namely relaxing you physically and emotionally in the weeks leading up to it. You were so distressed the last time Will. When it happens again I want you to have a beautiful, restful experience that won’t overwhelm you.”

“Sure,” says Will, who can’t help feeling touched by this. “Thanks: I appreciate the concern. But I honestly don’t think it’ll make any difference.”

“As much as I hate to contradict you,” says Hannibal, “I’m afraid the medical literature claims the opposite. And yes, I’m aware that generalisations can only go so far. But even if we’re doomed to failure, I think it’s at least worth a try.”

“Well…okay. I guess,” says Will, doing his best to sound enthusiastic despite being privately convinced that no amount of self-care can possibly take the edge of it. But he doesn’t want to seem ungrateful so in the end goes into the bathroom without further complaint; and where, as an extra concession, he not only spends several minutes experimenting with the dimmer switch to get a suitably ambient glow but dumps half a bottle of the hotel’s expensive bath oil into the water until it’s as fragrant and softly steaming as a Grecian fountain.

“Oh yes, excellent,” says Hannibal, who comes in a few moments later with two glasses and the
remains of the wine bottle. “Very good Will.” Will, who doesn’t care that much about the bath but is pleased that Hannibal’s pleased, smiles rather vaguely and Hannibal adds: “As a reward I fully intend to keep my promise about letting you lie on me.”

“Well you’re definitely not lying on me.”

“You sound very determined about that,” says Hannibal, beginning to unfasten his shirt one-handed while balancing the wine glasses on the ledge with the other. “Is it a point of principle – because you’re an omega and I’m an alpha?”

“No,” says Will. He pauses in removing his own shirt then beams at Hannibal beatifically. “It’s because you weigh a ton.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitches at this as if he’s struggling not to laugh. “Is that so?”

“It is: it is so.”

“I’m glad to have it confirmed.”

“I suppose it’s not your fault,” says Will airily. “It’s all that alpha brawn – big, lumbering muscle mass. Plus your bones are supposed to be denser.”

“Denser than what?” asks Hannibal, getting into the bath and stretching out rather luxuriously. “Than omegas in general, or you in particular? Is that a tacit admission of your own…” he pauses then begins to smirk even more than previously.

“Whatever you’re about to say – don’t,” replies Will, kicking off his jeans so he can climb in himself. “It’s obviously going to be something insulting; I can tell from that look on your face.” The water’s slightly hotter than expected and he shifts around a bit to get used to it before finally settling down until his back is pressed against Hannibal and he can tuck his head beneath his chin. “It was going to be ‘feebleness’ wasn’t it?” adds Will. “I bet it was. If you tell me I’m feeble I’ll drown you.”

“Well obviously I can’t confirm it now,” says Hannibal. “Not if you’re going to drown me.” He smiles to himself then strokes his cheek a few times against Will’s hair before wrapping both arms round his chest and holding him tight. “There: I have you. Don’t even attempt to leave until I say so.”

“I’ll make you leave yourself at some point,” replies Will, whose eyes are now closed. “I’m going to take you to bed after this.” He pauses for a few seconds then yawns and stretches. “Only it seems so far away now: miles and miles.”

“Mmm. Yes it does, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe we should have some stopovers on the way there? The bathroom floor…up against the wall in the living room…”

“Listen to you. I thought alphas were supposed to be the insatiable ones?”

“Then you thought wrong,” says Will. He stretches out his foot and gives Hannibal’s a tap, followed by a sharp little dig with his toes. “That’ll teach you to listen to stereotypes.”

“Monkey toes,” replies Hannibal fondly, giving them a stroke with his own. “Look how long they are.”

“Shut up, they’re not.”
“They are. You have extended phalange bones: very slender and well-shaped…”

“…and monkey like?”

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal. “We ought to put them to some practical use. For example I have several fruit trees that require harvesting every year. Normally I hire someone to bring a ladder but from now on I shall just send you up instead.”

Will laughs then reaches up to give Hannibal’s hair a tug. “I should drown you for that,” he says. “Consider yourself warned.” Hannibal pretends to bite his ear and Will makes an amused noise then prods him with his foot again. “This is actually really nice,” he adds sleepily. “It was a good idea. I never normally bother with baths.”

“I know you don’t. You leap into a shower for the minimum possible time then leap straight out again. Utilitarian – just as I said before.” Will hums in agreement then shifts slightly so he can tip his head back against Hannibal’s shoulder as a silent indication that he wants his face kissed. “You know this genuinely isn’t from a fear of drowning,” adds Hannibal, obediently pressing his lips against Will’s forehead, “but I wasn’t going to use any kind of synonym for ‘feeble.’ Irrespective of gender you’re extremely strong. In fact you’re in even better condition than you were several months ago.” For a few seconds he pauses then slowly skims his palms across Will’s rib cage. “You’re also a healthier weight. You have beautiful bone structure but it used to be much too near the surface.”

“That’s all your cooking – I’ll probably end up even heavier than you are. Except in your case it’s muscle and in my case it would be mounds of flab.”

“What a singular image.”

“I know: you’ll have to roll me to my next crime scene. Although on the plus side at least it might put Matthew Brown off.”

“It would not put me off – the more of you the better.”

Will laughs again then gives Hannibal’s foot another prod that’s slightly harder than the last one. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not. I’ve always liked looking at you and I’d find you fascinating whatever form you were in. In fact one day I intend to immortalise my fascination and persuade you to sit for a portrait.”

“You want to draw me?” asks Will rather hesitantly. “I don’t know about that. I don’t think I’d like it.”

“I understand,” replies Hannibal. “Your natural modesty rebels at the idea. Besides, you’re so full of energy it would probably be hard to get you to stay still for long enough. Perhaps a meticulous sketch is out of the question then, and a beautifully anarchic scribble would have to do instead?”

“Okay, great. You want to scribble me?”

“Yes, why not?” says Hannibal rather dreamily. “Something wild and chaotic with spiky edges and thick lines made with charcoal – spilling across the page and crammed to all four corners with vitality.”

As he’s speaking he starts to stroke Will’s chest again and Will makes an attempt to laugh before it turns into a little rumbling purr halfway through. “You know it’s a constant surprise at how incredibly susceptible I am to that,” adds Hannibal, lightly pressing his fingers against the hollow at the base of Will’s throat. “I like to think I’m above such things as a rule, but when I hear you make
that sound I seem to regress into full-fledged alpha.”

“Oh dear Dr Lecter,” says Will, giving Hannibal’s foot another tap. “That’s rather embarrassing for you.”

“Indeed it is. Imprudent too, because now I’ve admitted it and you can use the knowledge to your advantage.”

“You mean manipulate you?” says Will innocently. “Would I do such a thing? Plus I’d have to be very careful that you weren’t manipulating me at the same time. Otherwise it would be like some sort of cosmic black hole of manipulation; the world would probably spin off its axis.”

“An unstoppable force meets an immovable object,” replies Hannibal. “Although to be honest I rather had that impression from the beginning; in fact I’d only known you a few months before I had a strong sense of foreboding that I’d met my match.”

“Game, set and match,” says Will. He wraps his own hands over Hannibal’s then falls quiet for a few seconds. “I know this is all kind of joking,” he finally adds in a more serious voice. “But I do appreciate you saying that.”

“I know you do,” replies Hannibal. “Just as I know you understand that I’m not entirely joking.” Will gives a small nod and Hannibal breaths against his skin in a soft flutter of air before tightening the grip on his hands. “I know equality matters to you,” he adds gently. “Just as I know that you’re thinking about the situation with Andrew. It’s been troubling you all week hasn’t it: you’re tormenting yourself with what would have happened to you if you hadn’t managed to escape the first time?” Will sighs without replying and Hannibal squeezes his hands again. “If you want to talk about it you know I’m ready to listen.”

Instead of answering Will simply frowns to himself like he’s struggling to wrestle his thoughts into some kind of order, and Hannibal waits patiently throughout the silence without making any attempt to rush him. “Okay, well, I recently heard something I didn’t know,” Will finally says. “About the way omegas are treated in school.”

“That’s not at all what I expected you to tell me,” replies Hannibal with obvious interest. “I’m intrigued – please continue.”

“This is going to sound weird, but I found out that we get fairy stories read to us for a really long time: longer than betas do and a lot longer than alphas.” Will pauses then stretches out his foot so he can give Hannibal’s another tap. “Do you even get read that kind of stuff at all?”

“Not especially. At least not in Europe; I can’t really say for America.”

“The thing is those stories are meant for tiny children, and we get them thrown at us until our early teens.”

“Do you really? I wasn’t aware of that either.”

“At first I thought it was because we’re assumed to be too dumb to handle anything else,” adds Will bleakly. “Or at least we’re encouraged to think we are. And it probably is mostly that…but it’s something else as well.” He gives a long, bitter sigh and Hannibal immediately strokes his hands in a silent display of solidarity. “It’s because they’re allegories. It’s a way of preparing us for the kind of life we’ll be forced to have.”

“I understand,” says Hannibal, and there’s a trace of genuine sympathy in his voice which isn’t normally there.
“They had a real focus on one in particular,” adds Will, returning the pressure on Hannibal’s hand. “About a young woman who’s sent to live in a castle with a monster.” He pauses then frowns again. “Oh God, my mind’s gone blank…I can’t remember what it’s called.”

“Bluebeard?”

“No, no – the other one. They made a movie out of it: there’s a rose and the whole castle has a curse on it.”

“Yes, I suppose the former would hardly be very suitable for children. You mean *La Belle et la Bête*.”

“You’re so ridiculous,” replies Will amicably. “Why can’t you just say it in English?”

“Because its native title is a French one,” says Hannibal with a hint of smugness. “But yes, I see the point you’re making. *Beauty and the Beast* deals with an animalistic groom, civilised through love and faithfulness. In other words, exactly as you say: preparing young omegas for the idea of a forced bonding in which they’re bartered for the improvement of their parent’s wealth and sent away to live with a stranger who might well turn out to be frightening – or even monstrous.”

“In its essentials it’s not a fairy tale at all,” says Will in the same bleak way. “It’s a horror story. Of course in the children’s version they emphasise her consent and in submitting to him she ends up taming him. But how often does that happen in real life?”

“You mean how often do omegas get their happy ending?” replies Hannibal. “I should say: not nearly often enough.”

“Exactly. And yet they spoon-feed us this crap for years, right up until you’re old enough to be sold and one type of captivity gets switched for another.” For a few seconds Will goes quiet again then leans his head further back against Hannibal’s shoulder and screws his eyes tightly closed. “I meant what I said before about Andrew. There isn’t a court in the entire world that would have accepted it, but killing him really *was* self-defence. There’s no way I could survive that kind of life.”

Instead of replying Hannibal just strokes his cheek rhythmically against Will’s and when he finally speaks again his voice sounds as if it’s smouldering. “It’s the first time you’ve been so candid since the night you were released,” he says softly. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble to avoid discussing it. So, tell me – I’m curious to know. What are your current feelings about what happened?”

Beneath his hands he can feel Will flinch slightly as if he wants to pull away, and he makes a soothing noise before continuing to hold him in place with a grip that’s soft yet persuasive. “You mean killing him?” asks Will eventually.

“I do.”

“I already explained it.”

“You explained what you were feeling *then*. I wish to know what you are feeling *now*.”

Will hesitates once more then dips his head slightly so Hannibal has to lean in to hear. “My feelings haven’t changed.”

“And would you prefer if they had?”

“Perhaps,” says Will after an even longer pause.
“But?”

“But they haven’t.”

Hannibal gives a long sigh of satisfaction then pulls Will closer and scrapes his teeth against the back of his neck in the exact same spot where, if they were bonded, the bite mark would be. Will immediately quivers then goes rigid – yet while he’s obviously unnerved to be touched like that by an alpha for the first time ever the sensation doesn’t make him pull away. “Mano meilė,” murmurs Hannibal against Will’s skin. “Aš tave labai myliu. So…your feelings of being a predator haven’t changed. Your thoughts have altered though haven’t they? Now the passion of the moment has passed your rational mind is reflecting on your feelings and wishing to change them.”

“But?”

“Of course,” says Will with a hint of defensiveness.

“Yes, the mind gives up so easily doesn’t it?” replies Hannibal in the same hypnotic tone. “It’s so persuadable; so inconsistent. Tempest-tossed like as many storm clouds – so susceptible to each passing influence. Every transgression, both literal and imagined, takes place in the mind. It’s why folk wisdom advises us to ‘listen to your heart.’ But to do so, of course, one must first learn to trust it; and how can you trust an instinct like this?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” says Will sharply.

“I’m asking you of course,” replies Hannibal, delicately skimming his teeth against Will’s neck slightly harder than before. “That’s the whole point of this; I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me. Besides, the great ambition of life is self-realization: to comprehend one’s own temperament and inclination.” Hannibal waits a few seconds, allowing the silence to stretch out, then abruptly takes hold of Will’s shoulders so he can force him to turn round until Will is lying upright on his chest and has to look at him directly. “So tell me,” says Hannibal in the same softly rhythmic voice. “What follows after?”

Will shifts uncomfortably again, clearly resenting the interrogation yet somehow still prepared to tolerate it. The steam has made his hair tangle into his eyes and Hannibal’s faint smiles grows fractionally broader as Will stares back at him: fiercely unafraid and shimmering in the soft lamplight as if surrounded by tiny flares. “Appreciation,” he finally says, not once breaking eye contact.

“And what if it’s your composition? Last time I looked you seemed to enjoy the role of conductor.”

“Not at all,” replies Hannibal smoothly. “It is as I said: I can suggest, and I can enquire – perhaps I can even cultivate – but I can’t contort your instinct beyond the forms inherent to you. I can’t change your nature. So embrace it Will, and then examine yourself. Write your own myth, construct your own purpose; be a magnificent version of yourself and not a mediocre version of what other people wish you to be – you owe yourself nothing less. Don’t be fearful or ashamed or guilty. Be alive.”

Will’s eyes briefly dart away, clearly conflicted by the numerous double meanings woven throughout the speech. “What are you actually suggesting?” he says sharply. “For God’s sake. I mean, I killed
“No,” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. “You transformed what was useless and underserving into something artistic. You removed unspeakable ugliness from the world and, in the process of your own metamorphosis, left something beautiful in its place. That beautiful thing is you Will Graham – that is your design.”

Will immediately falls silent, reeling slightly as if stunned by a physical blow, and Hannibal sees it and then smiles into the dimness: poised and artful and infinitely patient. “You’ve developed the appetite, haven’t you beloved?” he says softly. “Killing Andrew gave you a taste for it and that’s why simply arresting the Sculptor is no longer going to be enough. Because it enrages you doesn’t it? It’s what’s driving you so hard to catch him. You feel guilty that the episode with Andrew deflected so much of your time away from the case, but you also feel a burning fury that once again someone is using the life of omegas merely for their relative value to alphas. I understand it all Will, you don’t have to explain it to me. You’re like the Lamb of Revelation – an embodiment of righteous anger, delivering judgement on the undeserving. And it’s not Jack Crawford’s idea of judgement but entirely your own.”

For long time Will doesn’t answer, just dips his head further down until he can feel Hannibal’s breath ghosting against his ear. When he finally does it’s just a single word, uttered very low and intense: “Yes.”

“Indeed yes,” says Hannibal softly. “Retribution for all those omega deaths: you’re planning to destroy him when you find him aren’t you Will? That’s your form of justice.” He pauses then brushes his lips against Will’s temple. “And yet another form of symmetry.”

Chapter End Notes


Heyyyyy guys. Sorry for yet another grumpy author note but I’m in a bit of a weird place with this fic. Positive interest has been dropping for a while now (which I take total responsibility for in terms of slowed-down updates and writing quality) whereas general negativity is still very intense. In retrospect it was over-ambitious of me to attempt three massive fics in a row, and while I’ve done the absolute best I could with this one I can appreciate that’s it’s not really resonating – and in this respect am genuinely sorry to have disappointed so many people’s expectations :-(

TL;DR = my Writing Mojo is pretty much lying on the sofa and drinking wine straight from the bottle.

So – onto Plan B! I’ve worked out that if I stick to my original outline I’m looking at around another 100k words, which tbh doesn’t really feel viable anymore. In response
I’ve decided to cut a few scenes/subplots and not introduce some new canon characters that were meant to appear, which means some re-structuring is needed to make sure deleting this stuff won’t affect the main storyline. After that, we’ll be back in business! In fact hopefully it’ll improve the fic by making it less rambling…and is probably something I should have done ages ago :-D So apologies in advance if there are a few more delays – although hopefully there won’t be – and also that I can’t do requests anymore. I loved including scenes that readers have asked for, but unfortunately don’t have the scope for it now (although all requests I’ve already agreed to I’ll try very hard to still work in). Also, please just ignore the chapter count for the time being as it’s likely to bob up and down a bit as I get the final structure worked out.

I’m so sorry to flake out this near the end my lovelies. Writing Hannigram just isn’t as much fun as it used to be, but if you’ve been enjoying this then please know you’re in my thoughts and I’m determined to do my best for you – and will be praying to the Lord and Saviour Bryan Fuller, the First Apostle Mikkelsen and Saint Hugh of Dancy for constant inspiration to get this sucker finished for you as fast as possible ;-D

See you ASAP xxx
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day dawns grey and bleak with a sky that’s mostly cloud and a clammy, claustrophobic feeling to the air that promises explosions of rain to come. In contrast the airport feels stiflingly artificial with its lingering smell of sweat, stale coffee and other people’s impatience, and Will stands and sways beneath the glaring lights of the check-in queue as he tries to ignore the smouldering dread of returning to a city that’s impossible not to think of as the Sculptor’s hunting ground. In fact the only thing stronger than this sense of foreboding is his overwhelming tiredness, and after nearly an hour an of fitful dozing he finally abandons restraint and crawls out his seatbelt so he can stretch across the seat and fall asleep with his head on Hannibal’s knee (because fuck what the air stewards or anyone else might think) before doing the same on the drive back home (because fuck the taxi driver too). Admittedly it’s not something he’d have done if he was feeling full-strength, but in spite of that there’s no denying how gratifying it feels to ignore other people’s stupid opinions and Will tests it out several times in his mind before deciding it’s definitely something he could get used to. Then he strolls upstairs and drops his suitcase on the floor like he’s been living there for years before asking Hannibal, with only very minimal awkwardness, if he’d mind Will getting some specially-lined curtains for their bedroom which he’s recently seen advertised for calming omegas in the run-up to their heat. The expression on Hannibal’s face suggests that he wouldn’t mind at all – and Will is so busy congratulating himself for mentioning it in such a casual way that it’s only some time later that he realises how easy it was to refer to ‘their’ bedroom as something mutually owned, even though it technically isn’t his at all.

The next thing Will does is dive into the shower to hose off all the airline grime before dripping his way down the corridor to tug on some fresh clothes and locate his car-keys. It’s actually well into the afternoon by now and undoubtedly a good time to start winding down, yet the same obsessive urgency that’s been fuelling him all week is showing no signs of wearing off and he knows he won’t be satisfied until he’s had a chance to review how the Sculptor case is progressing (or, more realistically, not progressing at all). Hannibal is clearly displeased by this, but Will ignores the disapproving looks and opts to make the dreary pilgrimage to work instead so he can collect a few files and update Jack first-hand. Jack’s in his office when Will arrives (lurking away with all the gloomy magnificence of Lincoln sat on his monument) and proceeds to garnish each response with a series of sighs and scowls as Will explains how everything so far confirms the suspicion of a link with Richard Black, including the meeting with Helena (sigh), the vanishing daughter and son (scowl) and the clear forensic similarities between the Nemesis and Sculptor. The last part prompts a combination of both sighs and scowls from Jack that looks physically painful, so Will sighs too to keep him company then follows it up with a melancholy shrug for good measure. Jack promptly shrugs as well, as if engaged in a silent competition over which of them can be the most jaded and world-weary, so Will wisely decides this is as good a time as any to end the meeting and leaves Jack to shrug and scowl in peace.

Will now intends to collect some paperwork from the lab before going home, yet without even fully meaning to his feet turn right instead of left at the last minute like they’ve got a mind of their own as he finds himself descending the bowels of the building to the direction of the holding cells. In fact the urge to do this feels a little like picking in a scab, in that he knows it’s going to be unpleasant and unhelpful yet finds the impulse rather irresistible anyway – and which is how he finds himself swathed in a dusty layer of shadow as he stares behind a two-way mirror to get a glimpse of Matthew Brown.
Amid the eerie echoing dimness it feels very much like a re-enactment of the first time they ever laid eyes on each other. Only this time, of course, the situation is reversed and Will is the one who’s free to observe in silence while Matthew Brown is caged and confined...at least for the time being. His skin is alarmingly pale and clammy, like something that lives beneath a rock and dwells in darkness and damp without ever seeing the sun, and the way his lips are parted reveals a wet gleam of teeth beneath the fluorescent lights. Will frowns slightly then peers a bit closer, trying to detect any resemblance to Helena. He’s acutely aware of how stealthy he’s being, like he’s afraid of doing anything that could alert Matthew Brown to his presence, yet while he knows it’s impossible he could have seen the way the pale eyes immediately swivel towards the mirror still makes his skin crawl. Matthew Brown’s lips promptly stretch wider across his teeth – although whether it’s a smile or a snarl is impossible to say – and in spite of himself Will can’t suppress a deep shudder of unease. The expression is so similar to the time they were stood in Will’s own cell: Matthew’s face illuminated with all the ugly zeal of urgency and obsession as he chanted about how special Will was, so special that even the Sculptor could see it, and in doing so made it painfully clear that he’d needed nothing beyond a few articles on the TattleCrime to understand the notes and nuances of Will’s Dark Reflection. It had felt like being stripped and flayed back then and that’s just how it feels now: the awareness that the darkest, hidden parts of Will are fully visible in all their dripping, grotesque deformity to those like Matthew Brown who want to see them.

Abruptly Will now turns away and retreats back down the corridor, breaking into a semi-run for the last few yards then pounding frantically on the release button. In the security office the guard has tuned his monitor to a baseball game and he guilty flicks it off then clears his throat before noticing Will’s expression. “What’s the matter sir?” he says, his own face slowly clouding over with concern. “Did he say something to you? You look like you’ve seen ghost.”

But I have seen one, thinks Will numbly, and for a few feverish seconds it feels like he can hear Hannibal’s words from the hospital replaying themselves in his head. It’s an eerie sensation: as if Will’s thoughts have adopted a smoky accent with smouldering vowels that briefly feel more real and plausible than his own voice does. The real spectres are the living, not the dead. We haunt ourselves – never forget that Will. Drifting through the remains of our lives consumed with all the burdens and regret we never found the strength to dispose of.

“Sir?”

“It’s nothing,” says Will tersely. The guard stares back, obviously unconvinced, and with a huge effort Will forces his features into something resembling a smile. “Nothing’s the matter,” he repeats. “Nothing at all…I’m fine.”

The lab would normally be empty this late in the day so Will is extremely surprised (and incredibly displeased) to reach the door and recognise Skinner’s unmistakably bony outline flickering through the glass. At this angle his black suit and angular limbs resemble a large ungainly insect, and Will softly curses to himself at the sight of them then reluctantly pushes open the door. Skinner spins round sharply at the noise then seems to go rigid for several seconds before his beady beetle-black eyes begin to glimmer and crawl with a stare that’s nearly as intense as Matthew Brown’s. In fact the intensity is so extreme that Will initially can’t make sense of what’s happening, and it takes a few moments of genuine confusion before he realises that Skinner’s trying to get a look at the back of his neck. Admittedly Will’s been mentally preparing himself for numerous alphas to pick up cues that he’s pre-heat, but the reality of watching it happen is still repellant and in that moment it takes all his self-control not to visibly flinch. Fortunately the awareness of his changing scent led him to plan ahead and wear one of Hannibal’s shirts in an attempt to hide it, so it’s now a huge relief to notice the way Skinner’s nostrils start to twitch before he blanches and takes an instinctive step backwards. The
shirt is actually too large and Will suspects it makes him look annoyingly frail and fragile-looking as a result (as well as sagging at the collar in an irritating way) but it’s still more than worth it just to watch the impact of alpha pheromones effectively drifting across the room and kicking Skinner in the face. Of course it’s also frustrating to have to rely on another alpha’s presence for protection, yet compared to a few months ago when Will was contorted into permanent spasms of anxiety and reeling with suppressants and pheromone spray the contrast can’t help but be a positive one. Emboldened by the idea of it, Will now takes a defiant step forward and props himself by the desk with his arms folded as if daring Skinner to try anything.

“Oh it’s Will,” says Skinner tersely. The words seem to run into one another – the sibilant ‘s’ nudging the bluntness of the ‘w’ then bowling it over – in a way that makes it sound like he’s saying ‘swill’. It can hardly be deliberate, yet the association is undeniably unpleasant just the same. Swill: refuse or scraps…food for swine. For some reason a memory of Hannibal once likening people to pigs flashes into Will’s mind and he clears his throat then blinks a few times, briefly unsettled all over again in a way he can’t fully make sense of.

“Hey,” adds Beverly in a friendlier voice. She seems rather pink-cheeked and exasperated and it’s not hard to decide that this is a result of whatever bullshit conversation Skinner’s been forcing her to have. “I thought you weren’t home ‘til tomorrow. Good trip?”

In the corner of his eye Will can see Skinner peering again. There’s no doubt about it this time; he’s definitely trying to check Will’s neck. Turning back to Beverly he now smiles and forces himself to sound relaxed. “Kind of,” he says. “My expectations weren’t especially high.” In fact he’d very much like to tell her what happened but is reluctant to go into details in front of Skinner – who, after all, has nothing to do with the forensic side of the case – so scrabbles through his mind for the right kind of official-sounding yet ultimately meaningless response that could be used to fob him off. “It’s more of a watch and wait situation,” adds Will after a slight pause.

“Oh yes, I hear you’ve been in New Orleans,” blurts out Skinner, whose pale eyes seem to be swivelling in their sockets every time Will moves. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

Will channels his inner Jack and sighs then shrugs, deliberately pantomiming vagueness. “Yes and no. Beverly, can you get me the autopsy report for Number Five?”

“Yes,” replies Beverly. Briefly she glances from Will to Skinner then back again, obviously sensing the tension yet wary of doing anything that might draw further attention to it. “That was the guy we found out in the countryside wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it turned the investigation round,” adds Skinner, clearly keen to canvass his opinion despite the fact that no one’s asked for it. “Didn’t it Will? It was the killing which made you start linking the Sculptor to Richard Black.”

“I remember it for the business card,” says Beverly with a small shiver. “It was the first time he started making contact with us.”

“It wasn’t us though, was it?” says Skinner. Slowly his eyes revolve round again before fixing into place. “It was Will.”

Will makes a faint humming noise, pretending to flick through the file pages while mentally telegraphing Skinner to kindly fuck off so he can speak with Beverly alone. “It’s good to have you back anyway,” adds Beverly as if reading his thoughts. “Are you going to come for a meal with us now? You said you would.”

Will pauses then glances up from the file. “Sure,” he replies rather shyly. “We’ll…um…” He clears
his throat. “We’ll both come.” Skinner’s head snaps upright up at the mention of the plural, and Will accidentally catches his eye and is promptly overcome with a sudden crawling sensation that Skinner’s trying to work out who this second person might be.

“Call me tomorrow,” urges Beverly.

“Sure.”

“You promise?”

“I’ll call you,” repeats Will. Aware of Skinner still looking at him he determinedly resumes staring down at the folder so there’s no possible risk of further eye contact.

Skinner darts out his tongue in rather reptilian way; damp and vaguely yellow-looking against the paleness of his lips. “Well, anyway Dr Katz,” he announces into the resulting awkward silence. “As I was saying before Will interrupted us: if you won’t support my policy I’ll just have to take it straight to Mr Crawford.”

“Take it wherever you like,” snaps Beverly. “He won’t agree with you either.”

“No, probably not,” agrees Skinner with a sneer. “This is the most ludicrously PC field office I’ve ever worked in. You’re all falling over yourselves not to offend anyone.” His tone is dripping with so much venom that Will nearly glances down at the sound of it, half expecting to see burn marks on the tiles from where the words have fallen from his mouth and seeped straight through them. Skinner now draws to a halt then pauses again, aggressively squaring his shoulders like someone limbering up for a fight as he takes a step closer to Beverly. “Let’s see how far that gets you when we’re overrun with foreign alphas.”

In spite of his plan to ignore Skinner this is such an outlandish statement that Will can’t help looking at Beverly himself in a silent request for clarification. “Mr Skinner wants to lobby for restricted entry criteria for alpha trainees,” says Beverly witheringly. “Extra background checks and that sort of thing – especially if they were born aboard.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” demands Will. “Besides, you have to have citizenship before you can even apply.” In fact the general entry criteria are continuously being modified, to the extent that Will himself would probably only scrape through eligibility if he’d applied now rather than a few years ago. The bureaucracy of the whole thing is actually incredibly irritating…yet more fruits of the FBI’s ever misfiring loins.

“Alphas are extraordinarily aggressive,” replies Skinner, who’s clearly unimpressed by Will’s estimate of what’s relevant and what isn’t. “Different cultural norms have a big impact. There have been studies.”

“No there haven’t,” says Will in a bored voice. “Don’t be ridiculous. The reason that policy doesn’t exist is because it’s completely unnecessary.”

“That’s easy enough for you to say,” hisses Skinner. As he’s speaking he draws back his lips like a dog and a few flecks of spittle come flying out and land on his lapel in little glistening globules. “The whole country could be invaded and your kind would have no problems at all.” Will quirks a single eyebrow and Skinner, mistaking the contempt for confusion, promptly decides to clarify. “Omegas like you would just get to stay at home and do nothing,” he says with something close to disgust. “It’s alphas like me that would have to go and deal with it. And even if the American side lost then you’d still be fine, because in a conflict situation the winning alphas are always going to kill their rivals then take their omegas for themselves.”
“So the omegas get ‘taken’, do they?” snaps Beverly. “That’s nice for them. Who wouldn’t want a life of sexual slavery with the person who’d killed your partner?”

“Better than getting killed yourself,” replies Skinner, whose normally waxy complexion is now blotched and mottled with anger. “They’d be looked after and cared for. Alphas would never hurt an omega.”

“You mean like the Sculptor?” asks Beverly with obvious sarcasm.

Will half wants to point out that they don’t know for certain the Sculptor is an alpha, but there’s no way he’s going to take Skinner’s side over Beverly’s so in the end just bites his lip and stays silent. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing, because the conversation has filled him with such seething anger that he doesn’t trust himself not to blurt out something threatening which could end up landing him in trouble. Mindful of Hannibal’s earlier advice about biding his time where Skinner’s concerned he now contents himself with a single derisive stare, just as Beverly slams the cabinet drawer closed with a sharp little click that’s clearly meant to signal the end of the conversation. “I think we can safely assume the States isn’t due to be conquered by an army of foreign alphas anytime soon,” she says crisply. “So I don’t see why you can’t deal with a little domestic influx. There’s no reason to try and cut down on our alpha intake.” Glancing up again she smiles sweetly at Skinner. “You’re not threatened by the thought of a bit of competition are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous Dr Katz. Of course I’m not.”

Beverly gives Skinner an even sweeter smile. “No, of course you’re not. How silly of me.”

Skinner shoots Beverly a look of intense dislike (which she returns with gusto) then pompously straightens and re-straightens his lapels before snatching up his briefcase and stalking out the lab. With his dark clothes and spidery limbs he looks like a long streak of shadow slithering across the floor and Beverly waits until the door has closed behind him before turning to Will with an expression of genuine incomprehension. “Jeez, that guy,” she says in disgust. “He’s completely unbalanced. Someone needs to speak with Jack again.”

“I know. Someone does.”

Beverly sighs even louder then begins to shuffle together a series of photographs from the most recent Sculptor scene. In the glaring lights they look more like abstract art than an actual human being – grotesque gashes that roil and overflow with foam and gore and splashes of scarlet – and Will finds himself staring down at them as he struggles not to flinch. “He actually got a lot worse after you turned up,” adds Beverly, and this time she sounds as if she’s choosing her word very carefully. “Look Will, it’s none of my business – and I’m not going to ask you about it – but it seemed to me like he couldn’t control himself round you.”

“So what else is new?”

“No, I don’t mean the professional envy; we’re all used to that with him. I mean that weird rant about omegas. And the way he was staring. You must have noticed it? It was obvious that he could smell Ha…” She pauses again then briefly catches Will’s eye “…um, another alpha on you. Some of them get like that when the omega isn’t bonded and it drives them crazy.”

“I thought Jack made him do the omega sensitization training?”

“He did, yeah – you can see how well it worked out.”

“It’s not just omegas though is it?” says Will bleakly. “He seems to hate other alphas as well.” In fact
he knows how crucial it is to not allow personal dislike to cloud his judgement, yet even as he’s speaking it’s impossible not to notice the obvious similarity with Richard Black. Will frowns slightly, turning this over in his mind. After all, surely it would be equally irresponsible not to recognise it?

Out loud he simply adds: “I’ll speak with Jack again myself. The problem is I don’t think there’s much he can do. He’s been watching the situation for a while, but he says unless Skinner genuinely steps out of line then his hands are tied.”

“The guy’s a time bomb,” says Beverly in an ominous way. “I’ve seen alphas like him before: a big seething mass of insecurity smothered beneath layers of rage and aggression.”

Will, who’s already well aware of this, gives another weary nod before something about the previous conversation snags in his memory and makes him stiffen before glancing up at Beverly. “By the way,” he says sharply. “Did you tell him I was in New Orleans?”

“No, he didn’t hear it from me. A few people have mentioned it though – it wasn’t exactly a secret.”

“Right,” says Will. “I guess Jack might have told him.” In fact this is very plausible: it’s easy to imagine how news of his trip could have percolated through half the department, and just as before he knows how fatal it can be to force every bit of new information to fit your favoured theory for a suspect. It’s not like Skinner even is a formal suspect…not anywhere close. Nevertheless, he’s still careful to file the information away in his mind to take out again and re-examine in the future.

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Will’s expecting to return to an empty house so is pleasantly surprised to find the lights blazing in the kitchen, the air full of enticing cooking smells and, most importantly of all, Hannibal stood by the counter with a wineglass in his hand and looking unusually casual with no tie and both shirt sleeves rolled up. There’s a softly yearning melody playing in the background and the sound of it makes Will smile as he remembers how the same tune had drifted out the auditorium during that concert they’d been planning to attend before ending up in the bar all night instead. It’s not really all that long ago, yet so much has happened since then it feels like a different lifetime – a gauzy, dreamlike interlude that happened to someone else.

“Nice,” says Will now, gesturing towards the speakers.

“Mendelssohn,” replies Hannibal. “I thought something soothing was in order.”

Will, who suspects this is yet another coded reference to preparing for his heat, makes a vague grunting noise then dumps his briefcase on the floor and stalks over to the counter to retrieve the wine bottle. “Normally I’d like nothing better than to give you that,” adds Hannibal, immediately confirming this suspicion by swiping the bottle out the way. “But I think you should have some food first.”

“Oh you do, do you?”

“I do. It’ll help the alcohol settle better.”

“You’re starting to sound like Mary Poppins,” says Will irritably. “Just so you know.”

“Who?”

“Mary Poppins. Ugh, you’re hopeless – don’t you have any pop culture references at all?” Hannibal looks bemused, obviously waiting for further elaboration. “I’m basically calling you a babysitter,” adds Will. “A nanny. A Nannibal.”
Hannibal’s lips twitch very slightly at this as if he’s struggling not to laugh. “At least I’m being considerate with my deprivations,” he says. “After all, you don’t even like wine. You’re always mocking me for being fond of it.”

“Oh yeah,” replies Will with a grin. “The last of the Malbecs.”

“Quite,” says Hannibal. He smiles too then leans forward as if he’s about to touch Will’s cheek before a sudden change comes over him that causes his muscles to go completely rigid and his face to close down into a cold, expressionless mask. Will stares back in confusion and Hannibal’s eyes narrow slightly before darting out a hand to grip onto his shoulder.

“Oh God, what is it now?” demands Will, trying to pull himself free. “Stop it. You’re hurting me.”

“I apologise,” replies Hannibal, relaxing his hold without actually letting go. “But you’ve had an alpha round you today haven’t you? Not just Beverly or Jack – someone else. I can smell them all over you.”

This time it’s Will’s turn to frown as he struggles to suppress the powerful wince of distaste that always comes with the idea of being saturated with some random alpha’s pheromones.

“That’s…ugh,” he finally manages to say. “That’s gross. Can you really?”

“I can. Who was it?”

“Who do you think?” says Will gloomily.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Will sighs again then takes advantage of Hannibal’s inattention to swipe a sneaky glass of wine before sitting down at the table and proceeding to grumble excessively about Skinner (followed by an obligatory bit of bitching about Jack and Matthew Brown, plus a bonus rant about the Sculptor case in general just for good measure). Hannibal listens patiently without interrupting, despite hearing versions of these complaints numerous times before, then waits until Will has run out of breath and gone quiet before placing a steadying palm on the back of his neck. “I’m sorry,” he says. “It seems you’ve had a very tedious afternoon.”

“So what else is new?” demands Will, who’s decided he wants to feel faintly martyred about it.

“It’s not new. Which is precisely my point.”

“What point?”

“I want you to stop work at least a week before your heat starts,” replies Hannibal firmly. “Preferably two; you need some space to recuperate.” Will immediately opens his mouth to argue about it and Hannibal gives a small smile then presses a finger against his lips to stem the flow of objections. “We can discuss it closer to the time,” he says. “Just bear it in mind. Would you do that?”

“I guess,” says Will, trying hard not to sound too sulky.

“In the meanwhile I’d like to keep an eye on your physical condition,” adds Hannibal. “Nothing complex, of course; merely for the purposes of monitoring. To begin with, would you permit me to take your pulse?”

Will falters for a few moments, clearly anxious at the thought of unwelcome news, then reluctantly tips his throat to one side to provide Hannibal with better access. “Don’t tell me,” he says unhappily. “It’s gone up hasn’t it?”

“It has,” replies Hannibal in a brisk, doctorly voice. He shifts his hand upwards and presses a palm
across Will’s forehead to gauge his temperature and Will sighs again then catches Hannibal’s eye.

“How long?” he asks, even more unhappily than before.

Hannibal pauses very briefly, obviously making some rapid mental calculations. “It’s hard to be sure. I’d guess a minimum of a month but more likely five weeks. Oh Will…don’t look so anguished. It’s a completely natural process.”

“I know it is: we’ve already had this conversation. You think it’s natural and I think it’s awful.”

“Well it’s not going to happen immediately is it?” replies Hannibal. “You still have time to get used to the idea. And I intend to take extremely good care of you in the interim – starting with the massage I was remiss enough not to administer when we were away.”

“I don’t want a massage,” says Will fretfully. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Humour me then. And if you really don’t like it I’ll stop.” Will shuffles his feet together, obviously wanting to refuse yet concerned about seeming ungrateful, and Hannibal adds in a gentler voice: “Remember what I said before about preventative measures?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Then I rest my case. There are strong grounds to suggest it’ll be easier for you if you’re more relaxed in the weeks beforehand and now is as good a time as any to begin. I want you to enjoy it when it happens Will – not merely endure.”

Will longs to snap that there’s more chance of him being able to fly than to enjoy being in heat, only can’t think of a way of doing that won’t sound rude – or even outright hurtful, considering Hannibal’s going to be there the entire time as well. So in the end he just shrugs rather dolefully then agrees to eat the food that Hannibal’s made (lightly grilled chicken with a delicate salad of peas, courgettes, wheatberries and tiny green beans flavoured in lemon and parsley) without once complaining over how it’s clearly been prepared with a healthy pre-heat diet in mind. Then he allows Hannibal to lead him upstairs by the hand to the spare room, where he’s coaxed into removing his jacket and sitting on the bed very quietly without any sign of rebelling.

“It’s good that you’re wearing my shirt,” says Hannibal approvingly as he starts to unfasten it. “I want you to continue doing the same until the heat’s over.” Will nods again then obediently raises both arms so Hannibal can slide it down his shoulders and onto the floor. “How docile you’re being,” adds Hannibal with amusement. “It’s really quite charming; all the more so for being extremely out of character.” His smile widens slightly and he pauses in removing the shirt so he can rest a finger beneath Will’s chin to tilt his face upright. “So much so that I’m convinced within myself that it’s merely an act: designed to lure me into a false sense of security just before I get ambushed.”

Will has a sudden awful sense that he might be blushing so quickly dips his head in order to hide it. In fact he sincerely wishes it was an act, but the truth is that a definite pre-heat state has been creeping over him in the past few days which is making him embarrassingly tactile and compliant whenever Hannibal touches him. Admittedly this isn’t unpleasant in itself, but having spent so long avoiding his heats like the plague getting hopelessly overwhelmed by omega instincts can’t help but feel unsettling. Only there isn’t very much he can do about it so in the end he just bites his lip then goes quiet again, allowing all his clothes to be removed with unusual passiveness until he’s completely naked and lying face down across the covers.

“You’re dwelling on what I said aren’t you?” adds Hannibal, with his typical uncanny ability to
sense exactly what’s Will’s thinking without needing to be told. “Don’t be. One ambition I have for you – one of several ambitions – is that you embrace the inclinations which come from being an omega without any sense of shame. Society’s conditioned you to believe they’re equivalent with weakness or inferiority and they’re not. You can be affectionate, or playful, or look for comfort and protection from an alpha and it in no way diminishes your inherent strength or sense of purpose. Embrace all your inclinations,” adds Hannibal with relish; and while the implication is unspoken, Will immediately knows that what he’s really referring to are all those incredibly dark inclinations that Will sees nearly every time he looks in the mirror. But of course there’s no easy answer to this, nor ever has been – and no sign of one arriving anytime soon – so Will just nods without speaking then lies very still until he hears Hannibal softly say his name. The admiration in his voice is obvious, and at the sound of it Will forgets his previous conflict and starts arching his back in response; aware, even as he’s doing it, that it’s a classically omegan gesture to gain approval from the alpha.

“You look beautiful like this” says Hannibal, rapturously smoothing his palm across Will’s spine. “Are you comfortable – not too cold?”

“It’s fine,” mutters Will, leaning contentedly into Hannibal’s touch. “But why are we in here? Why not our…um, your room?”

“Because I’m likely to get oil everywhere,” replies Hannibal. “Quite a lot in fact.” As he’s speaking he retrieves a small bottle from the bedside table and drizzles a little into his palms, rubbing them together to warm it up before sliding across Will’s shoulders in slow circles. “I don’t want to sleep in it and I assume you don’t either.”

“You could have just put some towels down,” says Will, trying not to writhe too extravagantly beneath the sensation of the oil. It’s actually rather sumptuous: the fragrance a very heady one of spices and cloves with a texture that’s silkily smooth without being greasy. “Towels would be easy to clean.”

“Towels would not do at all,” replies Hannibal, so fastidious it’s as if Will’s suggested rolling around on trash bags. “I want you lying on something more luxurious than that.”

“But this cover is silk. What if it doesn’t come off?”

“Then I’ll buy a new one.”

“Listen to you,” says Will in amusement. “You’re so decadent.”

“Yes, indeed. I am guilty as charged.”

“Everything to excess.”

“Again you are entirely correct,” replies Hannibal, who doesn’t sound remotely concerned about it. “Although I suppose that would be an appropriate segue to apologise for being so incapable of keeping my hands off you. Usually I can exercise a bit more self-restraint, but you’re fairly irresistible as it is and when approaching the start of your heat you’re tempting beyond belief.”

“Not yet I’m not. You said it was over a month away.”

“The heat itself is, but you’re already in the prodromal phase – I can definitely tell.”

“I’ll have to neuter you,” says Will as Hannibal begins to knead the tight tissue at the top of his shoulder blades. “You obviously can’t control yourself. Ow, no…not there. Further down.”

“Here?”
“Mmm yes, that’s perfect.”

“Good boy,” says Hannibal softly. His hands, slick with oil, glide across Will’s waist then skim across his hip bones in feather-like strokes which move with sufficient slowness and care to give Will time to relax and get used to the sensation. “See? I knew you’d enjoy it if you just allowed yourself to try.”

“S’nice,” murmurs Will, beginning to arch his back again. “But I suggest you quit while you’re ahead.”

“Oh yes? Is that your advice for me?”

“It is my advice: I know where you’re going with this, so don’t even think about extending the ‘if you’d just allow yourself to enjoy it’ analogy to being in heat.”

Hannibal makes a humming noise then skims his palms down Will’s spine and back up again like he’s familiarising himself with each curve and contour of his body. “You’re not the only one affected by it Will,” he adds after a small pause. “The process is a mutual one – me as well as you – and if it’s any consolation I find myself diverted by your presence in ways I’m not really accustomed to. I’ve never been this close to an omega before and it’s a steady journey of adjustment. At times it’s almost like a drug. I yearn for you constantly when you’re not there, then when you are I feel possessive and protective towards you in equal measure. That night in the carpark for example; you have no idea how hard it was to hear you calling for me and not being able to answer.”

Will frowns at this then reaches round so he can give Hannibal a sharp tap with his foot. “Don’t you dare start with that. If you expect me to feel sorry for you…”

“Not at all,” says Hannibal calmly. “I’m just stating the facts. Namely that those circumstances were part of a carefully devised plan, yet knowing you were frightened and needed me was enough to seriously threaten its completion.”

“It didn’t though did it?” snaps Will, who doesn’t want to talk about Matthew Brown. “You still left me on my own.”

“Yes, but only because it was in your best interests to take control of the situation. My point is that it was a struggle to put your needs before my own – and privileging someone else’s needs is not a struggle I’m particularly used to engaging with.”

“I don’t buy that at all,” says Will irritably. “You knew exactly what you were doing.” Only he can’t summon the energy to get genuinely annoyed about it and in the end it’s easier just to let the subject drop and concentrate on trying not to make any embarrassing purring sounds or grinding his hips too obviously against the mattress each time he feels Hannibal’s hands sliding over his skin.

“Your temperature’s really gone up in the last few days,” says Hannibal approvingly after a few moments of comfortable silence. “You’re positively humid. I feel as if I could hold a mirror across your body and it would mist over.”

“Hmm, you said so before. To be honest I don’t feel all that different.”

“That’s good – it’s better if it’s as unobtrusive as possible.”

“I guess.”

“So what about the behavioural changes?” adds Hannibal, briefly bending down so he can press his lips against the back of Will’s neck. “Do you feel prepared for those?”
“Like what? Nothing really happened last time.”

“Only because the heat was triggered so abruptly by stopping the suppressants. This time it’ll be more apparent.”

“Oh…you mean nesting activities,” says Will gloomily.

“Correct. I imagine it’ll begin with the next three weeks or so. You’ll probably notice a sudden, strong reluctance to be around strangers.” Hannibal pauses then leans forward to kiss Will’s neck again before adding, with a clear hint of smugness: “And a desire to be around me as much as possible.”

“I think that’s happened already,” admits Will. “Although I always hate being round strangers, so at least I know what I’m doing with that one.”

“Yes indeed,” says Hannibal fondly. “A little lone wolf. You really dislike socialising don’t you?”

“Mostly.”

“It’s because you’re an introvert; you get overstimulated very easily. Of course that’s not the same as being antisocial, because you understand people incredibly well. In fact you understand them too well which is why they overwhelm you.”

“I don’t mind doing it sometimes,” says Will. “I know you like it yourself. I don’t expect you to stay in all the time because of me.”

“Only in a spirit of compromise,” replies Hannibal who, unlike Will, doesn’t sound remotely self-conscious at discussing their future together in such a casual way. “I don’t want you to feel forced. Watching you in agonies the entire time isn’t my idea of an enjoyable evening. Besides, I like how aloof you are. You’re quiet and beautiful.”

“I don’t mind it sometimes,” repeats Will, cautiously wondering if this is a good time to mention Beverly’s invitation.

“Well, even so, withdrawal is an obvious pre-heat behaviour,” continues Hannibal, beginning to work on a particularly stubborn knot beneath Will’s shoulder blade. “So it’s likely you’ll want to retreat more than usual in the weeks before it starts. In the immediate run-up you may also need to make a private, secluded space for yourself within the house.”

“Oh God, it’s all so ridiculous,” says Will unhappily. “Burrowing myself away somewhere quiet. It makes me sound like a…” He trails off, trying to think of a dignified analogy, but ultimately has to admit defeat because the only things that come to mind are gerbils or hamsters – and lying in Hannibal’s elegant spare room self-identifying with a gerbil is clearly a line which should not be crossed. “Like an animal,” says Will after a small pause.

“Not at all,” replies Hannibal. “It’s simply about containment and emotional safety. Besides, it’s hardly like you’re going to be hiding in a box or sitting in a tree – not even with those monkey toes of yours.”

“Enough with the monkey toes,” says Will, giving Hannibal a push with his foot.

Hannibal smiles then catches hold of the foot so he can stroke along the instep, enjoying the way it makes Will’s toes sway and flex. “There’s nothing sinister or troubling about it,” he adds gently. “Nothing to be afraid of: it’s just typical omega nesting instincts. In fact the only thing you might find yourself doing which is genuinely out of character is an urge to start cleaning and re-arranging
different rooms.”

Will, who’s already contemplated a toned-down version of both these things, is promptly overcome with embarrassment again and gives an awkward, self-conscious wriggle before he can stop himself. Hannibal makes a soothing noise in response then gently strokes his neck as an encouragement to lie still. “It’ll be fine Will,” he says. “I’ll be with you the entire time. And you know we don’t have to stay here if you prefer it. Were you able to look at the hotel I mentioned?”

Will shakes his head so Hannibal roots around on the bedside table to retrieve his tablet then lays it flat on the bed for Will to examine. The website is very well-designed and the photos of the hotel itself suggest great beauty of a tasteful and under-stated kind in which ferns and ivy wind across crevices of golden limestone flanked either side by velvety rose bushes. “This is nice,” says Will approvingly, beginning to scan through the other photos. In fact it does look incredibly relaxing, and even though he knows they’re most likely paid models there’s something reassuring about seeing omegas and alphas together looking so loving and restful: strolling hand in hand across the lawns and lakeside, dining over candlelight, and even an alpha reclining on a satin chaise longue while protectively cradling his sleeping omega in his arms.

“They have several areas where alphas aren’t allowed to go,” adds Hannibal. “You’d probably enjoy that. I think it might be good for you to spend some time with other omegas.”

“Do they?” asks Will, who rather likes the idea of something omegas can have which alphas can’t, considering it’s nearly always the other way round. “But what would you do?”

“I suppose I’d have to sit with all the other alphas and wait for you to come back again.”

“Like dropping you off in day care,” says Will with amusement. “Ugh no, look at that – they’ve got heat locks on the bedroom doors.”

“For which you could have the combination,” replies Hannibal in the same soothing tone. “Remember it’s not so much to keep you in as to keep other alphas out.”

Will grunts in acknowledgment then peers a bit closer at the picture of the bed, which is draped in an elaborate silk canopy that he immediately recognises as an omega shelter. “You seem rather taken by that,” says Hannibal, who’s also inspecting the screen over Will’s shoulder. “Would you like me to buy you one? They’re meant to be very calming.”

“Yeah, I might like it,” admits Will. “You don’t have to buy it for me though – I can pay for it myself.”

“I’m afraid I can’t possibly allow that,” says Hannibal, beginning to drizzle more oil across Will’s shoulders. “Not least because if I leave you to your own devices then you’ll get something incredibly cheap and utilitarian that looks like it’s come straight from the Soviet Bloc: battle-ship grey and made of something abominable like polyester. Possibly even plaid.”

“Okay, great,” replies Will. “I’m not remotely offended by that – just in case you were wondering.” He twists his face round slightly so he can give Hannibal’s arm a nudge with his forehead. “Anyway, there’s nothing wrong with polyester.”

“Indeed beloved. There’s just nothing right with it either.”

“Ugh, you’re such a snob.”

“Yes I dare say,” replies Hannibal leisurely. “Only remember that I have to sleep in it as well.”
Will grins then gives Hannibal’s arm another nudge “Not necessarily. I might decide I’m not going to let you. I might decide I want to keep my communist polyester omega shelter all to myself.” Hannibal makes an amused noise and Will nudges him again then contentedly rests his face against the side of Hannibal’s forearm and resumes scrolling through the photographs. The luxuriousness of the suites is undeniable – even putting the one in New Orleans to shame – although his restful expression promptly cuts out like a switch when he sees what looks suspiciously like a breeding stool discreetly tucked away in one of the bedrooms. This name is actually rather misleading given that they’re more like tables with upright adjustable posts, but whatever they’re called their purpose remains exactly the same: to ensure whoever’s lying on it has to stay on their back with their legs forced open. Officially this is supposed to be for the omega’s comfort by reducing pressure on the thigh muscles, but as far as Will is concerned this is clearly bullshit and they’ve been designed solely with the convenience of alphas in mind. In fact Andrew had once brought one home, handmade from polished sandalwood and upholstered with rose-coloured velvet, and Will had taken one look at it then thrown a tantrum of such epic proportions that even Andrew had been slightly abashed and agreed to stow it away unused in the spare room (although had also never kept his promise of returning it to the store either). Frowning at the memory Will now gives Hannibal’s arm another, harder nudge. “Don’t even think about putting me on one of those,” he says sharply. “Are you listening? I’m serious – I don’t want you to.”

“What?” asks Hannibal, leaning down again so he can press his face against Will’s. “I’m not sure what you mean.” Will jabs at the screen rather mutinously and Hannibal leans in a bit closer. “Oh yes, I see: those breeding contraptions. No of course I won’t, not without your permission.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise,” says Hannibal. “What motivation would I have to break my word? I understand why you dislike the idea so intensely, so how could I enjoy something you weren’t taking any pleasure in yourself?”

*Because you’re an alpha,* thinks Will grimly, despite knowing this isn’t entirely fair. Hannibal clearly sees it too, because he now gives Will’s hair a gentle tug and says: “You’re not convinced are you?”

“Yes, well, no offence but...you might lose control of yourself.”

“Did I lose control of myself last time?”

“You bit me,” says Will, rather triumphantly.

“I did, but never on your neck. And in this respect I must insist on an armistice, mano milé, because you also bit me yourself – more than once.” Will makes a grumbling noise in grudging recognition of this and Hannibal kisses his throat once more then adds: “You know I appreciate your more vulnerable aspects Will; I’d be lying if I said I didn’t. But that’s not at all the same as wanting to subjugate you, because it’s your strength which drew me to you in the first place. I’ve never wanted a passive partner – I wanted an equal. Don’t you think I’d grow incredibly bored with someone who never challenged me?”

“It’s not the same,” says Will unhappily. “You’re talking about a day-to-day dynamic. It’s not the same as when I’m actually in heat.”

“You’re still worried about those breeding stools aren’t you?” replies Hannibal in a gentler voice. “The idea really troubles you.” For a few seconds he strokes Will’s face and then adds with obvious compassion: “Did Andrew try and force you to use one?”

“No,” lies Will, who doesn’t want Hannibal feeling sorry for him. “Look, I didn’t plan to make such
a big deal out of it. It’s just…”

“It’s just one more thing to feel concerned about,” concludes Hannibal. “And another way to fear your control being taken away. I understand Will. You don’t need to apologise.” As he’s speaking he slides his hands along Will’s thighs and Will quivers then gives a small sigh as he feels them start to slide back up again, this time on the inside. “Good boy,” murmurs Hannibal, his voice very soothing and slow as if he’s inviting Will to respond to him. “You know you can trust me. What if I told you I’d never force you into one of those contraptions because I’d far rather feel your legs wrapped around my back? You’ve done that before haven’t you? You cling on then dig your heels against my spine as if you’re showing me how much you want to feel me inside you. Other times you push your hips upwards so I’ll know you need it deeper or harder.” He pauses for a few seconds then rests his hands between Will’s thighs again, pushing gently yet firmly to force them wider apart. “Such slim, strong legs,” says Hannibal with approval. “Look how firm the muscles are: designed for running and jumping and fighting. You’re so agile Will. I think you could keep them upright for a very long time without any help at all. But I would be watching your face for signs of discomfort and if I thought you were growing tired then I’d rest them against my shoulders. Or else I’d hold them up for you myself.”

Will laughs slightly then twists his arm behind his back to catch hold of Hannibal’s hand. “Yeah,” he says wryly. “I bet you would.”

“But I would beloved; very happily. Why don’t you turn over for me and I’ll provide a demonstration?”

Will laughs again then neatly flips himself onto his back, staring up rather defiantly with both eyebrows raised. Go on then, the look says: impress me. “You appear to have grown non-verbal,” says Hannibal fondly. “I suppose you intend to assess my performance? Not that I mind; omegas have the right to do that with their alphas. All right then, I said I’d demonstrate didn’t I? To begin with I want you pull your legs up to your chest. Slowly though, there’s no need to rush – we have all night. Arch your back for me while you’re doing it. Very good Will. You look as if you’ve had years of omega training, but it’s not that at all is it? It’s just natural grace. Now spread your legs apart and raise your feet into the air.” Will smiles and obeys and Hannibal smiles back down at him then leans forward to catch hold of his ankles, delicately stroking the fibula bones with his thumbs. “That’s it,” he says. “Good boy. You see? Now I can look at you while I’m making love to you; I would stare into your eyes the entire time without ever needing to force you into any kind of apparatus. And if you grew uncomfortable like this, then I’d kneel upright and let you rest along my thighs with your legs placed on either side of me. I’d take hold of your waist and gently slide you back and forward – you wouldn’t even have to move beloved, I’d do all the work myself. Do you remember how tired you were at the end of your last heat? So exhausted you could barely speak. If it happens again then that would be how I’d take care of you and give you what you need without tiring you any further.”

Will gives a small sigh then follows it up with one of the rare, genuine smiles that always seem to light up his face. “Okay,” he says. “That was a pretty good sales pitch. I think you’ve made your point.”

“Have I?” asks Hannibal innocently. “Perhaps the point could be considered made…perhaps not. We’ll have to see.”

Without breaking eye contact he retrieves the oil bottle and pours a few more drops onto his palms before slowly starting to glide them across Will’s chest. Despite the somewhat frail façade, it’s pleasing to feel how strong and wiry Will actually is – the muscles hard and well-defined for all the pale slimness and slender softness of the exterior – and Hannibal takes his time to savour the beauty of a body that he now feels belongs entirely to him just as much as his own does: down Will’s ribs,
along his collar bones, thumbing round both nipples in feathery strokes and then teasing them with the tips of two fingers before moving down to caress the taut muscles of Will’s abdomen. The oil allows his hands to slide very effortlessly and Will gives a sharp inhale as Hannibal leans down to run his tongue along his lower lip as his hands trace tiny circles across the hollow of both hipbones. By now the sense of anticipation is intense and Will arches his back rather desperately, his whole body consumed with a series of little trembling thrusts. He hasn’t even had a chance to touch his cock, and yet it’s grown so hot and heavy that when Hannibal’s long fingers return to his nipples he feels it spasm against it stomach with a rush of pre-come.

“Patience my love,” murmurs Hannibal. “I know…you need it so badly.” As he’s speaking he strokes the head of Will’s cock with his thumb then reaches up to press it wet and glistening against Will’s lips. “Open your mouth,” he says softly. “Taste yourself. My beautiful omega boy, how long could you last like this do you think? Just quivering on the edge? One day I want us to try and find out.”

Will shivers and groans again – this time spiced with a clear hint of impatience – and Hannibal smiles to himself before finally relenting and taking hold of Will’s cock in both hands so he can give him what he wants. The oil means his touch is firm yet deliciously smooth and Will draws in all his breath before letting it out again with a panting gasp as his voice goes high and young. “Oh,” he says quietly. “That feels good. Oh God, Hannibal…it’s really good.”

“Don’t close your eyes,” instructs Hannibal, very low and intense. “Keep them open. I want to watch your face while I’m doing this.” As he’s speaking he runs his left hand along Will’s thigh, which is already slippery and gleaming in the lamplight with a trail of slick. “At least this is one place that I won’t have to oil,” purrs Hannibal, taking a moment to admire how slim and perfect Will looks when shimmering with sweat and flushed with desire. In fact he looks luscious: vulnerable, debauched and almost achingly beautiful with his neck drooping like a young martyr and his whole body trembling and tightening as it prepares itself for orgasm.

“Aš tave labai myliu,” says Hannibal softly. “You have no idea.” Will now frowns at the unfamiliar words, so Hannibal murmurs his name to reassure him then slides his hand back down so he can spread Will open and massage his quivering hole with the pads of two fingers; just rubbing in tender circles at first, then gently increasing the pressure until the tight muscle relaxes enough to push both fingers deep inside. Will’s chest flattens with rapid breath and he shudders then goes rigid, flinging his arm across his face as he makes a noise that’s almost a wail.

“So receptive,” says Hannibal, whose own breath is starting to catch. Will’s lovely omega cock is getting visibly harder as his hole is so thoroughly explored and Hannibal now reaches up to take his hand, guiding it downwards until it’s resting between his legs and he can replace Hannibal’s fingers with his own. “Now you,” adds Hannibal invitingly. “Show me what you like.” Will obeys eagerly without any hesitation or embarrassment, yet while there’s no denying how sensual he looks Hannibal can’t help being struck by a powerful sense of envy at how easily Will can enjoy his body and gain pleasure from it without Hannibal being directly responsible. Briefly he now fantasises about how satisfying it would be to forbid Will to ever touch himself before he’s had permission; or, even better, has given Hannibal the opportunity to take care of him first. Not that it would ever be possible to enforce such a thing, and Hannibal can’t help sighing slightly at how uncomfortable this resentment is. Although admittedly that’s isn’t because it’s jealous or controlling, but simply because it’s irrational (jealousy being understandable and permissible where Will’s concerned whereas irrationality, in all its forms, is just deeply tedious) and Hannibal now wryly rolls his eyes at himself for being so absurd. It’s really quite ridiculous…the sort of thing a normal person might feel. Even so, he still can’t resist the possessive urge to take control again and strokes along Will’s wrist and palm so he can work in his index finger alongside Will’s own. Will gives a low moan and Hannibal pushes even harder, relishing how beautifully Will clenches round him and the way his breath speeds
up as he rocks his hips against the slowly stabbing fingers deep in his ass.

“Look at that beloved,” says Hannibal softly. “Your body’s incredibly eager. You’re so ready for it aren’t you – there’s no resistance at all. In fact you could probably take two alphas together when you’re like this. Do you agree Will; do you think you could? One lying on the bed so you could ride him, while the other knelt behind and took hold of your hips to work a second knot inside you.”

Will gasps out Hannibal’s name then pivots his hips, completely unaware that he’s deliberately being held still to stop him from taking control of his pleasure away from Hannibal. The thought of having his ass filled up with two alpha cocks is both heady yet obscene, and he groans helplessly at the image as Hannibal adds another finger, probing and exploring the slippery tightness while starting to stroke Will’s cock with his free hand. “Not that I’d ever allow such a thing,” adds Hannibal with obvious menace. “I’d never let another alpha so much as look at you – never. I’d kill anyone who tried.” He pauses again and when he speaks there’s an eerie thrum of energy in his voice which wasn’t there before. “And you’d help me do it, wouldn’t you beloved? So fierce and ruthless as you are…I might instigate the execution, but you’d still push me aside so you could inflict the lethal blow yourself.”

These words clearly ignite something in Will because at the sound of them his eyes snap wide open and he drags in a breath before abruptly struggling free. He looks rather wild by now with flushed face and glittering eyes and for a few seconds he simply stares at Hannibal before roughly springing forward to pounce on him: tearing at his clothes, clawing at his shoulders, then kissing him with a ferocious, passionate urgency before dropping to his knees so he can take Hannibal’s cock into his mouth. “Beloved,” says Hannibal quietly. He knots his fingers into Will’s damp hair to push his head down and Will moans loudly round his cock, rough and messy and desperate until he’s nearly choking. Worshipfully he sucks the head, interspersing with rapturous kisses and licks and Hannibal gives another low sigh then tilts Will’s face to make him look upwards: gently stroking his hair again and tucking a few strands behind his ears while smoothing the rest out of his eyes.

Being touched so tenderly makes Will give a fraught breathy moan as he reaches out to try and grasp Hannibal’s hand. Then he moans again and bucks his hips, frantically grinding against Hannibal’s leg in an attempt to make himself come before pulling back a little and wantonly opening his mouth so Hannibal can see how much of his cock he’s taking. From this perspective it’s impossible for Hannibal not to sigh with admiration at his beautiful shameless boy, and yet no matter how good it feels – and it feels incredibly good – he still doesn’t want to come before Will does. With extreme self-restraint he therefore takes hold of Will’s waist and lifts him upwards, struggling not to smile at the way Will gives a little hiss of resentment at being held in place by someone stronger than he is. Yet Hannibal is always gentle in his forcefulness, so when he flips onto his back and pulls Will on top of him Will allows it without complaint and lets himself be guided until he’s positioned how Hannibal wants him with their chests pressed together and his knees resting either side of Hannibal’s face. He can feel Hannibal’s arms holding him close and he eagerly leans down to drag his tongue along his cock before letting out a broken-off gasp as Hannibal’s tongue begins to lap against his hole. Hannibal hums approvingly and increases the pressure: gripping Will’s trembling legs to make him stay still then swirling his tongue in slow swipes and avid licks as he uses the tip to tease open Will’s hole without ever fully breaching it.

“Oh,” says Will faintly. “Oh God.” He’s shaking uncontrollably now, pre-come leaking in a steady stream as a broad thumb pushes deep inside him and Hannibal licks the stretched slick skin around it. “Ah, no,” he gasps out. “Please, you’ve got to stop. I’m going to…I’m…” His voice sounds raw as it catches in the back of his throat, and when his body gives another helpless shudder he’s overcome with a sense of shame that he’s going to ruin things by coming too soon. It makes him contort his neck into painful angles, desperately covering Hannibal’s cock with lavish kisses in an attempt to focus on someone else’s pleasure to distract from his own. Only he’s so loose and stretched from
Hannibal’s fingers that it’s shockingly easy for the thick tongue to thrust its way inside him; and it feels so wet and firm, and the sensation is so unbelievably intense, that when Hannibal reaches round to stroke his cock again a few brief touches are more than enough. Will gives a long low moan as he tenses, quivers, goes completely rigid, and then gasps Hannibal’s name as his hips give a final frantic jolt and he starts to come.

Hannibal comes too shortly afterwards with Will’s lips round his cock, and Will pulls away when he’s finished and tenderly licks him clean – nuzzling his stomach with his forehead and making small omega-like purrs the entire time – before somehow managing to haul himself back up the bed again. Once there he collapses next to Hannibal in an exhausted heap and buries his face his in neck. “Fucking hell,” is all he says.

“Yes, quite,” says Hannibal with mock solemnness. “Very well surmised.”

“Your plan about not sleeping in oil completely backfired,” adds Will sleepily. “There’s no way I can be bothered to move.”

“That’s unfortunate,” replies Hannibal, gently rubbing his cheek against the edge of Will’s. “Although considering I’m destined to sleep in Soviet polyester I suppose sleeping in massage oil shouldn’t be too much of a trial.” Will mutters something drowsy in response then wriggles in a bit closer until his face is completely hidden against Hannibal’s skin. “I beg your pardon?” says Hannibal in amusement. “I can’t understand a single word you’re saying.”

Will pulls away so his mouth is no longer covered then blinks at Hannibal rather owlishly. “That whole thing was cheating.”

“How so?”

“You’re such a fraud; so much for an innocent massage. You’re just trying to win me over so I’ll agree to be locked in a hotel room with you for a week.”

“And did I succeed?”

Will glances up at Hannibal and wrinkles his nose at him. “Probably.”

Hannibal begins to smile then silently strokes Will’s hair for a few moments until he’s gone completely still and is making a little rumbling purr-like noise. “Why are you being so nice to me?” adds Will eventually, his voice soft and gruff with tiredness. “You’re never like this with other people.”

“Am I not?” says Hannibal sardonically

“You know you aren’t.”

“No,” agrees Hannibal. “I don’t suppose I am – although I do know how to be on occasion. I didn’t intend to be so with you at first though, I freely confess it. You appear to have won me over.”

As he’s speaking he carefully unhook Will arm from round his neck then repositions himself until Will is flat against the mattress and he can drape himself across his back: shifting his hips and torso as he goes, then wrapping his arms under and around Will’s shoulders so that Will is completely enclosed without having to bear his entire weight. The intimacy of it is striking and Will immediately knows without being told that Hannibal is covering him – an instinctive alpha gesture of protection. In fact it’s not something he’d ever have imagined being comfortable with, yet now it’s happening he finds it incredibly reassuring; the sense that someone he knows to be immensely powerful is offering him shelter and security and making him feel valued in a way he doesn’t always know how to be. So
rather than pull away he stretches out and allows his body to grow soft and pliant as above him
Hannibal murmurs his name then presses his teeth against the bonding spot on the back of Will’s
neck, tugging it very gently without any risk of breaking the skin.

“You feel so fragile like this,” says Hannibal tenderly. “So small and vulnerable beneath me – even
though I know you’re not. Just rest now Will, and let your mind be at ease. I know you have several
things to be concerned about but I don’t want my behaviour to be one of them. You have my word
that I won’t do anything to you while you’re in heat without your permission.”

Will gives a small sigh then searches out Hannibal’s hand so he can tangle their fingers together. “I
know,” he says softly. Then in his head he intends to be quiet again and let the matter rest; yet
somehow his mouth has different plans, and despite not planning to it still stays open long enough for
him to hear himself add something that he’s never said to an alpha in the whole of his life: “I trust
you.”

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Will, perhaps inevitably, finds himself consumed with an extreme state of nervous tension prior to
contacting Beverly. Of course the whole thing is ridiculous and the call should be the simplest thing
in the world – yet no matter how many times he rehearses it in his head, there doesn’t seem any way
to simply phone her up and arrange what’s effectively a double-date in a way that won’t feel
excruciatingly awkward. To postpone a little longer Will now auditions an assortment of other
options instead before rejecting all of them one after the other, including email as too official, texting
as too informal, and speaking in person as much too hazardous due to a risk of blushing or
stammering. Oh God, thinks Will forlornly. This is so embarrassing: get it together you stupid shit.
Then he realises a whole ten minutes have passed in pointless prevarication and he ends up getting so
annoyed with himself that he simply whips out his phone and hits the button before he can change
his mind – and where he can’t decide whether it’s more a relief or an additional layer of
embarrassment when Anneke replies with a breezy “Hey Will. Sorry but Bev’s in the shower; can I
help you with anything?”

With a colossal amount of effort Will irons any lingering trace of awkwardness from his voice and
explains the reason for the call. In fact considering how self-conscious he’s got over it he’s half
expecting alarms and sirens to start going off as soon as he opens his mouth, so it’s almost an anti-
climax when Anneke simply replies “That’s great!”

“Yeah,” says Will. “Great.”

“You’ve saved her a call actually, she was planning to get in touch with you herself. Is Friday at
seven any good?”

Will clears his throat then cautiously agrees that Friday at seven would be fine.

“Great,” repeats Anneke, and she genuinely sounds as if she means it. “Are you coming on your
own?”

Silently Will now congratulates himself for normally avoiding socialising at all costs, because
honestly – it’s really fucking exhausting. Then he clears his throat again and announces even more
cautiously that he’s meeting with Hannibal beforehand so was hoping to bring him too. Anneke
makes an approving noise in response, although by this time Will’s not listening anymore because
he’s started worrying that it might sound weird to state an intention to ‘bring’ Hannibal, rather as if
he’s an inanimate accessory like a dog or a handbag. It’s possible Hannibal thinks the same because
he now appears from over the top of his newspaper and raises his eyebrows: Will gestures crossly at
him to stay quiet and Hannibal smirks very slightly then disappears behind the newspaper again.
“Is there anything either of you don’t eat?” says Anneke. Which is of course a simple enough query, only Will can’t face asking because he doesn’t want her to hear Hannibal’s voice and realise they’re both in the same room at 8.30 in the morning – and therefore create the obvious inference that this is because they’ve recently vacated the same bed. In fact his reluctance to be open about it troubles him (and on one level he’d like nothing more than to proudly share it) but in spite of everything that’s happened he can’t shake an irrational fear that other people’s interest will create a source of tension that could put the new relationship under pressure. Essentially it’s like he’s so protective of it that he wants to shield it from all scrutiny.

“Friday at 7.00,” Will finally announces when he hangs up.

“Very good,” replies Hannibal, putting down the newspaper and gifting Will with one of his particularly Sphinxy smiles. “I look forward to being brought.”

Will just shrugs and then stares rather aimlessly into space as he gnaws the edge of his thumbnail. Silently he’s reproaching himself for making a stupid fuss over something as harmless as dinner with friends, yet despite his best efforts it’s impossible to hide his unease at how foreign and nerve-wracking it feels to give outsiders such an obvious glimpse of his personal life. The end result is that he spends the rest of the week tormenting himself with all the possible ways he might end up regretting identifying him and Hannibal as a couple; not least that the relationship is somehow going to be vulnerable when taken out of its cocoon of two and exposed to other people. Even so, no matter how high-pitched the anxiety manages to get, he still never gives himself to permission to call Beverly up to say he’s changed his mind.

By the time Friday comes limping round Will has worn out his reserves of nervousness and grown gloomy and fatalistic instead. Hannibal, in contrast, is completely unconcerned and when they’re waiting on the doorstep he places a protective hand on Will’s shoulder as if offering solidarity that everything’s going to be fine. Will can’t quite bring himself to shake it off, although remains badly tempted to – not least because as long as it stays there then Beverly’s first glimpse of them will leave no doubt as to what’s really going on. But to Will’s enormous relief she doesn’t make any reference to it: and by the time she’s welcomed them inside, and Anneke has kissed him on the cheek then shaken Hannibal’s hand, and Will’s had a chance to sit on the sofa and have some bonding time with Anneke’s boisterous Boston Terrier than he starts to wonder what he was ever worried about in the first place.

In this respect Will’s other concern – that Hannibal is far too sophisticated to slot into Beverly’s charmingly chaotic world – ends up getting dispelled so quickly that he feels faintly ashamed of himself for harbouring it at all. Admittedly it’s not the kind of evening he can imagine Hannibal submitting to by choice, but if Hannibal is secretly bored or irritated then he gives no obvious signs of it. He’s even gracefully courteous towards Anneke without ever once descending into the type of swaggering that alphas almost always use around omegas. Particularly pregnant omegas, amends Will with a shudder. A series of misunderstandings around the suppressant side-effects had once caused Jack to briefly believe that Will himself was, and the mortification of how he’d acted towards him still makes Will cringe. Beverly likewise seems surprisingly comfortable at having another alpha so close by, and it’s only when Hannibal has stood directly behind Will for possibly the eighth time as if he’s guarding him that he realises it’s his own presence that’s diffusing it and that he and Anneke are effectively cancelling each other out in terms of alpha grandstanding.

Anneke is clearly thinking the same because she now gives Will the ghost of a wink and as Will catches her eye and smiles back he can feel himself starting to relax. In fact he’s always liked being in their house, which is attractively and cosily Bohemian with its polished floorboards strewn with brightly coloured rugs, the joyfully bulging bookcases, and walls that are pasted in everything from modern art postcards to a corkboard with a piece of currency from every country Beverly and
Anneke have visited. In the corner a large piano grins with a row of ivory teeth, the lid coated in candle wax and drink rings as a testimony to numerous parties, whereas the wall above it continues the international theme with a collection of masks ranging from dainty Viennese carnival faces to fearsome Chinese dragons and an Aboriginal Australian one covered in rows of painstakingly precise coloured dots. In contrast to similar ones that Will’s encountered recently these don’t seem remotely sinister as opposed to happy and riotous, and he runs his eyes over them then leans contentedly against the sofa until he’s close enough to Hannibal to let their fingers brush together. Anneke’s dog is now noisily clambering over Hannibal’s knee and trying to lick his face, and although Will can tell he’s secretly irritated to an outsider it looks as if he’s tolerating it fairly happily. Will knows that this is because he’s been so worn into submission by Will’s own dogs and can’t help feeling rather touched by this before whistling for the dog so it comes and slobbers over him instead.

“Will’s a dog whisperer,” says Beverly to Anneke with obvious amusement.

Will gives a small smile then gently scratches the dog’s chin, immediately getting rewarded with a new volley of licks. “He’s beautiful. What’s his name?”

“Taxi,” replies Anneke with a smile of her own. “I should add that I didn’t come up with that myself. He was from a rescue shelter, poor old boy. His first owners obviously thought it would be hilarious to stand in the street yelling ‘taxi’ and now he won’t answer to anything else.”

“He’ll be jealous when the baby comes,” says Beverly. “We’ll have to spoil him.”

She and Anneke exchange a private glance and Will, who always finds himself getting triggered by the merest mention of pregnant omegas, hugs the dog rather protectively then blurts out that he’s looking forward to trying Beverly’s food in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

“It’ll be ready any minute now,” says Beverly. “It’s nothing fancy I’m afraid. Just risotto and salad – although it still took an embarrassingly long time to prepare.”

“She’s being modest,” says Anneke. “Bev’s wonderful in the kitchen. I always leave all the cooking to her.”

“Not that brilliant,” says Beverly apologetically. “I used a simplified version of the sauce and although the focaccia’s hand-made it’s not by me. I did try doing it myself but the dough’s a nightmare, I just couldn’t get it to rise properly. I lost the will in the end.”

Hannibal’s eyes promptly slide in Will’s direction. “I’ve also lost The Will on more than one occasion,” he says serenely. “Fortunately I was always able to find it again. Once or twice it even found me.”

“Well mine is definitely AWOL,” says Beverly. “Bereft of life it rests in peace. If you happen to have any tips...?”

Hannibal resettles his long legs against the sofa then looks at Beverly with one of his more inscrutable smiles. “A lot of Italian bread can be quite temperamental. I find it helps to coat the bowl in olive oil.”

Beverly seems pleased with this information then asks Hannibal if he’d mind choosing the wine to go with the meal, despite Will’s suspicion that she’s just being polite in deferring to his superior taste and could easily have selected it herself. Hannibal, equally politely, agrees that he’d be happy to and they all file into the kitchen where the air is already thick with a rich smell of spices and glowing very cosily from a combination of candles and fairy lights. The overall effect is extremely attractive and combined with an assortment of trailing ferns give the room a snug grotto-like appearance to the
extent Will half expects to see a tiger go padding past with yellow eyes that gleam amongst the leaves. In fact considering he was expecting the evening to be utterly torturous in every category he could think of (as well as several others waiting to be invented) things are going surprisingly well. The food, while admittedly not up to Hannibal’s standards, is delicious and the conversation is flowing just as well as the wine, with Beverly asking him about the theatres in New Orleans while across the table Anneke has discovered that Hannibal can speak Italian and is busy gabbling away.

“Goodness knows what they’re saying about us,” says Beverly cheerfully. “Ana’s brilliant at languages. This’ll be her third one, including English. She’s learning Italian at night school so it’s good for her to have someone to practice with.”

Will wants to say that Hannibal speaks seven but is concerned of looking like he’s showing off so instead asks Beverly if she’s ever considered night classes too. “I have actually,” replies Beverly. “Originally I just went to keep Ana company but I ended up really getting into it.”

“What are you studying?”

“Evolutionary biology,” replies Beverly, who sounds surprisingly animated about a subject that, from Will’s point of view, doesn’t seem particularly promising. “It’s a bit reductive in places, but still full of interesting little anecdotes to wheel out at dinner parties. For example we’ve just been looking at how facial characteristics differ between alphas and omegas.”

“Bad luck for the betas,” says Will wryly. “I assume they didn’t get a mention?”

“They didn’t, no. To be honest the main emphasis was on alphas.” Beverly smiles then shrugs apologetically as if the preference for alphas is somehow her fault. “The take home message is that alpha faces are more about lines and omegas are more about curves. Actually Hannibal is a good example.” She pauses briefly and looks thoughtful, obviously searching for a more flattering adjective than ‘sharp’ or ‘pointed’. “Chiselled,” says Beverly with satisfaction. “You see that look a lot on alphas: high cheekbones, high forehead, thin lips, and strong jaws and brow ridge. On the other hand you and Ana have typical omega faces in that your features are a lot softer and you have small noses and large eyes.”

“That makes us sound like kittens.”

Beverly grins. “Yeah, I know it does – sorry.”

“So what did evolutionary biology have to say about it?”

“‘It’s because of higher testosterone levels,’” says Beverly, obviously warming to her theme. “Facial features develop prenatally and testosterone is one of the hormones that influence the process. Testosterone is actually quite corrosive so angular features are a sign that the body can withstand it – and therefore signals a strong immune system.” She pauses again and then adds, rather mischievously, “High testosterone alphas are also supposed to have stronger reproductive drives and make better lovers.”

Across the table Hannibal is still speaking rapid Italian to Anneke but Will can tell that he’s listening because he now catches Will’s eye and gives the faintest hint of a smirk. In fact it’s so faint and fleeting that it probably wouldn’t be noticeable to anyone else, but to Will still manages to seem less suitable for a respectable doctor that it does for some sort of medieval warlord that goes round slaying dragons and bedding wenches. Will now gives him a small eye-roll (and is rewarded with an even broader smirk in response) then stares down at his plate and struggles not to laugh before spending a few moments applying Beverly’s information to the various alphas he knows. In fact now it’s been pointed out it really quite obvious: Jack’s broad jaw and strong brow, Beverly’s high
foreground and sculptured cheekbones, Skinner’s thin knife-gash mouth and Hannibal who, as usual, has to go one better than everyone else and collect the entire set. Admittedly theories based on biological difference are easy to dislike seeing how they’ve traditionally been used to the advantage of alphas, but one like this is so trivial and essentially harmless that he can’t help finding it interesting to think about. Not that it’s especially easy to relate in the same way to omegas given that he knows so few of them. Briefly he tries it out with several possible candidates – Dr Reynolds, Helena Black, and even Siemens – and can’t quite decide for sure, although if pressed he’d probably choose beta for all three. Rather mournfully he now inspects his own face where it’s reflected in the window and can’t help wishing that it was more gender-neutral in the same way.

Once the meal is finished and everyone has noisily congratulated Beverly for making it (who insists, equally noisily, that it was no big deal) they end up spilled across the sofa in the living room again – and where Will finally decides that if it’s okay for Anneke to curl up with her head on Beverly’s shoulder then it’s probably no big deal if he does the same thing with Hannibal. Hannibal promptly positions himself so he’s blocking Will from Beverly’s eye-line then protectively strokes the back of his neck, and the fact he’s so being subtly defensive to another alpha makes it very obvious that he’s sensed how it’s impending heat which is making Will so sleepy and slow. If Will’s honest with himself this is actually pretty mortifying, although somehow it seems too much effort to get self-conscious over it and in the end he just ignores the embarrassed twinge and simply shifts a bit closer to Hannibal instead.

“You’re not allowed to leave yet,” says Beverly firmly when Hannibal starts mentioning calling a cab. “I forbid you. I want us to play a board game.”

“Oh honey,” says Anneke. “Seriously?”

“I know,” replies Beverly, this time slightly apologetically. “I’m turning into such a hipster. But it’s a lot of fun and everyone does it now. Did you know they even have board game café’s?”

No one else does seem to know this, but Beverly is undeterred by the lack of enthusiasm and goes to one of the overflowing bookcases to retrieve a battered-looking Monopoly box from the bottom shelf. Will can see Hannibal pick up one of the pieces and examine it with vague confusion, so decides that it’s probably better to intervene before he can say anything embarrassing (‘a penguin Will?’) and politely informs Beverly that this sounds like fun – even though he’s convinced it’s not going to be fun at all as opposed to tedious and tiring. But in the end it does end up being rather fun, not least from the way he and Anneke keep catching each other’s eye and struggling to subdue snorts of laughter at how absurdly competitive alphas manage to be with one other even over something as trivial as a board game (while also keeping the other eye on Hannibal to make sure he doesn’t rob the bank when no one’s looking). And overall the whole thing is so rowdy and ridiculous and so many miles removed from his normal state of anxious intensity that he can’t help wondering what it might be like to have a life that contained more interludes like this: moments of simple carefree enjoyment where there’s nothing at stake, no darkly deformed hidden meanings, and nothing to focus on except little pieces of brightly coloured plastic accessorised by the buzz of conversation and a warmly soothing sense of companionship and goodwill.

In the end Hannibal manages to emerge as the winner, much to Beverly’s obvious resentment (and Will’s equally strong conviction that he really did find a way to rob the bank), and it’s only in the cab on the way home that Will finds himself growing pensive and quiet once more as his previous good humour begins to ebb away and something else steals in to take its place. In fact the sensation is so obscure at first that he can’t even recognise it for what it is, initially assuming it’s simply due to being tired and overwhelmed with an excess of pre-heat hormones. Hannibal obviously thinks the same, because he now runs his eyes over Will then gently tugs him down until Will’s head is resting on his knee and Will can stare fixedly ahead into the darkness as various fragments from the evening merge
with those from the past few weeks to stir something in his memory which prickles in an indefinable way. There have actually been several of these moments since first arriving in New Orleans: only slight impressions, inconsequential in themselves, yet somehow managing to meld together to snag and catch on the edges of his consciousness like eerie little hands. *Notice me*, these moments say; each and every one. *Notice me, notice me.*

Will now closes his eyes then takes a few deep breaths, hazily attempting to focus as a kaleidoscope of images weave and spin. At times it feels precarious and he has to constantly remind himself to take a few steps back in order to keep them on one side while he himself remains safely on the other: observing, intuiting and sensing, yet never merging with them too closely. It’s a *danse macabre*, just Will and this other unknown mind-set that slices sharply from one side to another and cleaves the air with whispers of insight. A violent choreograph of perception, like watching a pendulum swing. He’s no longer sure how much time has passed as he remains in rigid position, chiselling and carving at the impressions to see what might emerge because, oh God, it’s there…it’s *right there*. It’s always been there. Then he frowns again, shifting through the various shards before abruptly – painfully – his eyes snap open. “*Nemesis,*” says Will softly.

From overhead Hannibal’s hands appear and run themselves across his shoulders. “What’s the matter? Why are you suddenly thinking about Richard Black?”

“*Because,*” says Will, “Richard Black referred to himself as the Nemesis killer.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal patiently. “We’ve discussed it several times. It linked to his fixation on punishing alphas – the Greek goddess of vengeance and retribution.”

“I know,” replies Will, whose own voice has now adopted an odd, mechanical tone. “But Nemesis was the *goddess* of retribution, not the god.” Briefly he falls silent again as he runs through the succession of clues that have been sitting in front of him the entire time – hiding in plain sight – and in that moment he knows his suspicion is right.

“But what are you proposing?” asks Hannibal with obvious interest. “Surely you don’t believe the first killer was female?”

“No,” says Will in the same measured way. “No, of course I’m not suggesting that. I still believe the original Nemesis was Richard Black…What I’m saying is that I’ve just realised who Richard’s Black’s other daughter is.”

Chapter End Notes

Lolololol the thing about testosterone is allegedly true, because even science thinks Mads is a sexy badass #ScienceHasSpoken
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Enormous thanks, love and hugs to greendaygirl for this gorgeous fanart of the Murder Husbands to go with chapter 32, which you can check out here if you’d like to :-)  

For the first time ever Dr Reynolds isn’t sat behind her desk when Will walks in. In fact he’s so used to seeing her there that there’s something genuinely startling about her absence – like a missing tooth in an otherwise immaculate mouth – and it takes a few seconds to realise that she’s stood by the window, hands clasped behind her back as she gazes out at the stormy expanse of sky. The image of brooding black clouds sprawled across the horizon is a suitably desolate one, and in anyone else he might assume the pose had been chosen on purpose for dramatic effect. Someone like Hannibal, for example…it’s easy to imagine him draping himself against the window pane, adjusting his posture and arranging each long limb to create the desired impression in an onlooker. Only in this case Will knows that it’s not a performance at all, but rather a display of mental turmoil that’s simply found an image of upheaval equal to its own in the view of the storm-tossed sky.

At the sound of Will’s footsteps Dr Reynolds immediately spins round; and a single look at her face is enough to tell that this is a visit she’s played out in her head numerous times in advance. In this respect it’s hard not to speculate how she envisaged it would go and the various ways Will might have behaved whenever she imagined him – whether she thought he’d be aggressive, or sympathetic, or even haughtily complacent at having finally figured it out. Perhaps she had a preference when she wrote that mental script; and perhaps she’ll be disappointed when the real-life Will deviates from whatever lines have been written for him? Dr Reynolds stares back blankly, giving nothing away, and Will finally opts for a kind of polite neutrality then sits in the usual chair like it’s any other meeting and he’s getting ready to beg for suppressants while she recommends counselling or commiserates over the horrors of alphas.

As Will takes his seat Dr Reynolds reluctantly drifts away from the window and pulls out her own chair so she can settle behind the desk, every gesture exaggeratedly cautious as if she’s afraid that one wrong move will be enough to make her unravel. “Mr Graham,” she says, and as she darts her eyes over him Will knows that she’s badly frightened but is determined to hide it. “How can I help you?”

“I need to ask you some questions,” replies Will evenly. He stares back at her for a few seconds, silently empathising with the strangeness of the encounter, then reaches into his pocket to discreetly flip his badge. “I’m not here as a patient.”

“No,” replies Dr Reynolds, and this time there’s a wisp of resignation in her voice. “No, I didn’t think you would be.”

She doesn’t add anything else and Will can’t help being impressed at how she’s trying to assess exactly how much he knows before giving herself away. Holding back like this requires a strong nerve, but he’s got no desire to engage in a battle of wits – and no interest in stretching the confrontation out any longer than necessary – so opts to dispense with any subterfuge and get straight to the point instead. Replacing his badge in his pocket he says “I guess your sister called you,” being careful to phrase it as a statement rather than a question.
Dr Reynolds’ face sags very slightly as if her worst fears have been confirmed. “Oh yes, she called me all right,” she replies with obvious bitterness. “She told me she’d had the FBI round so I knew it would only be a matter of time. Of course Helena never could keep her mouth shut.”

Her tone is rigid with disapproval and Will can’t help trying to imagine how their conversation must have gone: Helena nervous and appeasing down the phoneline against Dr Reynolds’ coldly caustic outrage at an inability to let sleeping dogs lie. Privately he now congratulates himself at having the good luck to find Helena first given that Dr Reynolds would never have volunteered the same information; and Dr Reynolds, as if reading his thoughts, pauses for a few seconds then looks genuinely remorseful. “I was furious with her,” she adds. “I shouted at her…I said some terrible things. I had to ring her back later and apologise.”

“I liked your sister,” says Will calmly. “It can’t have been easy staying in the same city; I thought she was very brave.”

“Meaning I’m not I suppose?” snaps Dr Reynolds. “Is that meant as a reproach?”

“No,” says Will even more calmly. “Not at all. Just stating the facts.”

Dr Reynolds glares for a few seconds, clearly struggling with a temptation to pursue this pointless little conflict before realising that it’s hardly worth the trouble. “Helena might be brave,” she finally replies, “but she’s not discreet and she never has been. I’ll get to the point Mr Graham: this could destroy my career if it got out. Can you imagine? Richard Black’s daughter working as an omega doctor?”

“I understand,” says Will. Carefully he gestures his hands with both palms upright, attempting to indicate sincerity and openness. “It’s why I’m here at all. I wouldn’t normally come myself considering our past relationship, but I know you want to avoid your background going public. I’d like to spare you that if I can.”

Dr Reynolds gives a quick nod in appreciation of this then picks up her pen and begins to tap it against the desk. It’s a gesture she’s performed countless times when her concern was directed at him, so it’s now rather strange to see all that restless energy applied to herself. “How did you guess?” asks Dr Reynolds after a tense silence. “I don’t suppose she identified me outright – not even Helena.”

“No,” agrees Will. “She didn’t tell me. But she did refer to you as Liz.” He pauses then gestures at the certificate on the wall behind the desk. “And while she didn’t say you were a doctor, she did mention omega healthcare. There’s also a slight physical resemblance; I felt when I met her that she really reminded me of someone. Plus her mannerisms – she kept staring at me over the top of her glasses, the same way you do.” Rather ruefully he reflects on how he’d first noticed this gesture in Dr Reynolds because of the way it reminded him of himself, and how he’d vowed to stop doing it… then never actually did. “But it was also the mask,” he adds, gesturing at the wall for a second time. “I’ve spent so long staring at that space behind your desk it’s practically seared into my brain. Some friends of mine have one too and it reminded me of where I’d recently seen some similar ones: one in your office and one in your sister’s living room.”

“Well done,” says Dr Reynolds stiffly.

Her tone is distinctly hostile but Will, who’s a veteran of using anger to disguise fear, decides to let it go. “It wasn’t one particular thing,” he adds. “Just a combination of small ones. You don’t need to be concerned about other people making the link.” What he also thinks, but doesn’t add, are the numerous times he’s noticed the similarity between her own business cards and those found at the Sculptor crime scenes. Partly this is because the chances of it being a coincidence are too large to
warrant any weight as evidence, but also because saying it out loud is needlessly inflammatory and will immediately put her on the defensive. Nevertheless, the awareness of it still bothers him.

“It’s still unacceptable,” snaps Dr Reynolds, who’s clearly not appeased by this. “You’ve no right to try and drag me into the Sculptor investigation. No right at all.”

“I know, I’m sorry, but you have information I need. The sooner I get it the sooner I can leave you in peace.”

“This is harassment,” replies Dr Reynolds venomously. “You know perfectly well I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“You’re right,” agrees Will, attempting to keep his voice suitably calm and soothing. “You don’t – and if you told me to leave right now then I would. But a priority for the Sculptor Taskforce is to speak with the family of Richard Black. We need the information. And I have no choice but to persist until I get it.”

“Not at my expense you’re not.”

“That’s not my intention. It’s why I came to see you…” Will pauses very briefly, trying to think of a less dramatic word than undercover. “It’s why I came unofficially. Look, I understand how damaging this would be for you if it gets out – there’s a real risk that people might start looking at you differently. I suppose you’ve read the press coverage of the Sculptor?”

“No, I’m being practical. You have information the investigation needs and I’m offering you a chance to give it to me discreetly and quietly. The other option is messy and potentially public. Because the press is watching the investigation very closely – and if they get hold of this then it’s out of my hands.”

Almost as soon as it stopped the pen begins to tap again: a series of sharp, staccato clicks against the desk top like epileptic Morse Code. “I don’t know,” says Dr Reynolds in the same acidic way. “You still haven’t told me what you want.”

“I want to interview you about your father,” replies Will. “Similar to what I asked your sister. And
then I’d like you to voluntarily alibi yourself for the Sculptor murders.” Dr Reynolds opens her mouth to protest and Will holds up a hand. “I’m only asking you as a formality. Instead of an accusation, see it as an opportunity to eliminate yourself.”

“Those murders span for months,” snaps Dr Reynolds. “I can’t possibly alibi myself for all of them.”

“You don’t have to. That’s why we work so hard to establish them as a series – if you’re out for one you’re out for all.”

“All right, fine,” says Dr Reynolds. “Is that it?”

“No,” replies Will. Pausing slightly he leans back in his chair so he can look her straight in the eye. “I want you to tell me where your brother is.”

Dr Reynolds stares back defiantly but Will holds her gaze and in the end she’s the one to drop her eyes first. “I don’t know,” she says in a quieter voice. “Neither Helena nor I do. We’re never in touch.”

“If you’ll excuse me Dr Reynolds I find that hard to believe. You must at least have a phone number?”

Dr Reynolds’ eyes dart again, wary and urgent like an animal in a trap. “Only an old one. I’m not sure if he’s still using it.”

“Would you give it to me?”

“I don’t know…” mutters Dr Reynolds, and for a few faint moments Will feels like he can see a trace of the little girl she must once have been – pensive and uncertain amid the adult world’s casual cruelties – before the impression vanishes as quickly as it arrived and her tone snaps back to its usual brisk efficiency. “I don’t like the idea of going behind his back. I’d prefer to ask him to call you himself.”

“Helena said she’d do the same,” replies Will crisply. “And he hasn’t.”

Once again he stares fixedly in her direction and Dr Reynolds, once again, is the one who looks away first. As Will watches she bites her lip then reluctantly retrieves her phone from her pocket, doing everything with inflated caution as if trying to buy herself a bit more time. Then she picks up her pen again and hovers over a notepad without actually writing the number down. “Be honest with me,” she says. “If I give you this would you use it to put a track on him?”

“No,” admits Will, who’s secretly wishing this were possible. “I’d need a warrant and there isn’t enough evidence to issue one. It’s not my intention to hound your family Dr Reynolds, but your father’s case is strongly implicated in the Sculptor’s so you can understand why I’d want to speak with his children. I’ve spoken with Helena and you, and now I want to speak with your brother as well. It’s as simple as that.” Dr Reynolds gives a stiff little nod and Will leans forward again in his chair. “I know you want to protect him – but if he’s innocent he has nothing to fear.”

Beneath the desk Dr Reynolds’ feet are starting to tap. “Yes Mr Graham, you say that, but how many times have you heard of miscarriages of justice? How many innocent people get pursued by the police for the sake of a quick conviction?”

Her tone is distinctly rhetorical, rather like she’s expecting Will to start providing her with the details of all these innocent people just to prove his position, and Will holds out his hands again in the same appeasing gesture as before. “I’m not the police,” he says simply. “The only thing I care about is catching a disturbed and dangerous individual before they hurt anyone else. Believe me, I’m as
motivated as you are to make sure a conviction is the right one and the wrong person doesn’t go free.”

Dr Reynolds merely sighs in response, although this time her expression is fractionally less hostile than before. “All right then,” she says, oblivious to how Will’s head is tilting in an attempt to read her phone upside down. “I want to try and get his permission before passing his number on but I’m willing to talk to you in the meanwhile. Only I don’t know what I can tell you that you haven’t already heard from Helena.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s not new,” replies Will. “I’m just interested in your perspective. Let’s start with your father…The Nemesis.” Carefully he runs his eyes over her face to gauge any response to the nickname but her expression is as blank and stony as before. “Did you believe what he said – that he targeted omegas as revenge against alphas?”

“I have no idea what his motive was,” says Dr Reynolds stiffly. “The only one who really knew that for sure was him.”

It’s clear that she intends to conceal as much as possible with deliberately vague answers and Will, who’s extremely used to dealing with reluctant interviewees, decides to turn up the pressure in response. “Helena said your father raised you and your siblings to hate alphas,” he adds pointedly. “She also said that you all grew out of it, but on the basis of our conversations it seems to me like you never did.”

Dr Reynolds stiffens slightly, immediately taking the bait. “Neither did you Mr Graham. As I recall you’re not particularly fond of them yourself.”

“So what about your brother?” retorts Will, deftly bringing his argument full circle. “Did he grow out of it?”

“I…I don’t know,” replies Dr Reynolds, and for the first time it sounds like she’s starting to falter. “Maybe. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“So what about when you last saw him? How did he feel about them then?”

“I’ve no idea. It was hardly the type of thing we’d talk about.”

The answer might be negative yet the tone tells Will all he needs to know. Satisfied he’s got the information he wanted, he now neatly changes the subject again. “Could you show me a picture of him?”

“I don’t have any pictures.” Will raises an eyebrow. “I don’t,” snaps Dr Reynolds. “I don’t have recent photos of any of my family; we don’t exactly spend time together. Helena’s the only one I have any kind of contact with and I still haven’t seen her in person for nearly five years.”

“Helena told me all three of you changed your names,” continues Will, privately frustrated that he can’t force her to prove the lack of photographs. “Obviously you changed yours to Reynolds; did he change his from Black to Brown?”

“Not when I last saw him. I don’t know what he’s calling himself now.”

Will stares at her for a few seconds then dips into his briefcase to retrieve the mugshot of Matthew Brown, by now rather tattered from its pilgrimage from Baltimore to New Orleans and back again in an attempt to find it an identity. A wild impulse in him wants to show a picture of Skinner as well, yet there’s no doubt that implicating a colleague without a shred of evidence could easily get him fired and he forces himself to ignore the urge and just holds up the mugshot instead. “Your brother,”
he says. “Is this him?” Dr Reynolds’ eyes flick across the photo in the same wary way as Helena’s then immediately flick away again. “If it is him you’d be better off telling me,” adds Will gently. “You know it’ll come out eventually.”

“That’s not my brother.”

Will silently reviews the chances of this being genuine and then decides to push the suggestion a little further just to observe her reaction. “Is that why you moved up here?” he asks. “To keep an eye on him? He currently works in a hospital; a relative with medical contacts could have easily helped him get that job.”

“It’s not him,” snaps Dr Reynolds. “Besides, that young man is clearly an alpha. My brother is a beta.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’m sure.”

To most people her denial would probably seem clear enough, yet to Will it’s seasoned with just enough defensiveness to make him struggle to take it at face value. In fact compared to the discussion of her brother’s view on alphas it’s not remotely clear where the truth lies, but while he’d like to believe she’s lying he’s ultimately too cautious of being misled by his own biases to allow himself to be too persuaded one way or the other. After all, there’s no doubt that fear has made more than one innocent people appear even more suspicious than the guilty ones. Mentally he now files her reaction away for further inspection then opts to change the subject again. “Helena said he was your father’s favourite growing up,” he asks instead. “Is that true?”

“Yes that’s true,” says Dr Reynolds rather wearily. “My mother favoured Helena. Most people did, she was very pretty and good-natured. Bows in her hair, pink dresses on Sunday – that sort of thing.”

Just two neglectful parents without enough love for three, thinks Will, suddenly feeling sorry for her. It’s easy to imagine the child she must have been: gimlet-eyed and sharp-tongued (perhaps a little like Hannibal) who forlornly trailed behind her more glamorous siblings to gather up the crumbs of attention they’d left behind. Although admittedly it’s not like parental affection has done Helena that much good, or the brother either for that matter – Dr Reynolds, for all her anguished evasion, still comes across as the most well-adjusted of the three. “She also told me that it was hardest for your brother to come to terms with what your father had done,” he adds out loud. “That it triggered some kind of crisis in him?” Dr Reynolds leans back in her chair then frowns at Will from over her glasses without replying. “Do you agree with that?”

“Yes that’s true,” says Dr Reynolds rather wearily. “My mother favoured Helena. Most people did, she was very pretty and good-natured. Bows in her hair, pink dresses on Sunday – that sort of thing.”

“I would have thought it was obvious,” replies Dr Reynolds curtly. “You’re obviously laying the ground for some sort of point Mr Graham – I’d appreciate if you could just get to it.”

Despite the personal inconvenience it’s often caused him Will’s always admired her directness and he now dips his head in silent deference of it. “All right then,” he says. “I’ll be blunt. What I want to know is whether you think your brother is capable of the type of crimes the Sculptor’s been accused of?”

This time Dr Reynolds doesn’t reply immediately, instead drawing in all her breath before letting it out again in an unhappy rush. “What sort of question is that?” she says finally.

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

“What on earth do you expect me to say?” snaps Dr Reynolds. She sighs again then wraps her arms
around her torso, gently hugging herself as if in pain. “Tell me Mr Graham, do you have a brother yourself?”

“I don’t, no.”

“Well imagine if you did. Then imagine someone asking you if your brother – your little brother, the one who you pushed in his stroller and told bedtime stories to, and comforted when he was frightened…imagine being asked if you thought that baby brother was capable of sadistic serial murder? Of course you’d say no. You’d never want to believe it.”

“I’m not asking you what you want to believe,” says Will gently. “I’m asking you what you think is true.”

“I don’t know! I can’t possibly separate the two.”

“So what about you father?” adds Will, even more gently. “Would you have said he was capable? If someone had asked you before he was caught?” Dr Reynolds merely shrugs then stares very intensely into the distance as if focussing on something invisible just beyond Will’s shoulder. “Helena said he was good to you all; was that your experience of him as well?” She remains rigid and motionless and Will softens his tone even further then adds: “It sounds as if your parents treated the three of you differently.”

“I’m afraid I’m not prepared to discuss it,” snaps Dr Reynolds, abruptly coming back to life again. “Not with you. You’re not my therapist.”

She seems unaware that’s she inadvertently admitted to seeing a therapist and Will looks at her anguished face and feels a renewed wave of respect and sympathy. “I’m not asking you to analyse your brother,” he says now, deliberately shifting the spotlight of his focus away from herself. “You’re not a profiler and I don’t expect you to be. But the strongest predictor of future behaviour is the way someone’s behaved in the past.” Dr Reynolds gives a small flinch and Will leans forward in his chair again then adds very seriously: “Were you ever aware of him being violent?”

“Yes,” says Dr Reynolds, before catching Will’s eyes and quickly adding: “But not in the way you mean. Not like the Sculptor. But he had flashes of temper; he’d shout, lose control of himself…one time he attacked a neighbour who he said had looked at him wrong.”

“Was the neighbour an alpha?”

“I don’t remember.”

Will has a strong sense that she’s lying but can also read the situation well enough to know that further probing is pointless and might cause her to clam up completely. “It sounds as if you were close to your brother,” he says instead. “More so than Helena. You say you’re not in contact with him, but do you think it’s likely he’d be drawn to the same city you were in?” A few beats of silence pass and he closely watches her face. “Do you think he might be here in Baltimore?”

Dr Reynolds flinches as a muscle starts to twitch beneath the quilted tension in her jaw. “Well if he is he hasn’t come forward. I told you Mr Graham: I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Okay, you haven’t seen him. But have you heard from him?”

Dr Reynolds’ eyes flicker again. “Yes.”

“When?”
A while back. Well over a year.

And how did he sound?

He sounded…fine. He was in Canada on vacation; he said he liked the pace of life up there. He had an idea about moving but I don’t know if he ever did.

What does he do for a living?

Different things. He seems to have a new one every time we’re in touch.

Like what?

I can’t remember exactly. Graphic design was one I think; bank teller was another. Two summers ago he did a stint in Wyoming as a farmhand. Will glances up sharply at this, immediately remembering the Sculptor’s sixth victim and the discussion with Beverly at how it was almost the way someone would cut an animal’s throat. One time he said he was doing some acting,” adds Dr Reynolds rather vaguely. ‘Commercials, voice-over work…things like that.’

They don’t sound like a very plausible combination,” says Will. ‘Do you think he’s lying to you?’ Dr Reynolds merely shrugs again: maybe. “So what name is he currently using?”

There’s another beat of silence before Dr Reynolds slowly turns her head and looks at Will directly. “Andrew,” she says quietly.

For a few seconds Wil goes completely still as one by one every single hair on the back of his neck seems to stand on end. “Excuse me?”

Andrew.”

“Right,” replies Will numbly. Of course it can’t be more than a weird coincidence, yet hearing the name is this context is profoundly eerie and he now flinches in spite of himself. “Sorry,” he adds when he sees her staring at him. “It’s just…” The expression ‘someone’s walked over my grave’ promptly flashes into his mind and he blinks a few times then clears his throat. “Just a bit of a headache. So, his first name is, um, Andrew. What’s his new surname?”

“I don’t know.”

Will gives a loud, irritated sigh then abruptly pushes his chair back from the desk. “Dr Reynolds, please. You can hardly expect me to believe that.”

“I don’t care if you don’t believe it,” snaps Dr Reynolds. “It’s true. My brother was badly scarred by what our father did and it’s made him extremely wary and secretive. He doesn’t fully trust anyone and is very careful about the information he shares.”

“And that doesn’t strike you as suspicious? That he won’t even share his own name?”

“You grow up as the son of Richard Black, Mr Graham,” fires back Dr Reynolds. “You grow up as the son of that…that monster then sit there judging my brother for how he chose to cope with it.”

As Will stares silently back at her Hannibal’s words from several months ago seem to rush into his mind in a stream of smouldering vowels: He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not himself become a monster. And when you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you. Of course the abyss and the monsters described were in reference to Will’s own, yet isn’t it inevitable that the descendants of Richard Black should face a void of equivalent depths and darkness? Then in
the low winter light he sees a gleam of moisture on her eyelashes and it’s in that instant he decides 
that he’s pushed things far enough for one day. “I’m sorry,” says Will in a softer voice. “I don’t mean 
to sound like I’m judging your brother; everyone has good reasons for what they do. But you must 
understand how important it is that we speak to him.”

Once again Dr Reynolds fails to reply, instead casting a fretful glance at the mask behind her as if 
she’s reproaching it for giving away her secrets and leading Will all the way back to her office. “It’s 
beautiful,” says Will, following her gaze. “Did your sister buy it for you? She clearly likes to travel.”

Dr Reynolds gives a rather crooked smile. “No – my brother did. He sent one to each of us. I’m sure 
Helena told you that he left the States after our father was convicted? He claimed he’d travelled all 
over the place.”

“Claimed,” repeats Will, who’s always quick to pick up on people’s choice of words. “You mean 
you’re not sure if it was true?”

“I honestly don’t know,” says Dr Reynolds. As she’s speaking she pushes back her chair to signal 
the meeting is over, and the resulting ugly scraping noise is enough to make Will want to wince 
again. “I hope it’s true; it would be nice to think he’d got to see a bit of the world. But sometimes I 
wonder if he just ordered them off the internet and pretended he’d bought them abroad.”

Will quirks an eyebrow. “And why would he do that?”

“I suppose because he might want to make his life sound more interesting than it was actually was.”

“Possibly,” agrees Will. “Although it might also be because he didn’t want you to know his real 
whereabouts; you said yourself he was very secretive.” Dr Reynolds merely shrugs without 
confirming or denying if this could be the case. “Do you still have the packaging?”

“Of course not. It was years ago.”

In the resulting silence Will flicks his eyes back towards the mask, watching as it stares serenely back 
at him with sightless eyes that give nothing away. It’s such a symbolic choice of gift: a tool designed 
purely for disguise which conceals its wearer’s identity while presenting a distorted façade to the 
world. In this respect it’s impossible to forget how the Sculptor had tried to remove the face of his 
second victim, and as he pictures it now Will struggles not to shudder. Beverly believed he’d been 
disturbed before he could complete his grisly task but the incisions made his intentions clear – and it 
was then that Will had turned to Jack with a face that was pale and grave as he first uttered the words 
‘I think we’re dealing with a serial killer.’ Back then he was simply called the Unsub – the 
Unknown Subject of FBI code – but it could only have been a few months later that he was 
christened with the name for which he’s going to be forever infamous in the annals of violent crime.

That was the day that the Unsub died and the Sculptor was born. But of course that’s just two points 
of the trinity, because he also has a third name: one that’s currently only known to him, but which is 
surely destined to be his downfall by leading Will straight to his door just as it did to his sister’s? As a 
prospect this is undeniably grim, and Will is well aware that for all the hours spent poring over 
paperwork, for all the autopsies he’s attended, and even for his own blighted empathy and dark 
imagination, that he still doesn’t truly understand exactly what it is he’s dealing with. And yet he also 
knows that it’s far too late to turn back – because while it’s by no means ideal to profile a suspect 
second-hand, he has a sudden stab of certainty beyond all reasonable doubt that the killer known as 
the Sculptor and the son of Richard Black are one and the same person.

“Okay,” says Will finally. “Let’s leave it there for today.” In fact he’d like to discuss things further 
but can sense the brewing tension in the room and is already fairly tired himself. Dr Reynolds simply
sighs to herself in response, obviously wanting to refuse yet not quite able to insist on it. “I’ll be in touch,” adds Will. “Would you prefer I contact you here or at home? If you want to meet more private I can do that.”

“No, here at the clinic is fine. Although I’d appreciate it if you keep pretending you’re here as a patient.”

“Sure,” says Will. “And in the meanwhile I’ll look into finding a new doctor.”

“Yes,” replies Dr Reynolds in a flat, mechanical voice. “Yes, I think that would be best.”

Will nods in acknowledgment then pauses as he’s gathering up his coat before slowly turning round again. “One more thing,” he says. “Just for my own interest. When I was first referred here – did you recognise me?”

“I didn’t even recognise your name at first,” replies Dr Reynolds with obvious bitterness. “Let alone your face. Maybe I should have done, but there were so many people involved at the time. Police, psychiatrists, liaison workers…they all merged into one another by the end. Plus I never saw you testify. I never even attended the trial.”

“No?” asks Will, who’d assumed she would at least have been following it.

“I’m the eldest of the three of us,” says Dr Reynolds crisply. “By the time it went to court I was long gone – I’d already moved up north. I only worked out who you were when you started appearing in the news about the Sculptor case. Then the next thing I knew Helena was getting in touch to say you’d spent all afternoon with her; you can probably imagine how I felt.”

“Yes, I can imagine. But it’s not my intention to make trouble for you. Another couple of meetings and hopefully you won’t have to hear from me or my team ever again.”

Dr Reynolds nods rather aimlessly then finally moves away from her desk and extends her hand to Will. “I apologise if my manner’s been a little…abrasive,” she says; and it’s clear that relief the meeting is about to end has made her more inclined to be friendly. “Only you must appreciate what a terrible shock this has been.”

“It’s fine, really. Don’t worry about it.”

“For what it’s worth I think your work is admirable,” adds Dr Reynolds. “I know you don’t need me to tell you that, but I’d like to say it all the same. The type of life you have, the choices you’ve made…it would be impressive for an alpha or beta, but for an omega it’s extraordinary.”

Her expression is very serious and it reminds Will of how Helena had described her sister working with omegas to try and make up in some small way for what their father had done. Admittedly he’s not had an especially positive experience with her himself, but despite its frequent clumsiness he can still recognise a genuine attempt to safeguard and protect. “Thank you,” he says, returning the pressure on her hand. “I appreciate that.”

“I’d like to see more omegas have those kinds of opportunities,” adds Dr Reynolds in the same solemn tone. “And not just because they’re exceptional, like you, but because they deserve it – and because it’s their right as human beings.”

“Me too,” says Will. He pauses then catches her eye. “Maybe one day.”

“That alpha you mentioned…is he still looking after you?”
“Yes,” replies Will, allowing himself a small, private smile. “To be honest we look after each other.”

Dr Reynolds nods once more then finally lets go of Will’s hand and takes a step backwards. “Well then…” she says, seemingly adrift now that her supply of responses have finally run dry. “I guess I’ll be hearing from you?”

“At some point,” replies Will, trying to make his voice as calming as possible. “But please try not to worry in the meantime; there’s no reason this should end up in the press.”

Dr Reynolds stares at him for a few seconds then gives a final terse nod before quickly shutting the door behind her. The sound seems to echo in the empty corridor and for a few seconds Will continues to stand there motionless as he silently reviews what’s just taken place. Flickers of images and snatches of sensation now skim through his mind with lightning speed, yet despite their potency the thing he seems aware of more than anything else is the way last night’s bite mark has started to tingle. It doesn’t hurt exactly – more like a lingering impression from where Hannibal’s mouth and teeth have been – and Will slowly runs his fingertips across it, remembering Hannibal’s face above his as the impenetrable eyes with the hint of red stared intently into Will’s own.

If Hannibal and Jack were here right now then their reactions would be very different. Jack would be huffing with frustration, internally lamenting the civil rights procedures that prevent them from forcing Dr Reynolds to tell them everything she knows as his forehead furrowed into gathering folds of irritation. But Hannibal wouldn’t be doing any of these things. Hannibal would simply be standing there lean and poised amid the dimness as he watched Will with a very faint smile; because Hannibal, better than anyone, would be fully aware of the game that’s being played. In fact he was aware of it even before Will was. He said as much in New Orleans, running his eyes over Will’s face the entire time and unravelling his mind-set with the usual lethal precision: *Fishing is a form of hunting is it not? It necessitates planning, persistence and patience. Infinite patience: one sets the bait and casts the lure, then waits for the prey to ensnare itself on the line. So tell me Will; how disappointed are you going to be if it turns out that you cast your line into the wrong waters and are denied an opportunity to confront the Sculptor personally?* Briefly Will now darts his eyes towards the heavy oak door as he tries to gauge what’s currently going on behind it. Perhaps she’s already planning to warn her brother? Or perhaps Helena has. Perhaps he knows already – whoever or wherever he is – that the net’s just closed by a few more inches and his own personal nemesis is coming for him?

*If we act like predators they act like prey,* murmurs Will under his breath. Reaching down he retrieves a scrap of paper from his pocket and makes a quick note of the number he was able to memorise from his brief glimpse of Dr Reynold’s phone. Then he slowly turns round and disappears down the darkness of the corridor, his footsteps echoing away until he’s swallowed up in the depths of the shadows.
Inside Jack’s office Will gives a small sigh then leans back in his chair as he fights to stop his attention from wandering too much or too obviously. Exhaustion is pinching his forehead like a vice and by this point in the day (late) and this stage of Jack’s lecturing (terminal) it’s an enormous effort not to simply close his eyes and retreat into the comfort of his own internal space. The window opposite is streaming with condensation and Will now fixes on a particularly large drop that’s running parallel to another one as if the two of them are engaged in a race. He stare at it for a while, silently urging it on, and hazily wondering what the hell’s the matter with him. He’s so detached from all this; present yet absent. It’s strange. He just doesn’t…care. The bead of condensation now gives a tremulous little quiver then defeatly allows itself to be absorbed into the surrounding droplets and Will sighs again then refocuses his attention on the conversation.

“…so we’ll issue five reports instead of the usual three,” concludes Jack. “Or possibly four; what do you think about four? Maybe I should check capacity.” Oh God, what the hell is he even talking about? It’s something to do with forensics (probably) but Will lost the purpose of the conversation some time ago and by the now the whole thing seems to have unravelled like a spool of dropped thread. Jack grunts to himself and brandishes a sheaf of papers like a duelling sword, presumably to illustrate his point about the five reports, or four (or whatever) then pauses halfway through so he can lean forwards and peer at Will more closely. “Are you all right?” he says. “You seem a bit…” He trails off before he’s finished and Will raises his eyebrows expectantly, genuinely curious as to what’s Jack’s going to say. “A bit peaky,” concludes Jack with a flourish.

Will blinks a few times then clears his throat, trying and failing to summon a suitable response to this. In fact there’s something about the choice of word that’s genuinely annoyed him, not least because it isn’t the type of thing he could ever imagine Jack saying to another alpha. Honestly, though…peaky? It’s sounds so delicate and rarefied – omegan in other words – and is hardly the kind of term he can relate to himself. It’s seems like the sort of state Victorian heroines might be expected to find themselves in, reclining on their velvet sofas with a fan in one hand and a serving bell in the other. Fetch the smelling salts for me would you Master Crawford, I feel a little peaky. He’d actually have preferred it if Jack told him he looked rough, or sick, or even just cut to the chase with: Will, sort yourself out can’t you son, you look like seven shades of shit.

Jack now raises his own eyebrows, clearly inviting Will to elaborate on the source of the peakiness. “I’m fine,” says Will firmly. “Just a bit tired.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” adds Will, even more firmly. In fact he does feel slightly run-down (peaky) but can hardly be bothered to get into it with Jack. Likewise he knows that Hannibal is also worried about him, judging from the references he keeps making – which are both numerous and ominous – to the risk of pre-heat complications. Will’s typical response to these comments is an impatient shrug, at which point Hannibal tends to remind him that when he was last in heat he nearly died (as if Will might have somehow forgotten) before insisting on taking a couple of weeks off work. Will, who’s allergic to being told what to do by alphas, has been resisting these suggestions just as vigorously as Hannibal has been making them, and in the end an uneasy truce has been reached in which Will’s agreed to semi-regular health checks on the condition that Hannibal stops trying to control his actions in the meantime.

“Have some of these,” Jack is now saying. “Get your blood sugar up a bit.” Will pauses then glances rather doubtfully at what’s being offered: a box of chocolates in a lurid shade of pink, lavishly
printed with red blobs which bear a close resemblance to cabbages but are probably meant to be roses. “They were a gift,” says Jack defensively. “I didn’t choose them myself.”

Will’s curiosity is immediately piqued as to who might be buying Jack boxes of flowery pink chocolates, only he’s so paranoid about alphas at the moment that he’s wary of saying anything that might be misinterpreted as flirting. In this respect he’s equally paranoid about smelling like an omega; and which is why he’s not only wearing one of Hannibal’s shirts today but one of his jackets as well, all finished off with liberal splashes of some of his expensive cologne that Will stole from the bathroom this morning (and which admittedly won’t make much difference to the presence of pheromones, but compared to the cheap brand Will normally buys somehow manages to smell as alpha as fuck). “You look very smart,” Jack had announced with unflattering surprise when Will first walked into the office. “New wardrobe?”

Will had growled non-committedly then folded himself into a chair and wrapped his arms across his chest before glowering at Jack over the top of his glasses. Catching sight of his reflection in the window he now can’t help feeling a twinge of self-consciousness over how irritable he looks, although it still seems too much effort to do anything about it. God, he really does though: his eyebrows are furrowed so hard he looks as if he’s got a trench in his forehead. *Like a goblin*, thinks Will with gloomy relish. Or is it really goblins he’s thinking of…maybe it’s that other thing beginning with ‘g’? Those grumpy-looking little bastards with the staring eyes. Gargoyles? *Gremlins*? Oh fuck it. His head’s really pounding now and it’s a struggle to think of anything sensible at all. “There’ve been no real developments regarding Richard Black,” Will finally adds. “I’m going to interview the eldest daughter again next week.”

“Yes, you did well there,” says Jack approvingly. “Do you think she might open up a bit more about her family?”

Will shrugs as he weighs up the relative likelihood of this. “Probably not.”

“And was she able to alibi herself for the Sculptor murders?”

“No,” admits Will. “Not that it’s particularly surprising. Most people can’t say for certain what they were doing on a certain day five months ago. I don’t think I could myself.”

“Maybe,” muses Jack. “Bizarre her turning out to be your doctor though. Almost like she knew about you beforehand.”

“I’m not sure she did. Omegas are rare; there are so few clinics for us, the likelihood of running into the same specialist in one city is pretty high.”

“Well don’t get me started on the Sculptor operating in the same city. I’ll be honest with you Will – I don’t like those kinds of coincidences.”

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence at all,” replies Will, briefly remembering Hannibal’s eerie warning about symmetry. “If he really is Richard Black’s son then he holds me directly responsible for sending his father to prison. He thinks I owe him a debt.” He goes silent for a few seconds, struggling not to shudder. “Why wouldn’t he come after me? She denied it when I asked her, but my feeling is that I came here first, he came second, and she followed afterwards to try and keep an eye on him.”

“And there’s no new information about where Black’s son might be?”

“Nothing at all.”
Jack grunts crossly, briefly looking as morose as Will. “We’ll keep digging. I’m planning to put more personnel on it.”

“Are you going to hold another Taskforce meeting?”

“I suppose so,” replies Jack, before pausing and peering at Will a bit closer. “Say, doesn’t Hannibal have a shirt exactly like…”

“So what’s the plan for next week?” asks Will quickly.

“You mean the press conference?” says Jack, beginning to shuffle his papers together. “The usual spiel I guess: ‘actively pursuing several lines of enquiry.’” Will shifts uneasily in his chair and Jack pauses to throw him a quick glance. “Don’t worry. I know you’re concerned about the daughter’s cover being blown, but at this stage I don’t even see the need to mention Richard Black. It’s not like an appeal to the public for information would do any good. We already know who we’re looking for – thanks to you.” Will gives the usual modest shrug and Jack adds: “You’ve done good work on this Will; very good. Every significant break we’ve had so far is down to you.”

“Hasn’t caught him though has it?” says Will gloomily.

“We’ll get him,” replies Jack with a lack of conviction that immediately strikes Will as ominous. “He can’t hide forever. Just give it time.”

Will wants to snap that they’ve given it ample time already and received no rewards for their patience, but suspects that pointing this out would be needlessly petty – the type of thing someone like Kade Purnell would do. Besides it’s not like Jack to take refuge in meaningless clichés and the fact he’s been reduced to them is a sure sign of how much the strain is starting to show. “I guess we’ll see won’t we?” adds Will, deciding to relent a little. “Anyway, there’s something else I wanted to ask you about. I’ve been speaking with Beverly…”

Jack obligingly puts the papers down to show he’s paying attention and Will leans forward in his chair to describe the conversation at the lab and the urgent conviction that something should be done about Skinner. “I know you said your options were limited,” concludes Will. “But Beverly thinks the situation is unsustainable – and so do I.” He pauses for a few seconds then on an impulse adds: “And so does Hannibal.”

Jacks nods and frowns, obviously weighing up the various options. “Leave it with me,” he finally says.

Will pushes his chair back again and gives a quick, impatient sigh. “That’s what you told me last time Jack and nothing happened. I want something concrete.”

“You know I can’t just fire him,” snaps Jack with equal irritation. “Not without stronger grounds: he’d have me in front of an employment tribunal. Our best bet is probably a transfer.”

“Can you do that?”

“Not very easily. But I can try.”

“He might refuse to go,” says Will, who’s privately convinced that Skinner wouldn’t even go into another room without causing maximum inconvenience on his way out. “He might want to stay where he is.”

“Possibly,” admits Jack, beginning to shuffle then re-shuffle his papers again like a croupier dealing cards. “Let’s just cross that bridge when we come to it shall we? Oh come on Will, don’t look so
gloomy – I’ve said I’ll do what I can. Anyway, this might cheer you up. I’ve got some good news for you: we’ve had a very generous donation to the FBIAA college programme.” Will nods rather vaguely, trying to summon the energy to give anything close to resembling a shit about this. “From Alex Jackson,” adds Jack. “Remember him?”

“Who?”

“The used car guy. You know: he came to our last fundraiser. He does the TV spots with the cartoon dog.”

With considerable effort Will trawls his mind and finally locates the person Jack’s referring to: a florid-faced, loud-voiced alpha with clumsily pendulous hands that swung back and forward like paws. “That’s great,” he says, attempting to sound enthusiastic, then glances up and realises Jack’s still looking at him. “What?” asks Will sharply, overcome with a suspicion that this seemingly pointless story might be leading somewhere very specific.

“W-e-l-l,” replies Jack, who’s developed a sudden fascination with his fingernails. “Obviously his donation doesn’t depend on it, but Mr Jackson did say that he’d be very, um, happy if you’d agree to be his dinner guest one evening.” Will opens his mouth to yell and Jack quickly adds: “It’s a purely professional interest. He’s read about you online and finds your work very fascinating.”

“Yeah I bet he does,” says Will sarcastically. “No way am I doing that. Absolutely not.”

“Come on Will. The guy’s just donated 15,000 dollars to our memorial college fund.”

“I don’t care if he donated bone marrow,” snaps Will. “I’m not going for a meal with him. Do I look like some kind of escort?”

Jack makes an irritated noise, puffing out his cheeks as he does it like an outraged bullfrog. “For goodness sake don’t be so melodramatic. It’s a professional meeting, not a date.”

“Then go yourself,” says Will sulkily.

“He didn’t ask for me. And if he had I would have gone happily.”

“The reason he didn’t ask for you,” says Will, who’s now speaking very slowly as if dictating to some dim-witted secretary, “is because you’re an alpha. And if I hadn’t been outed as an omega then he wouldn’t be asking for me either.” Jack sighs even louder and Will shifts angrily in his chair then folds his arms. “Don’t look at me like that Jack – I’m not doing it.”

“Well I think you’re overreacting,” replies Jack, who seems to have changed strategy halfway through and has replaced his previous annoyance with an air of weary resignation that wouldn’t be entirely out of place for a martyr lashed to a stake. “I’ve spoken to the guy myself. Do you think I’d be asking you if I didn’t think his intentions were entirely above board?” Will folds and refolds his arms then glares at Jack over the top of his glasses. “Well obviously I’m not going to force you to go,” adds Jack in the same martyred tone. “But I do think it would have been a nice gesture on your part.”

“I don’t care,” says Will, who suspects he’s starting to sound like a grumpy teenager but can’t really care enough to do anything about it.

Jack gives Will a disapproving look (which is promptly returned) then begins to drum his fingers on the desktop in a bad-tempered sort of way. “Fine,” he says. “You’ve made your point. But he’s going to be very disappointed.”
“Good.”

“And he might be less inclined to donate in the future.”

“That’s up to him,” snaps Will, who’s started to mutinously eat his way through the first layer of Jack’s chocolates. “But it’s not in my job description to go on dates with wealthy alphas just to get us funding.”

“For the last time it’s not a date,” begins Jack, before catching sight of the furious expression on Will’s face and deciding that the subject is better off dropped. “Well, anyway…I said I’d ask you and now I have.”

“Go yourself. If he’s telling the truth about being interested in our work then he’d have no reason to complain.”

“Perhaps,” says Jack rather doubtfully. “I guess I could suggest it.” Will makes a sceptical snorting noise then realises he’s eaten the first layer of chocolates and decides to make a start on the second. “Anyway, while you’re here I think we should start to formally compare the wound pattern on the Sculptor’s victims with Richard Black’s,” adds Jack. “I know you, Price and Beverly agreed on the similarity but I want something official; it could save us a lot of time later if it ends up in court.”

“Maybe,” says Will crossly, who still hasn’t forgiven him the dinner-with-an-alpha suggestion.

“No Hannibal today?” continues Jack, peering round the office as if he expects him to come sauntering out from behind the filing cabinet. “It’d be good to have his input.”

“He’s not in at the moment.”

“Well where is he?”

“In work I suppose. I don’t know. I’m not his babysitter.”

“Well can you call him? He’ll come in if you’re the one who asks.”

“Not necessarily,” protests Will. “He won’t if he’s busy.”

Jack smirks very slightly in a way which can clearly be translated as: that’s complete bullshit and you know it. “Go on Will,” he says coaxingly. “Give him a call.”

Will frowns again then carefully replaces the chocolates on the desk, overwhelmed with a sudden, strong conviction that if Jack drops any more hints about his omega status making him effective at handling alphas then it’s going to be pretty much impossible not to do something drastic (including, but not limited to, picking up the nearby paperweight and clouting him in his smug face with it). Jack smirks again and Will is just opening his mouth to advise him of this when the door swings open and the moment is lost as Price comes tumbling in. He’s rather out of breath from running and he takes a moment to catch it again while Jack and Will stare at him in surprise.

“You’re needed Jack,” announces Price after a dramatic pause. “Right now – in the gymnasium.”

“What on earth for?”

“A group of alpha trainees are on the verge of a dominance fight.”

Jacks sighs loudly then gives the top of his desk an irritable swipe. “Not another one. Isn’t that the third this year?”
“Fourth,” replies Price with a hint of smugness. “Fifth if you count the one after the graduation ball.”

Jack dismisses this correction with an impatient wave of the hand. “Any other staff available to help out?”

“No,” says Price cheerfully.

“Which means they’ll all start turning on me,” says Jack even more irritably. “It’s a shame Hannibal isn’t here.”

Privately Will thinks Hannibal would be more likely to encourage the trainees than to stop them, although admittedly it’s very easy to imagine him strolling over and staring them all into submission before silently strolling off again. Wearily he now pushes back his own chair to get to his feet only to let out a startled gasp as he feels Jack’s hand come crashing down on his shoulder.

“Will Graham,” snaps Jack. “Are you out of your mind? I don’t want you setting a foot out this office until the situation’s dealt with.”

“But I can help in…”

“Stay here,” roars Jack.

“Now then William,” adds Price in a soothing tone. “Don’t be a Silly Billy. That’s an angry pack of alphas down there: one look at your mournful little bearded face and they’ll lose control entirely.”

“Price is right,” says Jack.


Jack, who’s obviously feeling embarrassed at touching Will without permission, has now quickly removed his hand and stuck it in his pocket as if to prevent it misbehaving any further. “Be sensible Will,” he adds in a calmer voice. “You’re only a few years older than they are. When they’re in a state like that they’re not going to see you as a staff member, they’re going to see you as…”

“An omega?” says Will bitterly.

There’s a clear quiver of anger in his voice, and for a few moments it’s a struggle not to feel too crushed by the biting unfairness of it all – of how Jack and Price, despite being so supportive in other ways, still automatically fall into the belief that Will’s mere existence as an omega is the problem rather than the alphas’ inability to control themselves. It’s not as if alphas can’t show some self-command if they really try; after all, Hannibal never behaves like that round omegas, and for that matter Jack doesn’t either. Then he can’t help wondering why he’s even surprised at this treatment, seeing how inevitable it was that people would start behaving differently once they found out. It’s not like I didn’t expect it, thinks Will bleakly; in fact the only thing more inevitable than it happening in the first place is that it’s almost certainly going to get worse. Then he briefly remembers Hannibal’s suggestion of leaving together once the Sculptor is caught and the sudden desire to just do it – to just walk out and never look back – is so overwhelming that it nearly makes him catch his breath.

In his mind Will is now gripped with an image of himself and Hannibal taking the only things that matter, namely themselves and the dogs, and vanishing into the distance in a trail of darkly mysterious glamour that would leave all the normal people trailing after them in a dust-coloured cloud of drab confusion. The image is intensely Romantic in the artistic sense – in the sense of individualism, of intense emotion, and the glorification of nature – and it reminds him of the night
Hannibal had murmured his reflections on the bright hair about the bone. That was the night Will had come so close to killing Matthew Brown…shock and ecstasy, and Hannibal’s eyes gleaming in the darkness like carnivorous stars as his fingers ghosted across Will’s face. “That scrap of hair is the relic of the title: both mortal existence and immortal connection. The poet believes that he and his lover could accomplish miracles together through the strength of their alliance – he imagines them as a symbol that other people might worship and grow inspired by. Remember, after all, how Achilles wished all Greeks would die so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone; it took divine intervention to bring them down. There’s such a fine line between beauty and horror – between the bright hair and the bone – yet see how we’ve demolished this line. Because we have, haven’t we? You. And. I…”

“Will?”

The memory is so absorbing in its intensity that it takes Will a few seconds to realise that Jack is talking to him. With a huge effort he now drags his mind away from that evening by the fireside and forced himself to try and focus. “Yes?” he says carefully.

“I said Price and I are leaving now. I want you to wait for me until I get back.”

“Sure,” replies Will through gritted teeth. “I’ll just wait right here.”

Jack casts a questioning look at the sharpness of his tone, although in the end he doesn’t add anything else and just disappears with Price instead, their footsteps echoing down the corridor until they finally disappear and everything goes quiet again. Left alone Will now flings himself back in his chair with annoyance, deeply resentful at having to wait in passive omega-like dependency while the Official Adults go and sort things out. What the hell is he even supposed to do? Then he sighs rather loudly and theatrically, despite it being pointless, and idly lets his gaze drift across the clutter of Jack’s desk. The first thing to catch his eye is a copy of the crime thriller Jack leant him many months ago and Will can’t help staring at it with a mix of emotions as he remembers the night he saw it lying on his own desk at home. God, things have changed so much since then; it’s almost like imagining a different life. That was the night he first met Siemens and Skinner then planned the visit to Dr Reynolds – and the night he’d stared so longingly at the newspaper clipping of Hannibal. In fact he’d vowed not to read the book at all when he’d first received it, but had eventually caved in after Jack had showed a child-like eagerness to share it with him that was actually rather endearing.

“Well did you guess who the murderer was?” Jack had asked when Will handed it back. “Yeah, it was obvious,” Wil had replied. “The killer had a double identity.” Jack had promptly looked disappointed. “It was very enjoyable,” Will had added kindly. Thinking about it now he frowns again, slowly taking in the cover with its flashy monotone photograph and stark blood-red font. A double identity…a mask to present to the world. The reminder of the mask in Dr Reynolds office is irresistible, and the prompt is more than enough for him to now reach into his pocket so he can once more dial the elusive number that he was able to memorise from his brief glimpse of her phone. In fact his repeated failure to get an answer is deeply frustrating – like a giant web with no spider at the centre – and he’s often considered leaving a message before admitting that he still doesn’t know enough about the Sculptor to risk antagonising him with such a tactic. Yet the resolve to keep trying is tireless, and as the dial tone starts Will’s aware of his heartbeat sounding in his ears in a weird pulsing way at the sudden strong conviction that this time he might be about to hear the voice of the quarry he’s hunted for so long. Briefly he now tries to imagine it: the way the man’s head will turn at the noise, reaching out his hand before hesitating at the sight of an unknown number. Come on, Will now urges him silently. Pick up, pick up. But ultimately nothing happens and the phone just rings and rings and rings.
In the end Jack’s gone for so long, and Will gets so bored waiting for him, that he finally decides to disobey instructions and head off home early. Partly this disobedience is being fuelled by offence from their earlier conversation, but admittedly its main source is an urge to be with Hannibal; an urge which is not only deeply powerful but also faintly humiliating, seeing how it’s clearly being caused by pre-heat hormones. Or, even worse – Will gives an involuntary shudder – from nesting behaviour. In this respect even Hannibal, for all his glacial gravitas, has proved that he’s not above teasing about this on occasion, and the fact he’s only doing it because he finds Will’s behaviour charming hasn’t proved much consolation. “Yeah, you’re right, what am I even complaining about?” Will had finally snapped. “I get to sit in a communist polyester monstrosity for a week and start wailing for you every time you leave the room. What’s not to enjoy?”

“But imagine how cross you’ll be while you’re doing it,” Hannibal had replied in his usual languid way. “You love being cross. I think you’ll enjoy yourself immensely.”

Will had made an irritated sound then and thrown a pamphlet about omega shelters at Hannibal’s head (who’d caught in one-handed then thrown it back again) and Will had ended up laughing before letting Hannibal coax him into being stroked, cosseted and generally fussed over until he was feeling better. Thinking about it now it’s hard not to smile, although even Hannibal’s obvious infatuation with the idea of him being in heat doesn’t change the fact that the actual process remains deeply unsettling. In this respect a fiendish ache has been grinding his abdomen since this morning, accompanied by a prickling sensation around his skull which leaves his head so clotted and curdled it’s like it’s stuffed with waterlogged wool. As if to confirm this Will finds himself stumbling down the final few steps to the carpark; and even though he’s at no real risk of falling, still has to grip onto the railing in an attempt to quell the sharp surge of panic that there might be something seriously wrong.

No, you’re fine, thinks Will desperately. It’s nowhere near as bad as when you were on suppressants; you’re just tired is all. Even so he’s forced to admit that driving is probably a bad idea in his current state, which means he has to waste a bit more time alternating between calling a cab (practical, but rather depressing) or asking Hannibal to pick him up (preferable, but has the embarrassment of looking needy). Not that Hannibal will mind being dragged out of work for omega-keeping duties; in fact given how incredibly possessive he’s been in the past week it’s almost surprising he isn’t here already. Will sighs to himself at the awkwardness of it all, then quickly follows it up with a groan of dismay when he realises the nearby figures he assumed were students are none other than Siemens and Skinner. Price has recently taken to calling them The Gruesome Twosome (in favour of Zeller’s preference for Little and Large, and Will’s for Shit and Shite) and the way they’re standing so close with their heads together makes Will wonder, not for the first time, what on earth they find so much to talk about.

“Hey Will!” calls out Siemens, promptly demolishing Will’s hopes that they’re too preoccupied to notice him. “How’re you doing?”

“Fine,” grits out Will, internally cursing as they both start to move in his direction. “Just heading off.”

“You don’t look fine,” says Skinner officiously. “You look…” He leaves a long pause before continuing and Will immediately feels himself starting to bristle. Go on you bastard, he thinks mutinously. Call me peaky…I fucking dare you. “You look very pale,” concludes Skinner. This is announced in terms of immense satisfaction, like he’s congratulating himself for his impressive insight, and Will frowns again then defiantly thrusts his shoulders back to ward off any further accusations of peakiness, paleness, or general under-the-weatherliness that any nearby alphas might want to shower him with.
“You were just telling me about your new car weren’t you,” announces Siemens into the resulting awkward silence. “It sounds neat.”

“Yeah,” agrees Skinner, with even greater satisfaction than when he was diagnosing Will with being pale. “It’s damn impressive, I’m not gonna lie.”

He then takes a deep breath and proceeds to rattle off such an extensive list of specifications that Will’s half expecting him to conclude that it turns into the Batmobile too – and which is so incredibly boring that he can’t even pretend to listen and starts scrolling through his phone for a cab firm instead. Not that this is the only reason for his inattention, because at the back of his mind is a horrible suspicion that alphas deliberately flaunt their wealth and status as a means of appealing to omegas. Oh Christ…surely Skinner isn’t flirting with him? The thought makes his head pound even harder, and when Skinner pauses to take a deep sniff in his direction the image is so repellent that Will finds himself blurting out: “I need to get going, I’m meeting Hannibal in a few minutes.”

Appealing to an alpha for protection always makes Will cringe, but even so there’s no doubt it’s an effective strategy because Skinner abruptly stops waxing lyrical about alloy hubcaps and active cruise control as his thin face gives a visible twitch. “Oh yeah?” he says cautiously. “Is he coming here?”

“Yes,” says Will. “Right. Here.”

Siemens clears his throat then glances at Skinner. The look says: you know as well as I do that he’ll kick your ass all round the parking lot when he turns up. Skinner clears his own throat and Will smirks slightly then adds a look of his own which says: and then he’ll rip your head off and kick that round too.

“Well, tell him hi for me won’t you?” replies Skinner in an overly casual way. “I’d wait on myself but you know how it is. Things to do.”

As Will folds his arms in stony-faced silence Siemens gives one of his quavering smiles as a farewell gesture then waits until Skinner has departed a few metres before turning back to Will again. “I was hoping to see you,” he says, lowering his voice as if he and Will are accomplices cosily exchanging secrets together. “I wanted to say goodbye.” Will raises his eyebrows and Siemens adds: “I’ve handed in my notice to Mr Crawford.”

“Oh yeah?” asks Will, trying hard not to sound too pleased about it.

“Yeah. That trainee getting murdered the way she did…right under our noses.” Siemens’ own nose twitches unhappily then emits a deep snuffling noise like a pig rooting for truffles. “It was too much for me Will, I’m not going to pretend it wasn’t; the idea that a killer could just walk into the FBI.”

“I know,” agrees Will bleakly. “It was a lot to deal with.”

Siemens waits a few seconds like he’s expecting Will to say something else; and then, when it’s obvious he isn’t, silently dips his head in a rather awkward bobbing motion. “So…yeah,” he adds. “I wanted to say goodbye.” He pauses again then repeats the same bobbing gesture, this time accompanied by a sad little wriggle. “And to say sorry to you – for the way I acted. I know I made a bit of a fool of myself.”

Will wants to agree that Siemens certainly did do this, but also doesn’t want to deal with a further flurry of watery-eyed apologies so ultimately just adopts a blankly neutral expression instead. Of course in a weird way Siemens’ pining has been a sort of catalyst for Will’s current relationship with Hannibal, although there’s no way Will’s giving him any kind of credit for it. “I hope you’ll forgive
“I hope you’ll be happy in your new job,” interrupts Will, who can see that Siemens is revving up into full self-flagellation mode and wants to shut that shit right down. Siemens gives another snuffle that’s practically operatic in volume and Will forces himself to add “And thanks again for your help in getting me released. I appreciate it.”

“Oh you’re welcome Will,” gushes Siemens. “It was the least I could do. And I hope things get a bit easier for you now. At least…” He pauses again then sucks up a deep breath before letting it all out again in a rush. “I hope you manage to catch him soon.”

“Of course.”

“You’ll take care of yourself, won’t you Will?”

“Always have.”

“I mean with this investigation. You know he targets omegas.”

“Yeah. I know it.”

“The way he keeps trying to contact you,” adds Siemens with a shudder. “It’s scary. It’s like…it’s like he’s close by. Hiding in plain sight.”

“It looks that way.”

“In fact I think the distance in the crime scenes is misleading,” replies Siemens earnestly. “It reminds me of what Sherlock Holmes said.”

Will privately feels that Sherlock Holmes couldn’t possibly have anything relevant to say about it, not least because he spent his (fictional) career recovering stolen bracelets and drinking tea and wouldn’t recognise a case like the Sculptor if it sat on his shoulders and shit on his head. Sherlock Holmes, in fact, can therefore go and fuck himself – although it’s hardly possible to confide this out loud, so in the end he just raises his eyebrows expectantly as if awaiting The Great Detective’s insight via Siemens-as-Watson. Siemens beams with pleasure at the sense of having Will’s attention then thrusts his hands into his pockets and announces in a rather dramatic way: “There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.” Will’s eyebrows elevate a little further up his forehead and Siemens promptly looks disappointed again at the lack of enthusiasm. “I mean when Mr Crawford said he wasn’t local,” he adds. “Because I think he is.”

“I’ve always said that,” replies Will sharply. “And Jack stopped saying he wasn’t some time ago.”

Siemens’ round face crumples at realising that once again he’s manged to irritate, and Will feels a small twinge of guilt for snapping that’s still not enough to make him want to apologise. In fact his head is really hurting now, twisting and pulsing as if crushed in a vice, and his vision is so strained it’s getting hard to focus. Reaching up he takes off his glasses then drags his hand across his forehead in an attempt to massage the pain away.

“I didn’t mean to tell you your business,” Siemens is now saying with a trace of bitterness. “I know you’re the expert; you and Mr Crawford. I’m know I’m just the legal guy.”

“It’s fine,” snaps Will. There’s a trail of perspiration trickling down his spine now and he flinches at how coldly clammy it feels. “Look, you’ll have to excuse me,” he manages to add. “I’m running late.” But even to his own ears the words sound slurred and indistinct as in front of him Siemens begins to grow as blurry as a photograph that’s been double exposed. Genuinely panicked now Will
takes a step backwards, then gives a helpless gasp as he feels himself starting to sway.

“Will?” asks Siemens nervously. “Are you all right?”

*Oh God,* thinks Will with raw desperation. *What’s happening to me?* Then he opens to mouth to insist that he’s fine; only this time the usual lie won’t come, and he simply staggers to one side before the cement comes crashing up to meet him and then there’s nothing at all but blackness.

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Behind Will’s eyelids is a sea of silhouettes which merge and tumble together like spilt ink: crashing, rolling waves of shadow with Will as a castaway in the centre, stranded all alone in the solitude of his skull. The only noise he’s aware of is the faint beeping of a heart monitor and the rise and fall of his own breath, yet while no one’s moved or spoken he still has an instinctive sense that protection is near. In fact his awareness of this silent source of safety is stronger than his own fear, and as he stretches into the darkness the feeling is immediately confirmed when a warm hand reaches out and grasps hold of his.

“It’s all right Will,” says Hannibal softly. “You’re safe. You’re in hospital.” Will frowns in confusion, trying to work out how such an unlikely thing could have happened, and Hannibal adds: “You’ve had a seizure.”

Will opens his mouth to ask how he had a seizure before realising that this question doesn’t make much sense unless he wants a technical explanation (which he doesn’t). Then it occurs to him that his eyes are still closed, but somehow it feels like too much effort to open them. “I was fine this morning,” he finally manages to say. “I don’t understand.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately and when he does there’s a distinct edge to his voice. “The quick answer,” he says grimly, “is that Andrew did an extremely thorough job of wrecking your endocrine system when he forced you to go into heat.” Reaching out he strokes Will’s hair back from his forehead then adds in a gentler tone: “And you haven’t helped it recover by pushing yourself so hard.”

Will’s fully expecting him to add ‘I told you so’, and can’t help feeling relieved when he simply leans a little forward in the plastic hospital chair so he can hold a beaker of water to Will’s lips. “Thanks,” says Will rather hazily. “Oh God, I feel so rough.”

“Move your head a little dearest,” replies Hannibal in the same soft voice. Will sighs and obeys, and Hannibal gently begins to massage the sensitive skin on the back of his neck where, if they were bonded, the bite mark would be. “Good boy,” he says as Will makes a small purring noise and flexes his throat. “Is that helping?”

“Mmm, yeah. S’nice. I like it.”

“Perfect,” murmurs Hannibal. He moves his hand so he can caress the side of Will’s jaw with his thumb then lets it stray upwards to brush against his lower lip. Will promptly makes another rumbling purr-like noise and Hannibal smiles slightly then increases the pressure. “It’s because you’re so close to your heat,” he adds. “Touching this area stimulates a release of endorphins – it’s the reason the alpha bite doesn’t hurt too much.”

“Is it?” says Will vaguely. “That’s good.”

“Indeed. Your body is very ingenious.”

This time Will doesn’t reply at all but just moves closer to Hannibal instead; arching against him
adoringly like a cat rubbing against its owner until he’s nearly falling off the side of the bed. Hannibal smiles again then tenderly pushes him back a few inches. “I still don’t understand how this has happened,” Will eventually adds. “Did they say when I could go home?”

“They want to keep you in for a few days for monitoring. There were a few complications – mostly due to your use of suppressants.”

“‘Use’ isn’t exactly the right word though, is it?” replies Will bitterly. “Why don’t you say abuse of suppressants? It’s what you mean.”

“You did what you felt was necessary Will. None of this is your fault.”

“I know,” says Will, even more bitterly. “It’s the system’s fault.” With a huge amount of effort he finally opens his eyes and is surprised to realise it’s already night time (when did that happen?) with streaks of rain against the window gleaming ghostly silver in the moonlight like phantom shoals. The only source of light in the room is a small overhead lamp and it makes Hannibal’s eyes gleam amid the shadows in a way that’s vaguely sinister. Seeing Will looking at him he smiles very faintly then leans further forward again in his chair.

“When did you arrive?” asks Will, shifting about on the pillow to try and get a clearer glimpse of Hannibal’s face. He’s wearing the same suit he had on this morning, so clearly not that much time has passed, although he’s removed his tie and has an unfamiliar crumpled look which suggests hours sitting in the same position. Worry lines are clearly visible around his eyes and mouth – gossamer-fine, yet undoubtedly there – and Will feels an immediate pang of guilt at the sight of them and wishes he had the energy to reach out his hand to smooth them away.

“A few hours ago,” replies Hannibal as if reading Will’s thoughts. “Beverly phoned me so I came straight from my office. Needless to say I was extremely concerned. Everyone was – in fact even Mr Skinner tried to come your assistance.” Hannibal pauses then gives a rather feline smile. “Beverly informed me that you were half unconscious but still managed to kick him before you passed out.”

“Did I?” says Will happily. “That was very enterprising of me.”

“Indeed it was. My only regret is that I didn’t get to see it myself.”

“He wouldn’t have done it if you’d been there,” replies Will, slowly starting to resurrect the events of the afternoon. “He was trying to avoid you.”

“Was he?”

“Yeah, he was going to leave when he thought you were coming.” Will pauses then smiles beatifically. “He can’t stand you.”

“You sound rather happy about that,” replies Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair again. “I thought omegas were supposed to get defensive about their alpha’s reputations. Shouldn’t you be getting incredibly offended on my behalf?”

“He doesn’t like alphas period,” says Will, who for once has failed to either notice or care at being referred to as someone’s omega. “He’s got some stupid plan to stop them being recruited if they were born abroad. Officially he was talking about the trainees, but I couldn’t help thinking he had you in mind.”

Hannibal faint smile begins to broaden slightly. “And why would he have me in mind?”

“You know why,” says Will fondly. “You big narcissist. It’s because he’s scared of you. You
“He’s right to be intimidated by me,” replies Hannibal with a certain tender menace. “For all his
defaults he at least has a modicum of common sense. But don’t think about it anymore tonight,” he
adds, seeing Will starting to yawn. “Don’t think about anything. I want you to get some rest and
grow fierce and strong again so I can take you home as soon as possible.” Will nods obediently then
tightens his grip on Hannibal’s hand before muttering something in an undertone. “I beg your
pardon?” says Hannibal. “You’ll have to speak a little louder.”

Will clears his throat in a rather self-conscious way then raises his face from the pillow. “I said will
you stay with me?”

“Of course I will,” replies Hannibal gently. “How can you even need to ask?”

“All night?”

“All night.”

“Can you get on the bed?”

Hannibal smiles slightly, very soft and affectionate. “I would, mano meilė, but I’m afraid it’s too
narrow.”

Will makes an irritable noise then hauls himself upright, moving carefully the entire time due to how
frail and unsteady his limbs feel. In fact he suspects he’s going to be haunted with embarrassment by
what he’s about to do, but the craving for closeness and contact is too powerful to ignore and
compels him to climb out the bed so he can curl himself up onto Hannibal’s knee and tuck his head
against his chest.

“Not like that beloved,” says Hannibal with unusual tenderness. “You’ll freeze.”

He retrieves his coat from the back of the chair then wraps Will up in it, cradling his head with one
palm and gently stroking his back and shoulders with the other. Will makes a soft, contented noise
then pulls a bit closer until he feels Hannibal’s cheek pressing against the top of his hair. “Don’t ever
tell anyone I did this,” he says sleepily. “If you do I’ll kill you.”

“Noted.”

Will smiles again then resettles himself against Hannibal’s shoulder before gesturing to where their
reflection is mirrored in the windowpane. “You look like you’ve got two heads.”

“Hardly.”

“Hopefully no doctors will walk past and see you. They’ll think it’s the room all the anatomical
curiosities are stored in.”

“Well, they might think that,” says Hannibal, smiling back at Will through the glass. “Or alternatively
they’ll simply assume it’s two people sharing a chair. But I’m sure you’re right and that the two-
headed man theory would be the most convincing. Or possibly a psychological explanation would be
more compelling. What do you think? They might assume I’ve halved in autonomy yet doubled in
will.”

“The Will.”

“Indeed, the one and only. A duplication of willpower in fact; we are very much the museum piece.”
“Oh yes,” says Will with morbid relish. “I wonder what our admission charge would be?”

“For a two-headed man? Something substantial, I’m sure, for such a structural marvel. Or even a metaphysical concept: two minds and one heart.”

“You wouldn’t want my mind,” says Will gloomily. He can feel Hannibal’s face pressing against his hair again and briefly closes his eyes. “I don’t want it myself half the time.”

“That makes it sound as if you’re offering it to me.”

“Well I’m not,” says Will in a firm voice before adding, somewhat more mournfully, “but even if I was…you wouldn’t want it.”

“And yet you disdain it yourself and are so eager to give it away. Your beautiful mind. Surely I’m a better judge than you are of my willingness to accept it?”

Will sighs and shrugs then abruptly goes silent and tightens his grip on Hannibal’s shoulder as he hears the sound of the door opening. Despite his earlier joke about a doctor walking the past the idea of one actually doing so is unsettling, and the resulting jolt of unease makes him realise how far gone he is with the dreaded nesting behaviours from how badly he needs quiet and security with no one but Hannibal nearby. In this respect the fact the intruder really is a doctor is obvious from his white coat and stethoscope – although the fact he’s also an alpha is equally obvious from the way Hannibal goes rigid then possessively wraps both arms around Will’s back as if he’s shielding him.

“Sir?” says the doctor, squinting at Hannibal through the gloom. “Sir, you have to leave. Visiting hours are over. And that patient should be in bed.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” replies Hannibal, chillingly crisp and calm. “I’m his alpha. He needs me here with him.”

In Hannibal’s arms Will sighs slightly then shifts further beneath the coat so his face is hidden from view, battling annoyance at the how the doctor’s chosen to speak to Hannibal rather than him combined with anxiety that Hannibal might be forced to go – although just like before, it doesn’t occur to him to mind at being referred to as someone’s omega. Beneath him he can feel Hannibal’s muscles quilling with tension at having a rival alpha so close by, and Will now instinctively nuzzles his jaw then strokes his wrist to make him calm down. It’s a classic omegan appeasement gesture – and, if he’s honest, something he’d normally hate the idea of – but the only thing that seems to matter anymore is preventing the type of argument which could end up in Hannibal being removed.

“Ah, I’m sorry,” the doctor finally says. “I didn’t realise. Only it’s in his notes that he’s not bonded.”

As he’s speaking he takes a step closer and Hannibal immediately tightens his grip then twists round in the chair until his own body is forming a type of shield between Will and the doctor. “At the moment a beta clinician would be preferable,” adds Hannibal tersely. “Or an omega – if you have one.” Despite the obvious tension he’s still glacially polite, although the subtext of ‘don’t even think about fucking with me’ is very clear beneath every single word. “He’s approaching his heat and proximity with alphas makes him uncomfortable.”

The doctor glances uncertainly at Will to Hannibal then back again. “I can arrange another medic for him if he wants,” he says finally. “That’s not a problem. And if he wants you to stay then you can, given the circumstances.”

“You can just ask me you know,” snaps Will. “I’m right here. And yes, I want him to stay.”

“Then I believe the matter is settled,” says Hannibal without bothering to turn round. “I’d appreciate
you closing the door on your way out.”

The doctor clears his throat rather awkwardly then obediently shuffles off and Hannibal waits until he’s left before tightening his grip even further and rubbing his face against the top of Will’s hair. “Just calm down can’t you?” says Will fondly, continuing to stroke Hannibal’s wrist with his thumb. “You were about to go full alpha on him. He’s just doing his job.”

“Which could be performed just as adequately by a beta,” replies Hannibal without loosening his hold around Will’s shoulders. “I’m not prepared to have other alphas touching you.”

Will opens his mouth to protest this possessiveness before remembering that if their situations were reversed he’d probably feel exactly the same and ultimately closing it again. Then he lies still for a few moments, listening to the low pulse of Hannibal’s heartbeat as it harmonises against the soft thrum of the rain on the window. Perhaps one day it might always be like this? Just lying in one another’s arms without the weight of duty or responsibility: no expectations, no deceptions, and without Will’s almost constant sense that at some point he turned into the wrong person and is living the wrong life.

“When this is over I want to leave,” says Will abruptly, and it sounds as if the words are falling over each other in their eagerness to escape. In fact he didn’t really mean to just blurt it out like that, but it’s too late now and he can hardly take it back. “Do you understand? I want us to go.”

“I was counting on it,” replies Hannibal, who’s assumed Will means after he’s discharged from hospital. “I had an idea of taking you to a second property that I own. I don’t think I’ve ever told you about that have I? It’s very secluded and restful: on the edge of a cliff side with a beautiful view of the sea.”

“That sounds good,” agrees Will, who can’t summon enough energy to be surprised at Hannibal having a second house tucked away with the same casualness as someone else might possess a second bedroom. “It sounds nice, and I’d like to do that. But I meant afterwards; after the Sculptor’s caught. And I…I meant away.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately, although Will thinks he hears him catch his breath before he presses his cheek a little harder against Will’s hair and murmurs: “I want that too.”

Will sighs in response then leans contentedly into Hannibal’s arms, imaging the house by the sea to rest and recover in. Then afterwards a hunt for the Sculptor with a Dark Reflection and then, after that…what? It’s impossible to know. But no matter what it is, it has to happen with Hannibal and this is one thing he does know beyond reasonable doubt. It’s as if it’s a mantra, an article of faith – as if it should be chiselled in stone or inscribed on parchment like any other universal truth: the sun will rise, the tides will flow, and you and I are the same and we belong together. Then he hears a faint rustling noise as Hannibal turns his head and asks in a tone that’s softly hypnotic: “Are you sure Will? Is that really what you want?”

Will now turns his own head until he’s gazing straight into the silver-flecked window and can see the way his reflection is overlaid onto Hannibal’s: eyes, lips, skin, breath, all blended together. It’s like twin souls in a single body, and it reminds him of the Dear You journal entry just after the heat and that perfect sense of Hannibal as an extension of himself: I just defined myself as you; and you as me. I remember that for a brief snatch of time we weren’t two people anymore but one. We were two halves of the same whole, and I didn’t know anymore where I ended and you began. In that single moment I felt like I could have merged with you, if such a thing was possible. That if it were possible… I would have done it.

Because it’s true, isn’t it? It’s always been true; and it’s for this reason Will feels it isn’t even
necessary to reply anymore. So he just gazes at the eyes that are blended with his own, and in that moment he knows without a word exchanged between them that Hannibal understands his answer is yes.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

As some of you know last chapter’s comment section turned into a bit of a bomb site and after some new trolls turned up I stopped publishing replies to the thread to try and shut the whole thing down. Unfortunately this meant I couldn’t reply to new comments myself, so apologies to MysticMoggie2016, Vincie_94, peanutbuttermovie, Orlandennie, dixxilixi, and sally3301 – just to let you know that I really appreciated your supportive messages, and I’m very sorry I wasn’t able to write to you personally <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear You,

I’m neglecting you aren’t I? I almost never write to you anymore. Not that it really matters I suppose, seeing how I just tell you everything in person now instead. To be honest it feels like I’ve finally run out of written words where you’re concerned so I’ve decided to simply save you all my spoken ones in their place. That’s true by the way; I store them up then scatter them in your direction, and no one else ever gets as many as you do.

Having said all that, I can’t actually talk to you right now because you’re asleep. And you really are – often I think you just lie there with your eyes closed, but I can tell you’re sleeping this time from how slow your breath is. It’s only two in the afternoon so you should normally be awake, but I’m constantly in bed at the moment while I recover so that means you’re here all the time too. I’m not really sure why I’m telling you that – it’s not as if you don’t already know. But it’s nice and I like it. I like resting against you and listening to your heartbeat. And I like how warm you feel. Somehow I always used to image you’d be cold to the touch. I remember thinking that when I first met you: ‘cold-blooded,’ I thought. But you’re not. You’re so warm it’s as if the sun has touched your skin. You’re warm and you’re vibrant and you’re everything.

Dear You, it’s odd to think that once I couldn’t write these letters if you were even in the next room. Once I couldn’t write them if you were in the same building. And now you’re lying next to me with your arm across my chest; I’m using your shoulder to rest the journal on and you could wake up any moment and see it and I wouldn’t even care.

Anyway, like I was saying, there’s no real need for writing to you anymore so perhaps that means I should write about you instead. I’ve sometimes wondered about that, only…what would I say? I guess I could write about all the small details. Like the way your accent gets stronger when you’re tired or how your eyes lengthen when you smile, or I could write about your warm skin or the way your heartbeat sounds when you’re sleeping. They’re important, these little details; these little glimpses of You. I think to a lot of people you seem more like a brand or a concept than an actual person. You’re so intelligent and imposing with that indefinable air of menace that you have, so it’s the little details which help to make you more human and knowable. It’s a way to see behind the façade and learn to understand you: that you’re not just this detached, unearthly representation that people admire, and are afraid of, but who’s totally removed from the rest of us. You’re so much more than that, and I can’t believe it took me this long to see it.
I guess I could also write about how much I need you and miss you when you’re not there; how I even miss you when you’re sleeping because you’ve gone somewhere I can’t follow you. To be honest I can imagine you’d be rolling your eyes at this point, because of course you’d never write something like that yourself. A letter from you would be cryptic and beautiful, full of elegant phrasing and obscure ideas. You’d never write something so dull and awkward as ‘I need you’; perhaps you wouldn’t even feel it. But I’m not you. And which is really why I’m writing this letter at all, because I’ve realised there’s something I want to say to you but I don’t know how.

You see the thing is: I don’t know how to tell you that I love you.

That sounds stupid doesn’t it? It’s only three words. Three syllables, eight letters…it should be the easiest thing in the world. In fact it reminds me a little of that famous poem: ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways…” I can’t remember how the rest of it goes; it’s the sort of thing you’d probably know. But you see there are so many ways and yet they’re all so incredibly hard to comprehend or express. Like the way I love you for wanting the person I am, not the person I’ve spent my whole life pretending to be. Or the way I love you not only for who you are, but for who I feel I can be when I’m with you.

I once told Jack I was lucky to find you, but that’s not really true is it? I didn’t find you because you were a part of me all along. You’ve always been there: you’re my own Dark Reflection lit up and illuminated and entirely without shame. You’re like love set on fire, burning inside of me. The world is full of fleeting thoughts and feelings but you’re a constant to cling onto and it makes me feel as if I want to give you all of me. All my shattered fragments. All of my Self.

So this is why I’ve decided that someday soon I’m going to show you this journal instead. I’m going to place it in your hands and ask you to read it, because I want you to see that I love you. And then, one day, Dear You – I’ll finally find how to say it in person.

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Will’s first glimpse of the get-away house is through the misty glow of the car window, and as soon as he lays eyes on it he can tell that it’s exactly as Hannibal described: a glinting glass edifice snaked through with steel that’s poised above the clifftop like a solitary watchman as the waves crash beneath it and the sky stretches out like a great grey mirror behind. It’s both majestic yet oddly haunting in its lonely splendour, and the sight of it immediately consumes Will with a mingled sense of awe and sadness that he can’t entirely define.

“The bluff is eroding,” says Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts. “Suspended over the roiling Atlantic; one day all of it will be lost to the sea.”

Will doesn’t really want to talk about loss so makes no attempt to reply to this speech: partly because it’s hard to identify a more cheerful subject against the roar of the waves and the greyness of the sky, but mostly because the journey has exhausted him so much it’s difficult to talk about anything at all. A new round of medication has additionally left him as quavering and unsteady on his legs as a newborn foal and in the end Hannibal has to pick him up and carry him the short distance from the car to the house, cradling him tenderly the entire time as if he’s something infinitely precious and fragile which rough handling could cause to break. It’s very different to the affectionate, casual way Hannibal usually touches him and in theory should be embarrassing or awkward – and it immediately reminds Will of a similar situation the night he’d gone into heat when he’d scorned attempts at help and insisted on walking himself. But now an admission of vulnerability no longer seems to matter in the same way, and it makes it surprisingly easy to simply wrap both arms round Hannibal’s neck and allow himself to be borne into the living room without complaint so he can be laid across the sofa.
The power’s been turned off while the house was unoccupied so Hannibal now goes to switch it on again while Will curls into a ball and internally curses heat and hormones as a load of bastards before finally summoning the energy to sit upright again and struggle out of his coat. In fact it’s still much too cold not to wear it, but he removes it anyway because while it’s got the advantage of extreme snugness and comfort the duffel design and toggle buttons are the type of thing he suspects a five year old might wear. Dignity restored, Will now rolls his eyes at the coat for being mortifying then hides it away in the closet (feeling slightly sorry for it at having to literally hang out next to Hannibal’s expensive designer overcoats) then limps back into the living room to contemplate exploring the house. The sudden powerful urge to do this doesn’t actually make sense to him, but he’s too tired to think about it much – and which means he completely fails to notice how Hannibal’s started watching him with something close to captivation because he’s realised before Will has that he’s searching for somewhere sufficiently secure to nest in. Hannibal, in turn, also knows that alphas aren’t particularly welcome during this process so forces himself to wait downstairs with increasing impatience until the sound of Will’s footsteps have finally fallen quiet and suggested he’s settled down somewhere. This turns out to be the bedroom on the top floor overlooking the sea, where Hannibal finds him sat up in bed with a blanket draped across his shoulders and his knees drawn up to his chest. He’s also managed to find one of Hannibal’s robes and is now wearing it over his own clothes while looking miserably self-conscious.

“Don’t you dare say a word,” adds Will when he sees Hannibal stood in the doorway. “I’m warning you. Nothing about monkey toes, nothing about communist polyester, and not one single thing…” The penny having finally dropped, Wil sighs then rolls his eyes.

...about nesting.”

Hannibal smiles without speaking and then arranges himself on the edge of the bed so he can smooth Will’s hair off his forehead: partly because the way it tangles in his eyelashes is endlessly charming, but also to check for any signs of fever. “How are you feeling now?” he asks as Will makes a huffing noise and tries to wriggle away. “Do you have everything you need?”

“I think so.”

“Did you take your tablets?”

“Yes.”

“Both doses?”

“Yes dad,” says Will irritably. “Stop fussing.”

“What a little horror you are,” replies Hannibal, beginning to leisurely twine a strand of Will’s hair around his finger. “Although you might want to reconsider placing me in a paternal role as by extension you’re reducing yourself to a filial one.” He pauses then smiles again. “You’re certainly sulking enough for it.”

“I am not sulking,” says Will with excessive dignity.

“No, perhaps not. Tantrum might be a better word. How would one create the necessary participle I wonder? To tantrumate?”

“I know you think you’re hilarious but you’re not. Sorry to break it to you.”

“And do you know,” says Hannibal, “that it’s widely considered part of an alpha parent’s prerogative to discipline their tantruming charges by putting them over their knee and spanking them?”

“If you ever tried that…” Will pauses, trying and failing to devise a convincing threat; Hannibal
smiles beatifically. “Don’t you dare,” says Will.

“If you insist, beloved,” replies Hannibal in an exaggeratedly sincere tone.

“Oh God,” says Will. He stretches both arms above his head then reaches down again to take hold of Hannibal’s hand so he can tangle their fingers together. “You’re unbearable.”

“Yes, I dare say. What a martyr you are for tolerating me. Perhaps your Uncle Jack will light a candle for you at the FBI?” Will rolls his eyes rather extravagantly and Hannibal rolls his right back before leaning forward to tilt Will’s face upwards with a forefinger. “In earnestness though,” he adds, “are you really feeling alright? You’re extremely pale. And you must have found the journey uncomfortable.”

“I’ve been better.”

“What’s the matter exactly? Agitation? Headaches?”

“Yeah…and the rest.”

“Do you feel like you need me here?” adds Hannibal gently. “Would you like me to get on the bed with you?” Will rotates his shoulders then mutters something indistinct. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes,” repeats Will in a louder voice, briefly looking more self-conscious than ever.

Hannibal smiles again in an unusually benevolent way, then neatly lifts Will to the side so he can climb onto the bed and sit himself upright against the headboard. Will makes a contended sound in response then immediately dives onto his knee, nestling against his chest and tucking his head across his shoulder. “There,” says Hannibal, wrapping Will in both arms and holding on tight. “Mylimasis. I have you now. Just try and rest for a while.”

“You don’t need to sound so pleased with yourself,” says Will, reaching up to give Hannibal’s ear a gentle tug with his teeth. “It’s your pheromones I’m responding to, not you.”

“So I am just an empty vessel for pheromones?” replies Hannibal. “How very gratifying.” Will makes an amused noise and Hannibal nudges his forehead with his own then adds in a more serious voice: “I realise all this is still very unsettling for you, but I promise you’ll get used to it.”

“I know,” says Will wearily. “I just… I just hate it.”

“It’s not surprising when you’ve been on suppressants for so long,” agrees Hannibal in a soothing tone. “Most of your adult life from the sound of it.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“So have you decided yet where you want to be during the heat? I’m at your disposal. We don’t have to go to the hotel if you’d prefer somewhere more familiar.”

“I’d assumed I’d be in my own house again,” agrees Will. “But seeing that’s not possible a complete change of scene might be nice. In a way I quite like the idea of it happening somewhere separate; that way I can come back again when it’s over and carry on as normal.” He goes quiet for a few moments, idly playing with one of Hannibal’s cufflinks before giving his sleeve a tug as a new thought occurs to him. “You ever hear the expression ‘What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas’?”

“I have, yes.”
“Well it’s a bit like that.”

“It’s not remotely like that,” says Hannibal briskly. “You’re acting as if your heat is something shameful to be kept hidden.”

“I’m not, I just…” Will catches Hannibal’s eye then shrugs rather stubbornly without attempting to explain any further. “Besides, that hotel did look really relaxing. It was nice.” He pauses for a few more seconds then gives Hannibal’s sleeve another tug and adds, rather shyly: “The main thing isn’t so much where I am, it’s whether or not you’re there too.”

“That you may guarantee,” says Hannibal. “And not only for my own gratification. As your alpha I have certain responsibilities towards you, and one of those is making sure you’re properly cared for when you’re in heat. That includes keeping you safe and comfortable – but also helping you to enjoy it. In fact my aim is for you to enjoy it so much that you’re regretful when it’s over and are placed in a state of pining for the next one.”

“But that’s the thing,” says Will with obvious fretfulness. “It’s the reliance I can’t stand. I hate being so dependent on an alpha.” Realising how harsh that might sound he flushes slightly then gives Hannibal’s neck a small nuzzle of apology. “No offence.”

“None taken.”

“Only I’m going to have to spend a whole week begging you for sex.” Will wrinkles up his nose in a way that’s obviously meant to be severe but somehow only manages to be endearing. “The thought of it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Then I’m going to have to put a lot of energy into anticipating your needs, aren’t I?” replies Hannibal, resisting a rather ridiculous impulse to touch the nose before sliding his hands down Will’s chest so he can stroke his hip bones instead. “That way I can take care of you however you require and you won’t even need to ask, let alone beg.”

“But I hate feeling out of control,” adds Will with a touch of stubbornness. “And vulnerable.”

“I know Will, but remember what I told you before: real strength is having the courage to ask for assistance – the courage to risk being vulnerable in front of others. Your vulnerability is the source of some of your greatest power.”

“Yeah, I remember,” says Will even more wearily. “And it’s a lot easier in theory than in practice.”

“Something else to grow accustomed to then,” replies Hannibal lightly. “Perhaps I ought to lead by example? One day I’ll have to present you with some of my own more vulnerable aspects.”

This causes Will to immediately fall quiet again as he remembers Hannibal’s actual words from the night in question: ‘Vulnerability isn’t the opposite of strength; it’s not a sign of weakness. When I show you how much I need you I’m simply being open. There’s actually a certain courage in it: I’m showing you that you have the power to hurt me and that I’m trusting you not to – even though you can.’ In silent acknowledgement he now takes hold of Hannibal’s hand in both his own then squeezes it to show he understands, and as Hannibal returns the pressure Will leans backwards until their heads are gently rested together.

“I can hear the sea,” he adds after a short silence. “It’s nice.”

“It is, I agree. Very restful.”

“When we leave,” continues Will rather dreamily, “after the Sculptor’s caught and we go…”
Hannibal presses his lips against Will’s temple. “Yes.”

“…I want to come back here first. Just for a while.”

“Certainly we can do that; whatever you like.”

“Then after that I want to go abroad.”

“I’ve thought of something similar myself,” replies Hannibal, almost as dreamily as Will. “In fact I’ve thought about it constantly: the sights I’d like to show you and the expression on your face when you see them; which settings would complement you best, the places in which we’re most likely to thrive…I’ve taken us all around the world without ever leaving the room.”

“I’ll get him,” adds Will, fully aware that he’s not using the ‘we’ that would include the FBI. “It can’t be long now.”

“Yes indeed: you’ve assembled your pieces quite impeccably across the board and led him exactly to where you wish him to be. Machiavelli would be proud of you Will; you’re playing an admirable game. You have never attempted to win by force what you were able to win by deception.”

“Deception,” repeats Will in the same soft voice. “Yes…”

“That word clearly strikes a chord,” adds Hannibal, equally softly. “You’re thinking about the mask aren’t you? It was such an incidental clue in many ways, yet its symbolic relevance is considerable.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately, instead silently frowning to himself as he begins to sift through the facts in his mind for what feels like the hundredth time. “I was talking to Siemens about it before I got sick,” he eventually adds. “He was making a big deal of how he thinks the Sculptor is close by. I’ve been saying that from the beginning, but now I’m wondering if he’s even closer than I realised.”

“Yes, indeed. Close to his sister – and close to you. The question is how close?”

“I know,” replies Will. “You said so before.” He hesitates again, and just like the time in Jack’s office it’s an effort not to shudder. “You think it’s someone I’ve already met.”

“I do,” says Hannibal crisply. “And Matthew Brown notwithstanding, I shouldn’t be surprised if it’s someone who has successfully convinced the world of their inherent righteousness. That he – or she – has crafted a mask of immaculate proportions.” He pauses then quotes very softly: “And thus I clothe my naked villainy, With odd old ends stolen out of holy writ, And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.”

There’s a smouldering nuance to his tone which somehow manages to be more menacing than the words themselves and at the sound of it Will can feel himself going rigid, briefly overcome with a surge of foreboding so strong it makes him catch his breath. “And yet you know I almost pity such a creature,” continues Hannibal, very low and hypnotic. “No wonder they pursue you – the one person capable of unmasking them.” Pausing again he slowly ghosts his lips against the side of Will’s face. “Having perfected one’s disguise, it’s only natural to seek out someone who is not deceived by it.”

In spite of himself Will flinches again in Hannibal’s arms, battling a fresh wave of panic as fragments and impressions from the last few months begin to skitter through his mind in a kaleidoscope of crimson and black. Because, oh God, he can almost see them now: blood-streaked and bone-tinged, tattered black feathers like flecks of tar, shadows crouching and crawling…Determinedly he blinks a few times in an attempt to banish them then instinctively tightens his grip on Hannibal’s hand.

“Keep your wits about you beloved,” murmurs Hannibal, his voice softly seductive against Will’s
ear. “You’re going to need them. And remember Baudelaire’s advice – because the finest trick the devil ever played was to persuade the world he didn’t exist.”

There’s another strained pause as Will winces like he wants to turn away. But ultimately all he does is nod very slowly before adding in a blank, mechanical voice: “Yes.”

“Ah, forgive me,” replies Hannibal, beginning to lightly stroke Will’s hair. “I’m unsettling you aren’t I? Sometimes I get absorbed in my own musings and it makes me forget how ill you’ve been. You wish to rest and occupy your wonderful mind with less disturbing topics.” Smiling slightly he readjusts his arms to pull Will closer then lowers his head until their faces are touching. “And yet there’s no reason to dread the devil,” adds Hannibal caressingly. “God delights in shame and self-reproach, but the devil will always celebrate the darkness and intricacy of who we really are. Destruction, debauchery, the quest for power: the temptations he presents to humankind don’t contradict our impulses; they merely complement and encourage them. What’s the devil’s concern, after all, except with our ability to show faithfulness to our true character – to our most authentic self?”

Will quivers even harder and then just as abruptly as he went silent appears to suddenly come back to life again: pulling himself upright then straddling Hannibal’s knee so he can gently but firmly grip onto his throat. “Very good Dr Lecter,” he says softly. “You make an interesting case.”

Hannibal’s faint smile promptly starts to broaden and Will leans further forward then lowers his voice until it’s almost the same smouldering pitch as Hannibal’s. “But do you know what all that sounds like to me?”

“What does it sound like to you Will? Dazzle me with your acumen.”

“It sounds,” replies Will, carefully drawing out each word. “Just. Like. Therapy.”

“Just like therapy,” repeats Hannibal, never once breaking eye contact. “What a disastrously clever boy you are.”

“And your therapy is very unique isn’t it?” adds Will. “Very tailored. Because ‘to constantly deny one’s true nature is one of the greatest acts of self-violence that it’s possible to inflict.’”

“Did I tell you that?” murmurs Hannibal, tipping his head back to give Will better access to his throat. “I suppose I might have done. It sounds like the type of thing I would say.”

“You know you did.”

“Then you should listen to me shouldn’t you?”

“Should I?” says Will softly.

“Certainly you should,” replies Hannibal, who’s started to smile again. “Because living a lie reduces you to one. God tells us what to think Will – and how to act, and who to believe – but the devil compels us how to feel. Then after that, he preaches how all our human feelings are acceptable. Consider, after all, how something horribly indulgent and self-serving there is about shame or guilt: the way we reprove and accuse ourselves before anyone else has the opportunity to do so then seek a sense of virtue in it.” He pauses as his mouth quirks itself into another Sphinx-like smile. “As the expression goes, it is not the priest who absolves the sinner but the confession itself.”

“So that’s why they call the devil ‘the Great Seducer’?” asks Will. With slow deliberation he begins to rock his hips against Hannibal’s then leans forward again to skim his lips against the side of his jaw. “Everyone wants to dance with the devil.”
“Then Nietzsche is right and God is dead,” purrs Hannibal. “Long live Satan.”

This causes Will to give a quick frown, although he ultimately fails to reply and in the end it’s him who drops his eyes first. “Do you want to know why?” murmurs Hannibal, taking hold of Will’s waist to encourage him to grind even harder. “It’s because destruction feels good. And why shouldn’t it? It does to God. Only last week in Texas he dropped a church roof on the heads of 34 of his worshippers just as they were grovelling for him. I doubt very much that He’d begrudge us, because killing satisfies Him too – He does it all the time.”

“Original sin,” replies Will, only this time there’s a distinct edge to his voice. “I think you should leave it now Hannibal. You’re taking your metaphor too far.”

“Am I?” asks Hannibal thoughtfully. “Perhaps so – perhaps not. Or perhaps it’s simply the case that we all need to learn to live a little. After all, the thought our lives could end at any moment frees us to appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything the world has to offer.” He pauses then gives Will a long, slow glance from beneath his eyelashes. “That is the ultimate gift the predator offers to its prey. A predator represents mortality so compels its victim to live as fully and fruitfully as possible on the understanding they could lose their life at any time. Carpe diem, Will. A predator encourages us to celebrate and sanctify each minute that we have, and they mostly do so without us even realising it. A secret devil in a mask who walks among us and manipulates our beliefs about the world…a mask just like the Sculptor’s.” This time he leaves a longer pauses then skims his mouth against Will’s throat as if he’s breathing into his skin. “Or even the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Enough,” says Will sharply. “Just stop. You always…” But then he pauses himself without explaining why, because really – it’s so difficult to define exactly what it is that Hannibal does. “You always push things too far,” concludes Will, aware even as he’s saying it how inadequate it sounds. “I imitated the Ripper from necessity, not from choice.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal, whose smile has finally turned in on itself as if it’s enjoying some private joke. “Remember what I told you after your misadventure with Matthew Brown? I told you that predators are merely something whose instinct is to prey upon another. So you can’t deny your predatory instinct mano meilė, because it’s a gift of nature and temperament. All you can do is choose whether or not to embrace it. To take a life or save one, Will: that’s the choice you make.”

Will tightens his grip on Hannibal’s shoulders, this time just enough to hurt. “I. Said. Enough.”

“And I heard you,” says Hannibal without missing a beat. “I simply enacted your advice a little differently to how you intended.” Will’s eyebrows gather together in a warning frown and Hannibal finally relents then lifts up a hand so he can smooth them back into place. “Very well,” he adds in a gentler voice. “Enough. Tell me what you want to talk about instead.”

Will frowns even harder then makes an irritated sound between his teeth. “I’m not sure,” he says fretfully. “I don’t know if I do want to talk. I feel so rough. I just…I don’t feel like myself.” Hannibal opens his mouth to reply and Will gives a rather mournful smile then presses a finger against his lips. “No philosophical speeches about identity please. Just let me feel like crap in a straightforward way.”

“I’m sorry you feel…” Hannibal hesitates, obviously reluctant to utter such a plebeian word as ‘crap’. “…Unlike yourself. You have my sympathy if it’s any consolation. Not that I really expect it to be.”

Will gives a long-suffering sigh then disentangles himself from Hannibal’s arms until he’s lying on his back again and can prop himself against Hannibal’s chest. “I don’t know,” he says eventually. “I honestly have no idea. What do you want to talk about?”
“You’re giving me carte blanche to name a subject?” asks Hannibal with obvious interest. “How very tempting.”

“Oh God. I can already tell I’m going to regret this.”

“Not at all,” replies Hannibal fondly. “You’ve just established your boundaries so I intend to respect the prohibition. Something revealing yet essentially harmless is what it shall have to be. Hmm…all right, I have it now: tell me something about your mother.”

“Seriously?” says Will. “Why on earth do you want to know about my mother?”

“Because I’ve already heard about your father and now I wish to complete the blanks in my knowledge. Besides, I find the idea of her fascinating. I saw that photograph of her remember? She looks exactly like you.”

“You mean I look like her. She came first.”

“Very true,” agrees Hannibal. “She is the original and you are the replica. You’ve also helped to answer your own question about my curiosity, because given the precedent why wouldn’t I want to know about her?” Slowly he runs his finger across Will’s cheekbone. “She was the means of giving me you.”

“You know I’m honestly not sure whether you’re being sentimental or vaguely creepy,” says Will sardonically. “I suppose it should bother me that I can’t tell.” Hannibal gives one of his more enigmatic smiles but doesn’t reply. “Well…I’m not really sure what to tell you,” adds Will. “I never knew her. She died when I was very young.” He pauses again then sighs rather sadly. “What about you?”

“Both my parents died when I was a child,” replies Hannibal. “I was the proverbial orphan until aged 16 when I was adopted by my Uncle Robertus. We appear to have a little in common Will – you in your homespun corner of America and me in my European wilderness – even if our losses might have varied in kind. But now you are changing the rules of the game, because I wish to discuss your mother not my own.”

“Talking about mothers,” says Will languidly, who’s starting to stretch himself against the length of Hannibal’s shoulder like a cat. “How Freudian. That’s some lazy psychiatry Dr Lecter. Low hanging fruit.”

“On the contrary. I suspect the fruit is on a high branch and very difficult to reach.”

“So’s my mother. I told you, I never knew her.”

“And yet you keep vigil to her photograph. I saw it myself – all adorned in flowers. I also saw that she was young and beautiful and had a smile that reached her eyes in a way that you only rarely seem to manage. Surely you must have some facts about her at your disposal?”

“No really. My father hardly ever talked about her. He adored her; he was devastated when she died.”

“Yes, I can imagine that: his longing to see her one last time and the sense of pining for what might have been. And you there by his side with that beautiful face as a constant reminder.”

“I’m not beautiful,” snaps Will with some irritation. “Don’t be stupid.”

“You are to me,” replies Hannibal simply. “Just as your mother must have been to your father. What
else do you know about her?”

Will pauses then frowns, obviously trying to dredge up some morsel of detail that Hannibal might find interesting. “Only that they were a fairly unlikely couple,” he says eventually. “My dad is seriously staid and uptight, whereas by all accounts my mother was something of a free-spirit. A bit wild, you know.”

“They don’t sound especially unlikely; it often happens that one is drawn to a partner possessing traits which are disowned in oneself. Look at us as one example – I have very little empathy whereas you suffer from an excess. As the saying goes love is a glass which makes even a monster appear fascinating.” Hannibal pauses for a few seconds, briefly looking thoughtful, and then begins to gently run his fingers through Will’s hair. “How did they meet?”

“Actually that’s one thing I do know,” says Will with another wistful sigh. “I’ve seen it.”

“Oh indeed? You intrigue me.”

“Yeah, she was singing in a bar. She wasn’t a professional or anything: it was just some local talent contest and they filmed it for a promo tape. My mom did a song called Hunt You Down. It’s very jaunty, kind of country and western, but the lyrics are pretty dark. It’s about a woman threatening to murder her lover if he’s ever unfaithful to her.” Will gives a small smile of his own then quotes with obvious wryness: “I’ve never hurt nobody, never buried a body, Never killed no one, I ain't afraid to get a little crazy, Baby, when I'm in love.”

“How incredibly apt,” says Hannibal in amusement. “A predatory spirit clearly runs in the family.”

“Hmm. Sometime I have nightmares about Freddie Lounds getting hold of a copy.”

“And yet your father wasn’t deterred was he? On the contrary: he saw your beautiful, fierce mother singing her ballad of killing and instantly wanted to know her better.”

“Pretty much,” agrees Will. “He was working the bar at the time to save enough for a car and when she walked onto the stage he couldn’t take his eyes off her. He was so distracted he spilt beer all over one of the customers.”

“And is his distraction also recorded for posterity? Or did he tell you about it himself?”

“He told me about it – one of the very few times he ever opened up about her.”

“I suppose his face must have softened as he did so,” replies Hannibal. “For a few moments he was no longer the wifeless husband with the motherless son: he would have been that ardent young man with the spilt beer, yearning after a lovely face and a wild spirit.” Will sighs again and Hannibal sighs too then curls a palm around the back of his neck so he can stroke it very gently with his thumb. “Your father was a fool to indulge his melancholy so much,” he adds in a softer voice. “Had he been less self-absorbed he could have appreciated all those qualities of your mother brought to life in front of him in her son. He should have taken more consolation in you.”

“Yeah, well…he didn’t,” says Will bleakly. “It’s not like you need to feel sorry for me. To be honest I’ve never really connected much to the concept of family. There’s something so foreign about it, like an ill-fitting suit.” He shrugs then gives a bitter, humourless laugh. “Of course being an omega doesn’t exactly help.”

“Were both your parents betas?”

“They were, yes. I know that’s unusual: statistically I’m a huge anomaly.”
“You’re rare,” agrees Hannibal with obvious fondness. “But certainly not an anomaly. I wonder what your mother would have made of your gender had she lived?”

“I’ve no idea,” says Will vaguely. “You know what my dad made of it of course – both literally and figuratively.”

“Yes, unfortunately; I recall you saying that he’d have preferred an alpha for a son, but that his outlook improved when he realised how much money he could make from you. Of course a male omega is an additional rarity, so I imagine he recognised the prospects of having an intelligent, attractive one to trade upon.”

“The thing is,” continues Will, “he mostly seemed like he’d be fine about it. It’s not like we were close or anything, but we mostly got along okay. All that changed when I was 15.”

“And what happened when you were 15?”

“He made it very clear that he planned to sell me when I reached legal age,” replies Will, and for a few seconds a look of real sadness flits across his face. “In New Orleans that’s 21, so at least I had a couple years respite. I mean it’s not like you don’t know about it in theory, but somehow you think your own parents would never…” He briefly goes quiet again then restlessly drags his hand through his hair. “It’s still a lot to deal with…nothing ever really prepares you. I had this fantasy that if my mother had been alive she would never have allowed it.” Hannibal makes a sympathetic noise and Will shrugs for a third time. “I suppose your parents were alpha-omega?”

“Correct. My sister was an omega too, just like you.”

“You never talk about your sister.”

“No,” says Hannibal simply.

“Does she look like you?” asks Will, who’s struggling to imagine it.

“Not especially. Although you actually remind me of her quite a bit.” Will promptly gives an irritable shuffle and Hannibal smiles slightly then adds: “I suppose that sounds patronising, but I promise it’s intended as a compliment. She had considerable physical beauty, just as you do, but it’s really more a question of temperament.” For a few seconds he falls silent himself, wordlessly remembering that small sister – long dead now, but whose memory never fades or blemishes – and whose softness, susceptibility and quiet need to be loved are entirely reminiscent of Will. “When she was a child she’d sometimes look at me exactly the way you do,” adds Hannibal, and this time there’s a distinct tone of sadness in his voice. “Very thoughtful and appraising with a hint of challenge. I always found it impossible to deny her anything.”

“Where is she now?”

“I lost her many years ago,” replies Hannibal, beginning to gently run his palm across Will’s shoulders. “You mentioned your fantasy of your mother’s mercy just now; well, my own fantasy is that what was done could be undone and one day she’d be restored to me. Should the universe contract…should time reverse and teacups come together.” Will immediately looks puzzled and Hannibal catches his eye then gives another rather sad smile. “It’s a reflection of the physicist Stephen Hawking: the broken cup is a metaphor for turning back time. In fact I called you that myself once didn’t I. Do you remember? Jack’s fragile little teacup…” This time he leaves another longer pause and then slowly trails his fingers along Will’s throat until he’s cupping his cheek in his palm. “It also shows why your choice of gift for me was so uncannily appropriate, just as its fate was when you threw it against the wall. Occasionally, I do the same Will: I drop a teacup to shatter on the
floor on purpose. I am not satisfied when it doesn’t gather itself up again, and yet of course it’s impossible – God’s most malevolent deceit.”

“God can’t save any of us,” says Will in the same low tone. “It’s inelegant. Elegance is more important than suffering. That’s his design.”

“Then we shall have to save ourselves,” replies Hannibal. “Won’t we?” For a few seconds he falls completely silent, seeming somewhat mesmerised as beyond the window the waves roar and crash, before he runs his hand through Will’s hair and adds in an even softer voice: “I’ve only had cause to shatter a single cup in the past few months. Would you like to know what my conclusions were?” Will nods without speaking and Hannibal stops stroking his hair so he can trace a finger along his jaw instead as if he’s trying to memorise the contours of his face. “My conclusion was that for as long as I have you near me then I’d be content for it to never gather together.”

Will swallows audibly in response, clearly lost for a suitable reply to this. It’s obvious that he feels deeply moved by what he’s just heard and in the end he simply takes hold of Hannibal’s hand so he can clasp it in his own and hold on tight. “Thank you beloved,” says Hannibal quietly. “Turn round now please: let me see you properly.”

Will obeys immediately and Hannibal reaches up to cup his face in both hands, smoothing his thumbs beneath his eyes as if trying to stroke away the shadows there. The sun is starting to set now and as the light spills through the window it bathes his pale skin in shades of burnt gold, persimmon pink, and deep a deep smoky crimson the same colour as blood. “It’s strange Will,” murmurs Hannibal after another short pause. “You constantly overpower me but I can’t bring myself to resent you for it. In fact the first time I discovered something I could really yearn for was the day I discovered you, yet my need to possess you is fraught with inconsistencies. At various times and in various ways it’s been contrary to comprehension, to judgement, to expectation, to peace of mind or freedom of choice, to helpfulness, happiness, or contentment; contrary even to my own sense of myself.” As Will gazes back silently, once more overwhelmed by this speech, Hannibal tightens his grip then leans further forward until his eyes are boring straight into Will’s, ardent and hypnotic as burning flints. “I’ve never been drawn to someone so fiercely as I am to you,” adds Hannibal softly, “yet while parts of me resist it and try to maintain an independence, there’s no doubt that the loss of you is unimaginable and I’d rather be haunted by your image and driven mad by the memory of you than not to have you at all. I am both murderer and martyr to my own devotion. You: my love of a lifetime, for a lifetime, and for whatever lives come after. Never try and leave me Will.”

There’s something about his tone which immediately strikes Will as ominous, although it’s hard to say exactly what it is. It’s the gravity of it, perhaps? The severity of it – as if something mortal is at stake – and for a few seconds Will is reminded of a childhood preacher in his hometown, intoning away from the Old Testament while he squirmed next to his father in the pew: ‘For the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you...’ Not that it’s really possible to imagine Hannibal ever trying to hurt him. Not deliberately; not seriously. Even when they’re being rough with each other there’s still a sense of him constantly holding back, as if Will’s presence compels him to repress a layer of ferocity that’s lying just below the surface.

“Why would I do that?” is all he finally says.

“You might decide you have your reasons.”

“No,” replies Will firmly. “I wouldn’t – couldn’t. There’s nothing would make me.”

There’s a pause and then: “Nothing,” repeats Hannibal in the same rhythmic voice. “Nothing is merely the absence of something. It doesn’t negate that the thing still exists. We shall have to see won’t we?”
Will rolls his eyes then presses his fingers against Hannibal’s mouth. “Stop it,” he says. “You were doing so well before, don’t ruin it. And it’s pointless anyway because you’re not going to lose me.”

“To lose someone,” repeats Hannibal slowly. “To lose someone as opposed to see them taken from you. To have them torn away, whether by circumstances or by design...” For a few seconds there’s a note of something like sadness in his tone, then as quickly as it was there it’s gone again and he leans forward and places a tender kiss on Will’s forehead. “Your objection is noted,” he adds in his normal voice. “Consider this my last word on the topic. Although perhaps one day you might have reasons to remind me of this conversation and today’s vows shall have to be renewed for a second time.”

“Vows,” says Will with a slight laugh. “There you go again: always so melodramatic. You’re making it sound as if we’re a pair of betas about to get married.”

“Pledges then, if you prefer,” replies Hannibal with a smile of his own. “Although I don’t think vows are all that unsuitable. Consider, after all, what one of your fellow Williams once had cause to observe: ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds, Admit impediments, Love is not love, Which alters when it alteration finds, Or bends with the remover to remove, O no, it is an ever-fixed mark, That looks on tempests and is never shaken.’” He pauses and the thoughtful look briefly returns. “How resolute are we really, I wonder? How fixed?”

“We’re fixed,” replies Will, and he says it firmly with no sense of doubt or reservation because the truth of it seems undeniable. Fixed in place, bound irrevocably – whether they like it or not. It doesn’t even feel like a choice anymore: it just is. Because for the rest of our lives, thinks Will with a flash of certainty, no matter how long we look and how far we search, there’ll be no appreciation for me like yours and no acceptance for you like mine. Because they’re two striving hearts and two singular minds: a unique alliance that’s equal in energy, equivalent in compulsion, identical in their strength of purpose and because Hannibal, for all his boldness and brilliance, is just as alone as Will is – and they’re both alone without each other.

Chapter End Notes

Sections of this chapter were inspired by this very interesting interview with the Lord and Saviour Bryan Fuller, where he talks about different ways the devil is represented in media. Sorry also that it was so short! It was originally supposed to have three scenes and I only managed one, so am probably going to cut the second entirely and will do my best to write the third ASAP xxx
Chapter Notes

Contrary to the numerous medical forecasts about the tragic feebleness of omegas, Will’s recovery is remarkably rapid and ultimately sees him close to full strength again after only a week’s convalescence instead of the expected three. Admittedly it’s hard not to reflect on this without a certain level of smugness, although while it’s tempting to give his own resilience the credit for it there’s no doubt that a portion has to go to Hannibal too for his incredibly attentive caretaking. This has been as tireless as it’s been conscientious for the entire time they’ve been at the getaway house and included everything from dispensing medication to providing a steady supply of luxurious cuisine; all performed with a quality of quiet tenderness that Will’s not entirely used to seeing from him. In fact he can’t help noticing how very far removed this manner is from how Hannibal generally behaves with other people, as while gentleness shouldn’t be an unexpected trait in someone whose chosen vocation is medicine in Hannibal’s case it somehow still is. Nevertheless Will remains touchingly grateful for the attention and quickly begins to flourish under such extravagantly devoted care: losing the shadows under his eyes, regaining the lost weight, and generally acquiring an air of energy and liveliness that’s been absent for so long that the sensation is no longer particularly familiar, a bit like relearning to use a wasted limb.

Hannibal, in turn, observes Will growing fierce and strong again with a huge degree of satisfaction; not least because of how it’s managing to bring his more omegan instincts simmering up to the surface. In this respect the initial treatment for his seizure included a course of hormone therapy, and the effect of withdrawing from it coincides with a sudden spike in pre-heat behaviour that far surpasses anything he was engaging in before. It’s actually debatable how much Will is consciously aware of doing this – but whether he is or not, there’s no denying that he’s started nesting in a sort of frenzy and in the last two days alone has rearranged all the furniture in the bedroom, heaped extra blankets on the bed to construct a makeshift den for himself, and scavenged a large wingback chair from the study so he can have somewhere secluded to sit when he wants to rest by the window and watch the sea. Hannibal finds all the disruption incredibly charming and doesn’t even mind that he’s no longer allowed to go into his own bedroom without Will’s permission. On the few occasions he’s entered without knocking it’s been obvious that Will gets agitated by the intrusion and Hannibal, who’s secretly been reading up on it in assorted medical journals, knows that this is very typical of pre-heat omegas who like to have a sense of control of their surroundings. Admittedly the authors of these articles also view banishing the alpha as a sign of a stubborn temperament and something the omega should be trained out of; but Hannibal enjoys Will’s self-reliance far too much to ever want to curb it, so never insists on being allowed to come in unless expressly invited. As expected Will starts to relax a little once he realises he’s not going to be forced to do anything he doesn’t want to – although still never fails to get bristling and territorial if Hannibal goes anywhere near the chair, which he’s clearly reserved for himself as his own private space. Hannibal finds the possessiveness over the chair alternately adorable and hilarious, but is careful to keep a respectful distance from it whenever he’s in the room to show he takes Will’s preferences seriously.

Even so, and despite the little flashes of aggression and territory-marking, there’s still no doubt that Will is less aloof than he was in his last heat and instead of avoiding Hannibal is actively craving contact with him. Although of course, being Will, he still manages to express this in ways that go from one extreme to the other in their predictable unpredictability. Sometimes he’ll show unabashed affection and curl up on Hannibal’s knee like a kitten, hooking both arms round his neck and staying so long he’ll fall asleep like that and need to be carried upstairs to bed; then at other times his mood will change entirely and he’ll grow feisty and combative in what’s a clear attempt to provoke a
dominance fight. Conversely he also shows a heightened concern with Hannibal’s own wellbeing and spends hours at a time following him round and expressing extravagant concern if Hannibal’s doing anything that could be considered even mildly dangerous. Hannibal knows this is another sign of impending heat in that Will is subconsciously looking to his alpha for comfort and protection – and which is undeniably charming, but also means it becomes impossible to complete tasks like cutting firewood or even climb a step ladder without Will immediately appearing next to him and staring tragically the entire time with large troubled eyes while shifting anxiously from one foot to the other. Afterwards he’ll descend on Hannibal with a succession of strokes and small purring noises before he finally seems to come back to himself and realise what he’s doing – at which point he’ll grow visibly embarrassed and vanish back upstairs to hide beneath the blankets again. Hannibal, who understands that Will’s still learning to negotiate his more omegan impulses, takes all these different moods with both devoted patience and a strong dose of captivation.

After another week has passed it’s obvious that Will is ready to brought home again, so on the final evening Hannibal puts his book to one side then goes upstairs to locate him (partly to announce that dinner is nearly ready, but mostly as an excuse to see what he’s doing), and finds that for once the bedroom door’s been left wide open. Hannibal raises an eyebrow, then pauses a few seconds with his fingers on the handle before deciding that technically this removes any need for knocking so prowls inside with the usual silent tread. There he finds that Will is sleeping, which at the moment he always does curled into a small ball and completely submerged in blankets so that only the top of his head is visible. Hannibal smiles at the sight of it then resists the temptation to touch him before moving towards the window so he can pull it closed and remove the draught. Unfortunately this also involves moving into the designated nesting space; at which point Will immediately wakes up and yells: “Don’t sit in my chair!”

Hannibal turns his face away so Will won’t see how he’s struggling not to laugh, then adopts a carefully neutral tone and replies: “I didn’t intend to.”

There’s a low grumbling sound from beneath the bedcovers before Will abruptly reappears and launches across the room so he can leap into it himself. He’s brought one of the blankets with him and proceeds to wrap it round his shoulders before giving Hannibal a distinctly withering look. “I thought you were asleep,” adds Hannibal, whose lips are starting to twitch again.

Will scowls dismissively then settles further into his chair, gripping onto the armrests with all the stately seriousness of Lincoln sat on his monument. “I heard your footsteps,” he says. “You’re not actually as quiet as you think you are.” Seeing Hannibal is drawing near the chair again he makes an irritated noise then briefly lets go of the armrest to swipe him away with his hand. “I was coming to tell you that the food’s nearly ready,” replies Hannibal, who’s starting to wonder if his face might crack with the effort of managing not to smile. “Would you like yours bringing up here? Or do you prefer to come downstairs?” Will makes another grumbling sound then tightens the blanket round his shoulders. “You know if you really require some secure personal space,” adds Hannibal, finding it impossible to contain himself any longer, “then we can do a lot better than that chair.”

“I like the chair,” says Will stoutly, before flushing slightly as if he’s just registered what he’s said and how inane it sounds. “Y-e-s,” replies Hannibal. “I’d already realised that.”

Will flushes again then clears his throat and draws his knees up to his chest, hugging them rather protectively and suddenly looking young and vulnerable. “I like the chair,” he repeats. “I don’t want anything else.”
“You wouldn’t prefer your own room?”

Will shakes his head in a stubborn way and Hannibal privately decides that he actually would like it, only can’t bring himself to say so because he doesn’t want to acknowledge that his nesting instinct has grown so strong that it requires a literal room to nest in. In this respect the chair is clearly intended as some sort of compromise. “Well let me know if you change your mind,” adds Hannibal, deciding not to press the issue. “There are several spare bedrooms as home.”

“Yes I know,” says Will irritably. “I live there too remember?”

“Then you should know they’re at your disposal whenever you need them,” replies Hannibal, typically patient as he curls his palm round the back of Will’s neck. “And don’t look so agonised – the urge is nothing to be ashamed of. You just need to control your surroundings at the moment, that’s all.”

Will gives an unhappy shrug, sighs again even louder, and then finally removes his hand from beneath the blanket so he can take hold of Hannibal’s. In fact he’s unpleasantly aware of this himself, and no matter how much he tries to rationalise it the way his body’s behaving so dramatically at odds with what his conscious mind is doing can’t help but be upsetting. After all, not even his deep sense of denial can ignore the fact that a desire for nesting space comes from the proestrus phase of heat – and the idea that he’s being overcome by a biological urge to find somewhere safe and secure for childrearing is so anxiety-provoking it makes him want to scream. It doesn’t help that the fertility statistics for alpha-omega couples are outright terrifying, with conception during heat a near certainty followed by a high chance of multiple births soon afterwards; triplets being the most common, but quintuplets not being especially rare. Seeing how beta children are pretty much unheard of these are also virtually guaranteed to be alphas and omegas like their parents and Will’s mind now clouds over at the thought of it, unable to stop tormenting himself with images of these phantom offspring – the alphas all tall and imposing with knowing smirks and slanty cheekbones, and the omegas all pale and anxious looking while blinking short-sightedly through assorted pairs of glasses. Oh God, the whole lot of them would be an absolute nightmare; it’s actually hard to decide which would be worst. Infant omegas are supposed to be highly emotional and require constant attention and reassurance; quick to distress and slow to be soothed. On the other hand alphas are reputed to bully their omega siblings mercilessly, as well as being supremely arrogant and aggressive (complete little shits in other words) that are impossible to control half the time except by other alphas…and all of who Will, as the omega parent, would be expected to give up work to take care of.

Will now has a rather surreal image of himself and the brood of bespectacled omegas barricading themselves in the attic to get some peace from the alphas until Hannibal arrived home to out-alpha the lot of them and force them to stop swinging from the light fittings and go to bed. In fact the thought is so awful that for a few seconds he gets completely lost in it and has to force himself to remember that thanks to Dr Reynolds’ numerous prescriptions this is at least one thing he does have some power over. But not even all the contraception in the world can solve the problem of being besieged by hormones or all the weird impulses that come with it, and the sense of losing a grip on himself so utterly is both haunting and enormously frustrating. Will now scrubs his other hand across his face then glances upwards at Hannibal, briefly looking rather anguished. “This whole thing…” he says hesitantly. “The way I’m feeling. Do you think it’ll ever get any easier?”

Hannibal’s own expression immediately softens. “I know that it will,” he says gently. “This is only the third heat you’ve had in nearly a decade – and the first without the influence of suppressant withdrawal. I would have expected it to be intense.”

Will squirms again then ducks his head back down in what’s an obvious attempt to avoid eye contact. “I guess,” he says. Hannibal’s other hand seems to have found its way into his hair and he
now leans into the touch for a few moments before adding very quietly: “They say…they say it’s a lot better when you’re bonded.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal equally quietly. With slow deliberation he lets his hand glide further down until it’s stroking the back of Will’s neck. “They do say that. I happen to agree with them.”

Will gives another little wriggle, by this time practically contorting himself with self-consciousness. “Yeah, well…” he says vaguely. “It is what it is. I guess I’ll have to see what happens.”

“That would be sensible,” agrees Hannibal, continuing to massage the bonding spot with his thumb.

“Anyway,” says Will. He pauses then clears his throat even louder. “Yeah. Um…So did you say dinner was ready?”

“Very nearly.”

“I’m so tired,” says Will forlornly. “Would you mind bringing it upstairs for me?”

Hannibal smiles and brushes his fingers against Will’s cheekbone. “No,” he says. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Will goes quiet again for a few seconds then finally glances up at him through a tangle of hair, briefly mischievous and playful in a way he hasn’t been for some time. “Just like a butler,” he says with a certain satisfaction. “Are you going to hand-feed me too?”

“I am not,” replies Hannibal leisurely. “What a little horror you are. Just for that I should take your chair away.”

Will gives a short burst of laughter then takes hold of Hannibal’s hand once more and clings onto it – immediately aware of feeling better without even fully understanding why.

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“You know I really miss my dogs,” announces Will a few hours later. By now the afternoon has long since melted into evening and seeing that the food has been eaten, the dishes put away, and the bags all packed in preparation to leave, the two of them have assembled a stack of blankets to ward off the cold and settled on the grass near the cliff side for a last chance to enjoy the scenery before returning to the city in the morning. Will is backed up so far against Hannibal’s chest he’s practically sitting on his knee, although has already decided to give himself a pass for something so embarrassing on the grounds that dignity is less important at the moment than shared body heat. Hannibal obligingly adjusts his long legs to give Will more room and Will gives a small sigh then rests his head against his shoulder. “I wish I’d brought them,” he adds wistfully. “They’d love it here.”

Hannibal, who’s secretly been enjoying their absence, sighs too to keep Will company then attempts to adopt a tone of voice that sounds suitably sad and sincere. “I know you said you preferred them being at the farm,” he makes himself reply. “But if you change your mind you’d be welcome to have them at my house.”

Will lets out another sigh that’s almost lavish in its extreme mournfulness. Rather as if, thinks Hannibal in bewilderment, the wretched furry things had gone and died as opposed to being on what’s basically a canine vacation. “I’d love to have them at your house,” adds Will, who’s growing visibly maudlin the more he talks about it. “But it feels too risky after what happened before. I want them somewhere safe until the Sculptor’s caught.”

“Understandable,” replies Hannibal, trying not to sound too happy about this. “When did you last see
“Not that long fortunately. Just a few days before I had the seizure.”

Despite numerous attempts Hannibal’s never really been able to understand how an otherwise sensible person can muster such berserk passion over anything as shambolically lolling and slobbery as a dog, and it now requires some serious self-exertion to muster any sympathy beyond a vague humming noise. Will sighs again even louder than before and with enormous effort Hannibal forces himself to add: “If you like we can make a detour to the farm on the way home.”

“Oh yes, that would be great,” says Will, immediately perking up. “We can take them for a walk.”

“You may certainly do that,” replies Hannibal, who’s decided that a line definitely has to be drawn somewhere. “I, on the other hand, shall remain in the farmhouse where it’s warm and dry.”

Will gives a small snort of contempt. “That means you’ll have to talk to the farmer the whole time. You know you can’t stand him.”

“It’s true his conversation is a little tedious,” agrees Hannibal serenely. “But I believe it’s a case of the lesser of two evils. As charming as your pack of hairy children undoubtedly are…,” Will gives him a nudge and Hannibal smiles slightly then readjusts both arms a little tighter around his chest, “…as charming as they are, wading through the mud with them in the middle of winter is a pleasure I can do without. I shall wait until they’ve been returned to you then take them to the park like a civilised person.”

Will grunts in acknowledgement of a compromise then gives Hannibal another nudge. “You know if you hadn’t pulled that stunt with Matthew Brown I could probably have asked about a safe house.”

“Could you?”

“Yeah, I almost definitely could. Not that it’s possible now. Thanks to you I’m persona non grata with most of the BSI.”


“Okay, that’s great. You could at least pretend to sound guilty about it.”

“I don’t wish to have any more discussions about guilt,” says Hannibal, tucking a strand of Will’s hair behind his ear from where the wind is blowing it. “I’ve agreed to sit on a patch of wet grass with you haven’t I. What greater display of penance could you possibly require?”

“You’re not sat on the grass, smartass. You’re sat on a blanket.”

“It’s the same difference mano meile,” says Hannibal briskly. “Do you see me sitting on a chair?”

“Well why would you bring a chair out here? Anyway it’s nice: cold but nice. You never get stars like that in the city.”

“Very true,” agrees Hannibal, lowering his head so he can prop his chin against the top of Will’s hair. “And I’ve always been fond of the sea. It’s so mysterious and elemental; completely impossible to tame. Rather like you in fact.”

“Or you,” says Will. He pauses for a few seconds while the night air flows crisp and clean against his face, admiring the way the waves shimmer in the moonlight as they heave and thrash like living things. “But you should say if you want to go back inside. I don’t mind.”
“Neither do I. I’m fine as we are.”

“Are you sure? Your hands are freezing.”

“I’m fine Will.”

“But you’re cold,” says Will, removing the blanket from his own shoulders then manoeuvring round so he can bossily drape it over Hannibal’s. “Take this.”

“Then you’ll be cold instead and our situation will not have improved.”

“It’s called heat for a reason,” replies Will, who’s actually uncomfortably chilly but is more concerned about Hannibal being warm. “My temperature’s been going up for weeks.”

Hannibal politely ignores this by removing the blanket and arranging it over Will again – who takes it off and covers Hannibal’s head with it as if he’s trying to smother him – at which point an amicable argument breaks out over who’s the coldest that looks as if it might run on indefinitely until Will decides that they’re getting perilously close to fussing over each other like a pair of old women and suggests a truce by returning to the house.

“An excellent plan,” agrees Hannibal, who’s still clearly determined to have the last word by taking advantage of Will’s inattention so he can dart forward and cocoon him in the blanket like a baby in a papoose. “We seem destined to fail in this battle of wills and the only real victor shall be the blanket itself.”

Will pushes his head free from its woolly confines then collapses against Hannibal’s shoulder again and gives his ear a playful nip with his teeth. “The battle of The Will.”

“Oh yes indeed,” says Hannibal. “The Battle of the Will. Like the Battle of the Alamo, but with a larger body count.” Will smirks slightly then tugs Hannibal’s ear again. “And decidedly more underhand tactics,” adds Hannibal. “You have no respect for military etiquette at all have you? Not that I expect you to care. In fact you probably delight in it, ruthless boy that you are. I suppose it’s rather fitting: you’d wear your ill-gotten scars with great panache.”

“Probably.”

“Definitely,” says Hannibal with obvious satisfaction. “You typify the wisdom of ‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.’”

“What doesn’t kill me,” replies Will, “had better apologise and then run for its goddamn life. So go on old man – get moving.”

“Such things you say to me,” sighs Hannibal in an exaggeratedly martyred tone. Then he smiles to himself and gets to his feet, holding out a hand to pull Will up too before sharply spinning round and dashing back to the house again without letting go. Will allows himself to be dragged behind, struggling not to emit the occasional gasp of laughter (which at one point threatens to get close to actual giggling) before tumbling into the kitchen in a flurry of cold air – and where he waits until Hannibal’s back is turned before pouncing on him and pushing him up against the wall for a messily passionate kiss.

“What a terrible tyrant you are,” says Hannibal when they finally pull apart for air. “I’ll have to ask your Uncle Jack to arrange separate psychiatric arrangements for me. It’s obvious I’m going to need them.”

Will grins then reaches up to smooth Hannibal’s hair off his forehead from where it’s been ruffled in
the earlier struggle. “And what’s your reason going to be?”

Hannibal smiles too, elegantly tilting his head to one side to provide better access for the stroking. “My reason,” he says, “is prolonged exposure to The Will.”

“Oh dear Dr Lecter: you’re a bit weak-willed really, aren’t you?”

“Evidently I am,” replies Hannibal with another smile. “I demonstrate a regrettable lack of willpower.” Will makes an amused noise and Hannibal finally lets go from where he’s gripping his waist so he can slide his hands upwards and begin unfastening his coat instead. “Especially when you look like this,” adds Hannibal with obvious approval. “An appropriate word would be edible – you could test the self-control of even the most discerning alpha. And I’ve always liked you in this shirt.” He pauses then smiles very faintly all over again, well aware that it’s actually one of his. “The colour compliments your eyes and complexion extremely well. I must have told you that before? You should always wear cooler, darker colours; none of that abysmal plaid.”

“That’s good,” says Will innocently. “I’m glad you like my clothes. Would you like to take them off?”

Hannibal’s only response to this is a long slow smile (distinguished by being far more wolfish than his usual feline variety) before he seizes hold of Will’s hand again and pulls him towards the door. By unspoken agreement the bedroom, up its two flights of stairs, is considered much too far away and so they end up in the living room instead where a large fire is still smouldering in the grate that bathes the walls in a buttery gold shot through with darker shadows of purple and grey. Will promptly pounces on Hannibal for a second time and starts tugging at his clothes before wrestling him onto the floor and kissing him again; aware, even as he’s doing it, of how the mood has started to shift from madcap and high-spirited to something much more tender and loving. In this respect it never stops surprising him how much he enjoys simply kissing Hannibal – not as a preliminary activity, as it would be with most people, but as something beautiful and exciting that’s pleasurable in its own right and deserves to be savoured. I like the noises we both make, thinks Will rather dreamily as he unfastens the last few buttons on Hannibal’s shirt, and the way we sometimes pull apart to gaze at each other. I like the way you run your fingers through my hair or touch the side of my face.

This thought is so absorbing that he ends up getting slightly lost in it, so Hannibal takes over by shrugging the shirt off himself before pushing Will backwards until he’s lying on the hearthrug. Then he smiles down at him very softly and strokes his forehead while Will gazes back then wrinkles his nose at him, because he knows it’s one of the few things that’s always guaranteed to make Hannibal laugh. Right on cue Hannibal’s lips start to twitch and Will smiles too then reaches up and cradles his cheek in his palm. “You’re so different when you’re like this,” he says fondly. “Nothing like you are on the outside.”

Hannibal’s smile promptly broadens as he reaches up himself to trap Will’s hand in his own. “Likewise,” he says. “You’re also different mano meilė. Much more relaxed – and far more playful.”

“Only because you’re so ridiculous,” says Will. “Like wanting to bring a chair to the side of a cliff.” He wraps his legs round Hannibal’s back to try and tug him closer, followed by a frustrated noise when Hannibal just smiles back without making any attempt to move. “Oh come on,” adds Will, who’s already on the verge of laughing again. “You’re miles away up there. Get yourself down here.”

“In a moment,” replies Hannibal, whose voice is now so low and rumbling it’s almost out-smouldering the fireplace. “I have something I want to give you first. A gift, Will: a very particular one.”
“What sort of gift?” asks Will, trying in vain to hook Hannibal’s waist with his feet. “Can’t it wait?”

“No,” says Hannibal caressingly. “The current moment is perfect.”

“But we’re right in the middle of something,” protests Will, half-annoyed and half-amused. “Later.”

“Now,” purrs Hannibal. He leans down to slowly run his tongue along Will’s lower lip then abruptly straightens up and vanishes to the Morocco cabinet at the far end of the room, pulling open the lower drawer to retrieve what Will can make out is a box made of glossily expensive-looking black card. Its print of silver fleur-de-lys gleams softly in the firelight and Will props himself up on his elbows to watch Hannibal carrying it back again, battling a strong sense of impatience at the interruption combined with undeniable intrigue at what such a tantalizing little parcel might contain. Hannibal catches his eye and smirks very slightly before resettling himself on the rug so he can pull Will against his chest; stroking along his arms until their fingers are entwined then puppeteering Will’s hands to pull off the lid.

“I’m not even going to try and guess,” says Will, “only I want you to know that your timing is awf…” The words promptly die on his lips as he finally works the box open and sees what’s inside. “Oh God,” he adds, struggling not to laugh. “You didn’t.”

“But I did,” says Hannibal serenely. “Exactly as I said I would.”

Will opens his mouth to reply then realises that he doesn’t actually know what to say and has to close it again. Then he glances down at the box for a second time, consumed with a squirming sense of embarrassment spiced with undeniable arousal at the sight of an omega anal plug: obscenely bulbous, gleaming silver, and nestled (rather ludicrously) on sleek scarlet velvet as if someone’s told it it’s a piece of jewellery and it’s now determined to try and behave like one. “This is just…uhh,” he finally manages to add. “Where the hell did you get it from?”

“Oh, from a specialist boutique,” replies Hannibal airily. Considering the results of this trip are now sitting right in front of them (still sprawling around on red velvet) this is announced with what Will can’t help noting is an enviable lack of self-consciousness or embarrassment. In fact if anything he sounds faintly pleased with himself…anyone would think he was about to describe a trip to the public library for research purposes or a day spent volunteering at a homeless shelter. “Ostensibly it was for omegas,” continues Hannibal with a rather wicked smile. “But really it was designed to cater to the ego of alphas who want an opportunity to flaunt that they have one, as well as the financial resources with which to spoil them. There wasn’t a single omega in the entire place. Needless to say I found the patrons extremely amusing in how absurd they were.”

“Yeah,” says Will wryly. “I bet you did.”

“The owner asked me quite a lot of questions about you,” adds Hannibal, beginning to kiss the side of Will’s throat. “They had an extremely large range of items, so it was necessary to determine what specifications would be the most suitable. I said you were very slim and delicately-built, as well as relatively inexperienced with alphas, so would probably require something that was not too demanding on you physically.” Will promptly opens his mouth again to complain about such an unflattering description, only to find the words getting lost in a small moan as he feels a graze of teeth against his bonding spot – no doubt exactly as Hannibal intended. “I also added that you were very responsive,” adds Hannibal silkily, “so would probably adjust to it quickly. The owner was an alpha himself of course, and there’s no doubt he was rather fascinated by my description. I think he would have liked to have seen a photograph of you, but of course I would never have allowed that. In truth I found his fascination somewhat unprofessional.” He pauses fractionally, and for a few seconds there’s another light scrape of teeth against Will’s next. “Although I still took an opportunity to request his business card.”
At the mention of a business card Will’s memory gives an intense and immediate twinge. There’s an association there somewhere – surely there is? – only in the headiness of the moment it’s impossible to make sense of what it might be. For a few moments he goes completely rigid, attempting to decipher the chill of unease before finally managing to reassure himself that he’s simply getting confused with the cards from the Sculptor crime scenes and the dread is irrelevant to the moment at hand. Then Hannibal nuzzles his bonding spot with his forehead and Will promptly forgets about the business card and tentatively reaches out to examine the plug instead, handling it with extreme caution the entire time as if it’s something incendiary that’s liable to go off in his hand. The metal exterior glints in the firelight in a rather provocative way, and while the dimensions aren’t especially intimidating he still can’t help suspecting that Hannibal chose a particularly fearsome-looking one on purpose just to shock him. For God’s sake, they’ve even modelled the bulging outline of an alpha knot along the base. Then he hesitates and peers a bit closer as an awful thought suddenly occurs to him. “That’s…that’s not platinum is it?” asks Will, completely scandalised at the idea of the expense. “Oh God, please tell me that’s not platinum.”

“It is not platinum,” says Hannibal in amusement. “I don’t have many limits it’s true, but platinum sex aids would undoubtedly be one of them.”

Will’s eyebrows promptly descend across his forehead. “You’re not lying to me are you? If I found out you bought something made of the world’s most precious metal just to push up my…”

“Well without wishing to outrage you further…I’m afraid it’s only one of several.” Hannibal trails off suggestively as an invitation to let Will’s imagination go into overdrive at what the others might look like before skimming both palms down his chest and along his waist. “This is the smallest size, but I would like us to progress to the larger ones in the coming days. And eventually I would like you to keep it inside you all the time.” Hannibal pauses then scrapes his teeth against the bonding spot on Will’s neck again, this time a little harder than before. “Including when you go to work.”

“Would you now?” asks Will, who despite his stern tone is still beginning to arch himself against Hannibal’s chest. “And do I get a say in any of this?”

“But it’s in your own interests beloved,” replies Hannibal innocently. “In preparation for your heat. You’ll be spending a week with a knot inside you almost constantly. Without adequate preparation it could leave you in some discomfort; hence this little device. It’s going to help coax your body into accepting me much more readily when the time comes.”

“You mean when you come,” says Will. “Look, I’m not sure about this. I don’t know if I want to. I mean… I mean just look at it.” Hannibal obligingly looks down at it just as Will does too: the plug gleams serenely back, almost as if it’s listening to the conversation, and continuing to catch the glow of the fire in a series of expensive twinkles. The fucking thing looks as if it’s winking at him. “I’ve always said I’d never let an alpha…” begins Will, determined to have another go at protesting; but ultimately he just drifts into silence for a second time as he feels his resolve wavering before the lecture has even got started. Hannibal, in turn, doesn’t even reply at all and instead starts to kiss the back of his neck even more persistently. “Oh God…go on then,” says Will weakly. “But just for tonight.”

Hannibal makes an approving noise – a sort of rich vibration deep in his throat – and there’s something so incredibly alpha about it that it goes straight to Will’s groin and causes the last shreds of his reservation to wither away. And perhaps it’s because he’s so close to his heat, or because he knows it’s going to give Hannibal so much satisfaction…or maybe it’s because he’s heard about
these plugs before, and how insanely pleasurable they’re supposed to feel when the dimensions are right. But whatever the reason, it’s filled him with a sudden certainty that he wants to feel that thing in his ass right now, goddammit, and compels him to dip his head and wantonly slide his tongue across the length of the plug without once taking his eyes off Hannibal’s face. Hannibal’s own eyes gleam in response and Will can’t help feeling secretly glad of the firelight because by this point there’s no doubt that he’s blushing – not least because he understands enough about alphas in general (and Hannibal in particular) to know he’ll expect permission to come deep inside Will’s body before inserting the plug. Of course with anyone else this would be outright repellent. Disturbing, even – there’s no way he’d allow it. But seeing the alpha in question is Hannibal it’s impossible not to find the idea hopelessly exciting, so Will now drops the plug and eagerly sinks to his knees to slide his tongue along Hannibal’s cock instead; lavishly sucking and lapping at the head before attempting to take the whole length into his mouth and swallow it down. He tilts his head as he’s doing it so they can gaze into each other’s eyes the whole time, and Hannibal murmurs Will’s name very softly then stares down at him like someone transfixed as his hands flit around his face – caressing Will’s jaw, stroking his hair then tenderly tucking a stand behind his ear – before his breath eventually catches in a sharp gasp and he grips Will’s shoulder as a sign to pull away. Will obeys immediately then instinctively turns round and hitches onto his knees in the classic lordosis breeding position: back arched and face resting on his forearm as he presents himself to his alpha

“That’s it,” murmurs Hannibal, sounding almost ecstatic. “My beautiful omega boy. That’s perfect.”

Will makes a small mewling sound as he arches his back into a stronger curve, for once oblivious to how extremely omegan he’s being. He’s not even sure where he learned to do this; no one’s ever taught or told him…it’s as if instinct has just taken over. In fact he’s so lost in the moment that he likewise expects Hannibal to go full-on alpha by simply thrusting inside him and getting off as quickly as possible, so when he feels a series of soft kisses down his spine it’s impossible not to give an appreciative gasp.

“That’s it,” repeats Hannibal soothingly as Will’s breath starts to speed up. “Good boy. You’ll enjoy it, I promise.” He runs his tongue along the curve of Will’s hipbone then leans back on his heels and spends a few delicious moments massaging his hole, admiring how small and tight and beautiful it looks beneath his fingers. Will’s thighs are so glistening with slick it looks like they’ve been drenched with oil and he now slowly works a finger inside, then two, sighing with pleasure at how luscious and smooth Will feels and the way the muscle is starting to clench as if it’s trying to draw him in. Will, in turn, gives a low moan and rocks his hips against the slowly stabbing fingers, trying to ground and steady himself by focusing on the way Hannibal’s other hand feels pressing on his back: how gentle the touch is, the slight calluses on his thumb and index finger, and how firm and warm his skin feels against Will’s. Then he cries out as Hannibal twists his fingers round and the stroking and pressing becomes more insistent because oh God, it’s good – it feels so good – he could probably come just from this. Just from two of Hannibal’s fingers inside him, it would probably be enough…a bit longer and it’s going to be enough.

Above him Hannibal murmurs something rapturous in a foreign language then drapes himself across Will’s back, scraping his mouth against the bonding spot before giving a tender lick of apology across the graze his teeth have made. Will gives a breathy high-pitched gasp but makes no attempt to pull away. In fact the anticipation is nearly unbearable and Hannibal’s teasing strokes along his thighs and hipbones are close to outright torture. He can feel his legs begin to quiver with the strain of it, and when a broad thumb slides inside him it’s enough to make him cry out as his cock spasms with a rush of pre-come. Hannibal obviously sees it too, because he makes a soft noise of approval then slowly begins to rub the head of his cock against Will’s slippery soaking-wet hole.

Will promptly sucks in his breath, murmuring “Oh God” in something close to a whisper. He can hear Hannibal beginning to leisurely jerk himself off, and it would seem that Will’s been fingered
open so incredibly thoroughly that after just a few seconds he’s able to come deep in his ass without even needing to fully push in. The awareness of this is faintly humiliating and as Hannibal picks up the box Will lets out another stifled moan as he buries his face in his arm. In fact this is the moment he’s been waiting for, yet instinctively he knows Hannibal is going to take his time over it, and of course he does: first using his fingers to push his come as deep inside Will’s body as possible, then lightly stroking him with the blunt head of the plug, then finally pushing the tip in unbearably slowly in order to savour every quiver and breathy gasp that Will can possibly make. Not that the caution is remotely necessary, because despite being fairly wide the plug still slides in embarrassingly easily without any resistance at all.

Will’s whole body goes rigid as he hears himself gasping “Hannibal, oh. Oh fuck. I like it…I really like it,” in a desperate chant combined with something dangerously close to whining. In fact he’s making the sort of noises he’s only ever really heard in porn films, yet it’s completely impossible not to when the plug’s curves are caressing him in a way that feels so unbelievably good. It’s rather like having his cock stroked from the inside, and when Hannibal pauses again to brush his thumb against Will’s lips it makes him pant out rather helplessly: “Don’t stop, I want it deeper. Do it now please.” Normally he’d feel degraded by begging for it for like this, but right now it doesn’t feel remotely submissive as opposed to empowering – to demand what he needs without shame, restraint or reservation.

“Exquisite,” says Hannibal, practically purring with satisfaction. “So stunning Will. Next time I’m putting you in front of a mirror so you can see what you look like when I’m doing this to you. I think you’d enjoy watching yourself. You take it so well mylimasis – I knew you would.”

“It’s good,” gasps Will. His voice is hoarse from all the panting and when Hannibal gives the plug a twist he yelps sharply then catches his lower lip between his teeth. “Oh God, oh God, it’s so good.”

“So good,” repeats Hannibal. “You like having it inside you, don’t you beloved. Deep inside you…filling you up.”

“Oh yeah, fuck, I like it. I like it so much.”

“I know you do: your beautiful body is very eager. I’d almost resent it, except I know when the time comes you’ll take my knot even better. Are you going to do that for me Will?”

“Yes…yes.”

“Are you going to spread your legs like you’re doing now? Are you going to beg for it?”

Will, who’s clearly past the point of replying, lets out another moan so Hannibal puts a steadying hand on his back – partly to reassure him, but also to keep him still so he can admire the sight of his omega’s sweet little hole stretched so prettily around the glistening plug, the skin slightly flushed and tender-looking from all the friction. Then he spits onto his thumb and gives a few teasing stokes around the rim as Will makes a mewling noise and arches his back, his eyes widening at how feverishly intense it is then trembling and gulping in frantic gasps of air as Hannibal runs a soothing palm up and down the ridge of his spine. In fact he’s almost crazed with desire by now, helplessly aware of how hot and heavy his cock feels between his spread legs – the way the blood is pulsing there – and how he’s starting to leak all over the hearthrug as his body clenches and tightens, already quivering on the verge of orgasm.

“Oh fuck,” whispers Will rather desperately. “I’m going to…oh God, Hannibal…I think I’m going to come.”

No sooner has he said this then he’s immediately being tugged upright so Hannibal can gather him
against his chest, nuzzling Will’s jaw and showering his face and hair with rapturous kisses while murmuring extravagant words of praise. Will, who’s not remotely in the mood for this, makes a frustrated groaning noise then pulls back a few inches: flushed and almost cross-eyed with an overload of sensation.

“Look at you,” says Hannibal fondly, beginning to smooth Will’s damp hair off his forehead. “You look as if you’re drunk.”

“What the hell?” stammers Will. He lets out his breath and blinks a few times, obviously trying to gather his scattered senses together, then shoves both hands against Hannibal’s chest in a gesture that’s only half-playful. “For God’s sake,” he finally manages to say. “Why did you stop?”

“But,” replies Hannibal with provoking calmness, “things were going faster than I wanted them to.”

Will makes another growling noise then slumps forward and rests his forehead against Hannibal’s “Yeah: than you wanted them to. Jesus, you’re such a sadist.”

“Possibly,” murmurs Hannibal in a voice that’s rather hypnotic and eerie. “That could be an astute diagnosis.” He gives a flickering, serpentine smile which even Will in his current state can’t help find slightly odd before the moment has passed and it’s immediately gone again. “Not this time though,” adds Hannibal in his normal voice. “This time I stopped for your sake.”

“You jest,” snaps Will with heavy sarcasm.

“Not at all,” says Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair again. “On the contrary in fact; I’d like to give you something that you want.”

“I already know what I want,” says Will sulkily.

“No you don’t,” replies Hannibal. “Or at least – it’s not something it would occur to you to ask for. And which is why I intend to suggest it to you instead.” He pauses for a few seconds, mouth quirking slightly at the novelty of using such a slang expression. “What you really want,” adds Hannibal languorously, “is an opportunity to go ‘on top’.”

For a few seconds Will goes completely silent, blinking rather foolishly as he struggles to work out if this suggestion is genuine or (more likely) some sort of fiendish trick question. Admittedly he wouldn’t think twice about a similar offer from a male beta, but for an alpha to make it to an omega is pretty much unheard of and makes it extremely hard to know how to respond. Then he gives a small frown as in spite of himself his mind starts to veer back to a college biology lecture he’d once attended (presented by an alpha, naturally) which had insisted on going into the mechanics of the whole thing in truly excruciating detail. Now the case of the male omega is an interesting one, the professor had announced, pointing at the audience with one hand while stroking his straggly ginger beard with the other. Their chromosomal sex is clearly determined, but their phenotypic structures are contradictory. They have the same secondary sex organs as alphas, except less well-developed and with weaker muscles and connective tissue, but their internal reproductive system is an imprecise version of a female omega’s. In other words their anatomy evolved as highly compatible for alpha mating rights, despite superficially masculine characteristics...

Will’s mind now starts to mist over at the grating awkwardness of the memory: the smirking of the alpha freshmen with their lingering smell of sweat that hung above the auditorium like a mushroom cloud, or the lecturer’s patronising face and the way his mouth had made a truly terrible little popping sound every time he’d pronounced the ‘p’ in penetration. Of course there’d been no mention of male omegas choosing to have sex with female betas, even though Will had already done that himself on
numerous occasions; nothing except an emphasis on them as a walking, talking hole for alphas to shoot shrieking red-faced babies into. It was around this time that Will had started earning extra cash writing term papers for the other students in order to fund the supply of pheromone spray he’d realised he was going to need – although even that hadn’t been enough to stop the alpha professor dropping increasingly unsubtle hints about evening study classes and staying behind after lectures as an opportunity for extra course credits. Oh God, is it possible to tell Hannibal any of this? Will takes a quick look at his face, which is typically serene and inscrutable, and promptly decides no… absolutely not.

“So what’s your response mylimasis?” asks Hannibal into the resulting silence. “Would you like to?”

Will clears his throat then finally manages to answer “Yes,” in a rather small voice. Then he casts his eyes around the room rather aimlessly, because while he really would like to the suggestion is so unexpected it’s thrown him and he feels like he needs a few moments to get used to the idea. Hannibal simply smiles again then arranges himself on the hearthrug and leans back on his elbows – all easy, cat-like glamour and casual grace – and Will clears his throat even louder and makes a grab for the nearby bottle of massage oil in an attempt to buy a bit more time. In fact this probably isn’t necessary seeing how Hannibal has mentioned having sex with other alphas in the past without any trouble; and as much as he doesn’t like admitting it there’s no doubt that Will, as an omega, is going to be much less to take. Even so, he’s anxious about hurting him.

The thought of this promptly triggers another memory, and as he slowly twists the cap off the bottle Will tries to re-imagine the encounter Hannibal once mentioned with that other alpha; the one who was supposed to look a bit like Will and who’d taken Hannibal to bed in Paris when the latter was only 18. Hannibal would have been much more willowy back then with softer edges and hair tangling in his eyes; probably he wouldn’t have had time to grow into the sculptured features which are so distinguished by age and would have looked a bit lean and sinuous with eyes too large in his thin face and the slim limbs and supple muscles of a greyhound which are built for speed rather than strength. Admittedly it’s also pretty impossible to imagine an 18-year old Hannibal having any smaller reserves of poise and confidence than the fully-grown version – and that if any dominance did occur, it would undoubtedly only be because he’d allowed it – but it’s still rather tempting to picture this older alpha-version of Will flinging him onto the bed; licking into his mouth and then holding him in place so he could kiss his way down his chest.

Hannibal now catches his eye with another slow smile and the look is so relaxed and affectionate that Will finally forgets to feel self-conscious and simply smiles back before playfully leaping on him and straddling his chest. Hannibal allows this rough treatment without any complaint and Will leans forward then takes hold of both wrists and pins them above his head.

“An omega taking control of my alpha,” he says, leaning further down so he can press his lips against Hannibal’s forehead then gently tug his lower lip between his teeth. “What would everyone think?”

Hannibal smiles again and stretches rather luxuriously, flexing the muscles in his neck as he basks in the light of the fire like a large jungle cat. “It doesn’t concern me in the least,” he says. “There are only two opinions which really interest me: yours and mine.”

Will smiles a bit wider then on an impulse lets go of Hannibal’s wrists so he can cup his face in his palm instead. “Look at you,” he says softly. “You’re so…” The word he’s thinking of is perfect, yet somehow it’s not quite right because it fails to capture how Hannibal is perfect in his extreme imperfection. “You’re so you,” says Will finally – and which probably wouldn’t make much sense to anyone else, yet still feels far more accurate for capturing the sheer uniqueness. “I don’t care that everyone out there is scared of you,” adds Will in an even softer voice. “When you’re in here you
belong entirely to me.”

Hannibal’s eyes gleam again in response and Will leans down to kiss him properly, by now completely overwhelmed with a thrillingly primal urge to possess. For a few seconds they rock against each other, frantically searching out one another’s mouths as Will listens to the sounds he’s making: the panting, desperate cries which sound half-maddened with desire and the way he’s pulling away to gasp out Hannibal’s name over and over again. And Hannibal, for once, seems completely unable to gain control of himself either as he holds Will even tighter against him, stroking his hair so roughly his head snaps back before making a sound that’s nearly a snarl and possessively gripping the bonding site on the back of his neck with his right hand. The long fingers feel firm and dextrous curled round Will’s throat and he’s acutely aware of how Hannibal could crush it right now without any effort at all. Then he draws in a ragged breath. Breathes out. Tries to focus and finds he can’t, because – oh God – everything’s so intense. They’re so intense. They’re all-consuming, and it doesn’t even matter anymore because he wants them to consume each other…and he wants to watch it happen. Wind it up and watch it go. He pushes his hips forward against Hannibal’s, biting his lip to try and hide the whining noises he’s making, and Hannibal finally releases his throat and glides his palm downwards so he can rub slow circles against Will’s abdomen which is already embarrassingly slick and sticky from where he’s leaking pre-come over both of them.

“Don’t even think about moving,” murmurs Will. “Stay on your back for me. I want to watch you. I want to see your face when you start to come.” It’s the type of tone he’s aware of using with his dogs – loving but firm – and a part of him fully expects Hannibal’s inner alpha to reassert itself in protest at being ordered about in such a way. But if Hannibal secretly resents it he doesn’t give any indication and Will leans forward to kiss him again as silent appreciation for being so prepared to put his ego aside and play along. Then he reaches back for the oil and drizzles a generous amount across his hand (leaning forward as he does it to steal another kiss, for no better reason than it’s impossible not to) before sliding his forefinger into the tight, smooth heat of Hannibal’s body. He’s actually going much quicker than intended, but he’s desperate to hear Hannibal make that noise again which makes it fairly impossible to attempt to slow things down. Then he remembers reading that some alphas are able to come just from having their prostatesstroked, so crooks his fingers in a gentle rubbing motion until Hannibal gasps and arches his back. “You look amazing when you’re like this,” says Will admiringly as he starts to increase the pressure. “You should let me do it more often.” Hannibal smirks very faintly but doesn’t reply. “Although it won’t be long now will it? Less than a month and then you’ll have to be available 24/7 to fuck me as much as I want you to.”

Hannibal’s mouth arranges itself into one of its more feline smiles to indicate that he actually has a very good idea; and Will can’t help smiling too, accompanied by the smallest hint of an eye-roll, before working in a second finger. He’s actually going much quicker than intended, but he’s desperate to hear Hannibal make that noise again which makes it fairly impossible to attempt to slow things down. Then he remembers reading that some alphas are able to come just from having their prostates stroked, so crooks his fingers in a gentle rubbing motion until Hannibal gasps and arches his back. “You look amazing when you’re like this,” says Will admiringly as he starts to increase the pressure. “You should let me do it more often.” Hannibal smirks very faintly but doesn’t reply. “Although it won’t be long now will it? Less than a month and then you’ll have to be available 24/7 to fuck me as much as I want you to.”

“I’m sure I’ll bear the responsibility,” says Hannibal, reaching out to stroke the side of Will’s leg. “Although I anticipate you being extremely demanding.”

“Says you,” replies Will fondly. “You know you’ll want to control everything as much as possible.” He adds a third finger, deliberately teasing and precise, then rubs the pads in small circles until Hannibal gasps and lets his head tip backwards. “What have you got in mind, hmm? Are you going to make me ride you before you knot me?”

“Make is hardly the right word beloved,” replies Hannibal. “You’re going to be very keen for my permission.” As he’s speaking he stretches the arm that’s touching Will’s leg until he’s able to reach the base of the plug: pushing it in an exquisitely tantalising rhythm to match the movement of Will’s
fingers until Will’s own breath is coming in a series of staccato pants. “You know you will. You’d
grow so fierce if I denied you.”

Will gives a low moan then thrusts back his hips. “You reckon?”

“Although I might be tempted to make you present for your alpha,” adds Hannibal, whose voice
sounds like it might just be on the verge of cracking. “You did it so beautifully before, I’d like to see
that again. What do you think Will? Did you know it’s the custom for alphas to train their omegas to
do it in a way that suits their personal liking?”

Will bites back another moan then leans forward and slides his tongue along Hannibal’s top lip as he
speeds up the movement of his hand. “That’s never going to happen. You’ll only get what I decide
to give you.”

“Yes, but you are going to give it to me aren’t you?” purrs Hannibal, straining up his head for a kiss
then making a frustrated growling noise when Will deliberately jerks his face out of reach. “It’s an
omega’s instinct to let their alphas take them. All omegas – even one as rebellious as you.”

“I guess we’ll find out won’t we?”

“We will,” agrees Hannibal. “Although I can tell you right now that you’ll crave to feel me inside
your body: my fingers, my tongue…although only a knot will truly satisfy you. Then afterwards
you’ll fall asleep in my arms and I’ll watch over you until you wake and realise you need me again.”

As he’s speaking his breath catches even more sharply and Will smiles and moves his left hand
downwards so he can start to stroke his cock at the same time. “Yeah, keep talking while you still
can,” he says. “You won’t be able to soon, I guarantee it.”

“It’s true though,” replies Hannibal, who’s now arching his back beneath the movement of Will’s
hands. “I have to guard you: it’s my duty as your alpha. You’re my most precious possession and
seeing as you can’t protect yourself when you’re in heat you’ll require my protection in its place.”

“Jesus, nothing’s enough to shut you up is it?” says Will fondly. He swirls his thumb round the head
of Hannibal’s cock then begins to stroke the length again before leaning back on his heels so he can
admire how powerfully sensuous Hannibal manages to look when laid out in front of him: all coiled
muscle and rapacious energy. “Besides,” he adds sardonically, “do you really think I can trust you to
look after me – wouldn’t that be a bit naïve?”

Hannibal draws in a long breath then lets his eyes fall closed. “Perhaps,” he says with a rather eerie
smile. “Perhaps it could be said that I’m not the most…trustworthy of individuals.”

“No, you’re not,” agrees Will, promptly moving forward again so Hannibal can take hold of his hips
with both hands. “You’re as shifty as hell.”

“At least you can guarantee I’ll always carry your interests close to my own,” replies Hannibal,
trailing his right hand down between Will’s legs while continuing to cradle his hip with the other.
“Not that you require much protection. You’re extremely powerful, even if you sometimes need a
little guidance to sustain you.” He lets out a sigh so low it’s almost a hiss before his eyes abruptly
snap open and he looks at Will directly. “Just like when you pretended to be the Ripper.” As he’s
speaking he gives the plug another sharp twist and Will cries out then bites his lower lip. “How far
did you go?” murmurs Hannibal tenderly. “Did you use your empathy Will…did you imagine you
were him? You don’t see the world the same way he does, do you; yet you can assume his point of
view.”
At the back of his mind Will is immediately aware of a small, strained voice that’s starting to sound out in alarm: a call for help which demands over and over in a frightened pitch ‘Why does he keep coming back to this?’ It’s a voice Will’s heard many times before, whispering to him in forbidden accents that something is very badly wrong…and yet he still chooses to screw his eyes closed in an attempt to block it out, unable to believe even for a second – even the time it takes for a heartbeat – that his trust, love, belief and sense of stability could have been so disastrously misplaced. It’s so dangerous, after all, to push the fear too far. Rather like prodding at an open wound: precarious at first, then painful, and then ultimately a source of infection, ruination and destruction. And so he forces himself to ignore the little flare of fear and focuses on Hannibal instead, soothed in spite of himself by the rhythmic voice that’s inviting him to follow where he can barely acknowledge he wants to go.

“How did it feel Will?” murmurs Hannibal in something like a chant. So Will promptly flicks his eyes back open then leans down to scrape his teeth against Hannibal’s jaw as he answers: “It felt real. It felt like I was being myself.”

Hannibal gives another sigh of satisfaction then hooks his legs around Will’s back to tug him closer. “Yes,” he says. “Your own diorama of death, beloved. Your own work of art.”

“Yes,” repeats Will, helpless anymore to deny it. “Yes…”

“And so much poetry, boldness and beauty in that moment – so much life even in the midst of dying.” For a few seconds Hannibal goes completely still so he can gaze directly into Will’s eyes, virtually pinning him in place using nothing but the power of that blankly soulless stare. “There you are Will Graham: dwelling in both the minds of those who are murdered and in the minds of those who murder them – between the authority of ending life and the helplessness of having it taken. And so what do you do? You transform horror into the aesthetic. You control your environment with the hand of an artist. You compose a virtuosic rhythm…you construct the perfect design.”

Will flinches slightly, suddenly frightened again. “No…” he protests. “The Ripper’s design.”

“No,” repeats Hannibal calmly. “Yours. Yours Will; like a protégé with a mentor. You created your own canvas that night, don’t forget that. Only you didn’t do it with brushes and paint but with flesh and blood – with bone and breath. All just elements, undergoing change to fuel your radiance…”

Will gives another low moan, battling a swelling sense of panic before he’s able to scrabble through his mind with growing desperation and remind himself that all this is nothing more than an elaborate metaphor for freeing himself from Andrew. Because of course it is: it’s simply a conversation about Will coming into his own power. The realisation is like clinging to a life raft that can keep him afloat amid a swirling sea of uncertainty – a buoyant, life-giving reminder that Hannibal encouraging Will to accept certain aspects of his nature is not at all the same thing as actively celebrating him becoming a killer. Because who does that anyway; who could turn someone into a killer simply by the power of suggestion? No one could do that…not even Hannibal. It isn’t possible, thinks Will rather wildly as glances down at Hannibal’s angular face, so sharply sculptured in the light of the fire. No one could, not even you.

So ultimately Will does what he’s always done before, which is do his very best to ignore the whole thing. Then he sinks forward into Hannibal’s waiting arms, gasping against his skin and yanking his head back by the hair to kiss him with incredible care and thoroughness: brutal-hard, then tender-gentle. He knows that most alphas would be furious at this, yet Hannibal accepts the rough treatment without any hint of resentment. In fact if anything he seems to be enjoying Will’s fierceness, and the awareness of this is enough to make Will gasp his name again like it’s the words of a prayer before roughly lining up so he can force his cock into Hannibal’s body with a single deep thrust. On one
level he feels like he should be spending longer over it with tender lingering touches, as the
experience of taking Hannibal for the first time can only ever happen once and it occurs to Will that
he ought to make it last. And yet, oh God, it’s completely impossible to wait any more than he
already has. He’s helplessly aware of the noises he’s making now: breathy and broken and desperate,
telling Hannibal how much he wants to fuck him and make him come, then almost sobbing at how
good it feels as they hit a perfect rhythm and he frantically tries to chase a release that feels just
seconds away. The plug is still buried deep in his ass and as he rolls his hips downwards the double
stimulation is so intense it’s almost too much. Hannibal’s breath against his throat is as hot as a brand
and the sensation of it all is phenomenal, as if every nerve is alight: it’s like scouring a piece of wood,
burnishing and sanding off one another’s splintered edges each time they touch.

His skin’s so slick with sweat that Hannibal’s palms glide over it and Will’s eyes flutter closed as he
writhes within Hannibal’s lethally strong grip, barely able to move yet not really needing to because
for a few seconds it seems like Hannibal’s doing all the work for both of them as he slams his own
hips upwards while forcing Will’s down. Will moans again, then on an impulse lowers his face so he
can scavenge Hannibal’s throat with his teeth. In fact he knows what he wants to do is ridiculous and
would only make sense if Hannibal was an omega; but it’s still not enough to stop him roughly
twisting Hannibal’s head to the side, baring the delicate skin just beneath his hair then delivering a
stinging bite to the back of his neck.

Hannibal gives a low gasp at the sensation and Will kisses him again more gently before reaching
down so he can fist at his cock to match the rhythm of his hips. They’re both going to come soon, he
can tell; they’re going to do it together and it’s going to be perfect. Hannibal’s presence is literally
coiling into his head and it’s as if he’s so filled by it that he can’t contain it all – can’t think, can’t be,
because nothing else exists in the entire world except the two of them – and it’s at that point that he
can feel himself starting to lose it completely. Then he draws in his breath as he grows aware of
Hannibal’s fingers ghosting over his face, murmuring Will’s name just as Will hears himself gasping
Hannibal’s. Then Will says: “I’ll never not want this” at the exact moment Hannibal says: “I’ll never
stop wanting you”, gazing upwards with his lips slightly parted as Will stares back with wide frantic
eyes. And then there’s nothing at all beyond that exact moment – no miserable past or uncertain
future, no doubts or insecurities, no fear about things being wrong beyond a certainty that everything
is right – because they’re both outside of time, it’s just now, just this. It’s just each other.

Afterwards Will drapes himself across Hannibal’s back and wraps both arms round him (and then,
after a bit of contortion, both legs as well) then clings on fiercely. The fire has entirely burnt down by
now which makes the shadows long and chilly, and Hannibal gently disentangles himself so he can
lay Will against the floor then arrange himself on top of him. It’s a classic alpha gesture of protection
– something he’s been doing increasingly frequently in the last few weeks – and as usual Will finds
himself surprisingly happy to accept it without any objection. Instead of tugging himself free he
therefore just huddles even closer before reaching round to rearrange the blanket and make sure
Hannibal is properly covered. “You know I still can’t believe you let me do that,” he adds once he’s
lying still again. “I don’t think I’ve ever met an alpha who’d have allowed it. If I’d even
hinted
the
same thing to Andrew he would have slapped me round the face.”

“Unfortunately I find that depressingly easy to believe,” replies Hannibal grimly. “My sole
consolation is that you would have slapped him straight back again.”

“Not that I would have asked. I wouldn’t have wanted to. Not with him.”

“You might have done,” says Hannibal. “Purely for your own gratification, of course, rather than his
– only it would never have occurred to you to ask, because you’ve been so conditioned to believe it’s
Will shuffles irritably, aware that Hannibal’s making a valid point even while he’s reluctant to admit he’s been a victim of alpha conditioning. “Not necessarily,” he says with a touch of defensiveness. “To be fair omegas aren’t really built for it.”

“That’s not the reason at all,” replies Hannibal briskly. “You’ve just demonstrated that omegas are perfectly well built for it. No: the real reason is the propaganda that’s been developed against you, because it convinces omegas to believe that being the receptive partner is the same as being submissive. Of course two alphas, or two male betas, could immediately tell you that that’s ridiculous, but an omega has a more complicated role. You’re told from your earliest years that your chief purpose is to propagate children and keep your alpha happy by – if you’ll excuse the crudeness of the phrase – lying back and accepting whatever they wish to give you.” Will sighs bitterly at the undeniable truth of this and Hannibal adds: “Omegas are encouraged to view their sexuality only as far as it relates to alphas. I think you understand me enough by now to know that I don’t subscribe to rationing one’s pleasure in anything. And if it’s something that society’s rules encourage me to avoid then I’m likely to pursue it even more passionately.”

“Yes,” say Will quietly. “I know.”

“I do admire you Will,” adds Hannibal, reaching round so he can stroke Will’s cheekbone. “I admire you hugely. It is, after all, the nature of oppression to breed bitterness between members of the oppressed rather than towards their oppressors. Why do you think so many omegas spend their time competing and arguing amongst themselves instead of challenging alphas? Yet you’ve never done that in all the time I’ve known you. I still remember the concern and compassion you showed towards that young omega we saw in the park; you rebel against the system yourself, yet you didn’t despise him for succumbing to it. You haven’t internalized the prejudice against omegas, which is why you care so deeply about them.” He pauses for a few seconds, allowing the full significance of the statement to register. “And why you wish to avenge yourself against the Sculptor on their behalf.”

“Thank you,” replies Will in the same quiet voice, “I appreciate you saying that.” A short silence follows and as Hannibal presses a kiss against his temple Will clears his throat in an effort to change the subject and distract from how emotional he suddenly feels. “I’m sorry I bit you,” he says instead, gently nudging Hannibal’s face with his own. “I got a bit carried away.”

“Don’t be. It’s fine.”

“But I hurt you.”

“You flatter yourself beloved,” replies Hannibal languidly. “It would take far more than your tiny little teeth.”

Will laughs at this, grateful of a way of venting some of his private tension, then pulls himself free so he can scramble on top of Hannibal’s back and deliver a small bite to the shoulder blade. Hannibal makes a vaguely inconvenienced noise in response but doesn’t pull away. “Is that so?” adds Will. “I’ll show you tiny teeth.”

“Enough,” says Hannibal in amusement. “Stop nibbling me.”

“I shall not.”

“Indeed you shall.”
“Make me,” says Will. “Hannibbles.”

Hannibal, rather uncharacteristically, laughs out loud at this before neatly flipping himself over so Will is caught off balance and lands on the floor. Hannibal promptly climbs back on top of him then smiles down in an unusually benevolent way as he tenderly smooths Will’s hair off his forehead. “What an unnatural little menace you are,” he says. “How is it that you manage to make rudeness seem positively charming?”

“Omegan witchcraft,” says Will. “Since you asked.”

“I’ve no doubt of it,” replies Hannibal in a mock serious voice.

Will smiles again then reaches out for Hannibal’s hand so he can tangle their fingers together. “Do you want to know a dumb thing I did?” he adds. “Are you listening? Because I’m only ever going to admit this once.” Hannibal smiles back then caresses Will’s knuckles with his thumb. “I bought a book called *What Alphas Want,*” continues Will with a tiny eye-roll. “Right before I moved in with you. And then I read it. I might even have made a few notes in the margin.”

“Did you really?” replies Hannibal serenely. “Well if we’re trading confessions I suppose I should make one of my own. Last month I bought a book called *Understanding Omegas.* I likewise read it – and might even have annotated it too.”

Will gives a burst of laughter then on an impulse wraps his arms round Hannibal’s back and pulls him close. “Are you still listening?” he says. “I’ve got something else I want to tell you.”

“And do you intend to do so?” replies Hannibal when nothing follows except silence. “Or shall I be required to guess?”

Will rolls his eyes again. “I feel self-conscious. I’ve built it up too much.”

Hannibal smiles then leans forward to press their foreheads together. “Then say it quietly.”

“Well…” begins Will. He hugs Hannibal a little tighter then twists round to bury his face in his neck. “I’ve been thinking about this. I’ve been thinking about it a lot.”

“What have you been thinking mano meilė?”

“About my heat,” says Will earnestly. “And what’s going to happen. I’ve been thinking about it and…and I’m sure now.” Then he takes a deep breath before adding in a voice that’s very low yet brimming with soft sincerity: “When my heat comes Hannibal…I want you to bite me. Do you understand? I want us to be bonded.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m not sure if there’ll be another update before Christmas, so just in case wishing a wonderful time to everyone who’s celebrating and a very peaceful, positive and happy end-of-December to those who aren’t xxx
HAPPY NEW YEAR FANNIBALS! Woo! I hope 2019 is a very peaceful, positive, happy and healthy year for all of you and brings you lots of joy and good things. Much love to everyone xox

In contrast to the noise of the past few weeks – of all the talking and deconstructing, of promises made and pledges exchanged – the drive home from the cliffside house mostly takes place in a companionable silence. Hannibal removes his hand from the wheel at regular intervals to lay it across Will’s knee and every time he does it Will never fails to take the hand in both of his and cling on. He’s aware that Hannibal’s silence seems to be coming from a sense of contentment; his own, in contrast, owes more to how light-headed he’s felt since this morning and the resulting concern that he’s going to be ill again. But while this isn’t a particularly comforting thought, it feels like even the spectre of sickness has lost some its fear as long as he’s protected by the shield of love and solidarity from their cocoon of two. Perhaps the damage Andrew did was more serious than he realised and he’s not yet back to full health; but if he’s going to be ill again then he’ll recover and flourish again – it’s as simple as that. In fact for once everything is simple: the most elementary of equations where one plus one equals two. Because two can face the trials and tempests of the world unshaken; two can face sickness or a Sculptor…two can face anything. So Will simply lies back to bask in this newfound sense of security and happiness, and it’s not until the car’s pulling into the driveway and Hannibal’s helping him climb out that he notices the first real omen of unease. In fact it’s something he hasn’t seen for so long that he’d nearly forgotten about them entirely. But there’s no mistaking it, because there they are just as if they’d never left and had merely been waiting for the right moment to be noticed again: the ragged black outline of the murder of crows.

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Within a few hours of arriving home Will’s earlier fears are realised when he suffers a minor relapse. Admittedly this doesn’t express itself with anything more worrying than a raised temperature and an aching head; but given the recent seizure Hannibal is reluctant to take any chances, so ignores Will’s protests and insists on going to the trouble and expense of finding an omega specialist who’s available to do a house call. Although this initial problem then directly leads to a second one, because Will refuses to see Dr Reynolds on the grounds of it being awkward, whereas Hannibal refuses to contact Dr Hall on the grounds that it will be too tempting to want to kill him (and which isn’t a bad thing in itself, but is hardly the most appropriate time or place). In turn Anneke isn’t answering her phone to recommend one, Will has never bothered to identify one, and the omega clinic itself is always closed on Sundays.

“Oh just leave it,” says Will, who’s now thoroughly bored with the whole thing. But Hannibal is not at all inclined to leave it and rifles though his address book instead to retrieve the details of an old acquaintance of his from Johns Hopkins. Will’s half hoping she won’t answer her phone either, but unfortunately she does; and after subjecting Hannibal to what Will feels is an insufferable amount of small talk is finally able to suggest someone local that might be suitable. This turns out to be a large spray-tanned alpha called Dr Michaels who arrives 30 minutes later armed with an oily bedside manner, an industrial amount of hair gel, and a lot of very white teeth which look as if they owe far more to cosmetic dentistry than anything which nature might have blessed him with. He examines
Will in the bedroom – Hannibal standing by the entire time with his arms folded – and proceeds to take his temperature, check his pulse, ask a series of enormously tedious questions, and then when Will’s finally passed out from exhaustion (or possibly boredom) diagnoses complications resulting from heat toxicity.

“I’ve seen it before in abuse cases,” says Dr Michaels to Hannibal once they’re downstairs in the kitchen again and Hannibal has brewed a pot of coffee. “The alphas force them go through their heats by themselves and it plays havoc with their endocrine system.” He pauses then gives a rather theatrical shudder. “Sometimes it can be fatal.”

“It nearly was in his case,” replies Hannibal grimly. “He suffered multiple organ failure.”

“If his temperature gets any higher you should drive him to the ER,” adds Dr Michaels, taking an appreciative sip of the coffee. “But I think that’s unlikely. He’s not showing any signs of toxic shock and his blood pressure is good. Mostly he just seems run-down. Has he been under any stress recently?”

Hannibal makes a regretful noise. “He has, yes.”

“Poor little guy,” says Dr Michaels. This is accompanied by a cooing sound like a sickly pigeon and immediately identifies him as one of those alphas who’s incapable of not being hugely patronising at even the faintest hint of an omega in distress. Hannibal’s eyes promptly narrow into little slits of disapproval and Dr Michaels clears his throat then adds rather hastily: “Although he has a remarkable constitution and I’d expect him to be in far worse shape all things considered. Another day or two and he should be back to normal again.”

Hannibal replaces his cup on the counter with a crisp little clicking noise. “He’s certainly very resilient.”

Dr Michaels flails awkwardly for a few seconds and then flashes the large white teeth in Hannibal’s direction. “Oh yes,” he says. “No doubt some of them can be.” Hannibal raises a single eyebrow. “Tough little critters!” adds Dr Michaels with a hint of desperation.

Hannibal’s other eyebrow slowly elevates to join the first. “Critters?”

“Um…yes,” says Dr Michaels, who’s well aware that he’s just been handed a shovel to dig his own verbal grave. “Critters? You know?”

”No,” says Hannibal.

“Well, they’re, um, kind of small and cute and…” Hannibal’s eyebrows now return to their resting position and Dr Michaels abandons ship entirely and allows the rest of the sentence to quietly drown in his coffee mug. “Anyway,” he adds, once he’s taken a few cautious swigs and enough time has passed for the critter definition to be declared officially deceased. “I was meaning to ask you – there didn’t seem to be a bite mark on his neck?”

Hannibal, who despises stating the obvious, stares back serenely without bothering to reply and Dr Michaels makes a feeble little waving motion with his hand. “I’d advise you to do something about that as soon as possible. It’s obvious he’s formed an emotional attachment with you, but it’s in the absence of a neurophysical bond. One without the other is going to exacerbate his symptoms.”

“I’m aware,” says Hannibal, inadvertently returning to the same grim tone as before. “I believe his own doctor told him something similar. Of course it’s not simply a matter of biting him without his permission.”
Dr Michaels flashes the teeth for a second time. “When’s his next heat? Soon I’d guess, judging by the look of him.”

“Less than a fortnight.”

“Well make sure you get him bitten then – if he’s one of those nervous ones then make it clear to him beforehand that it’s for his own good. And I’d recommend cutting down contact with him in the meanwhile because your pheromones are going to set him off. I don’t mean not seeing him at all,” he adds as he sees Hannibal starting to frown. “Just reducing the time you’re together. Do you have a spare bedroom you could use?” He casts his head around the kitchen in an exaggerated way, obviously pantomiming the fact that the largeness of the house makes this extremely likely. “Because I usually recommend a 50:50 ratio – 12 hours on and 12 hours off.”

“I’d prefer not to leave him to sleep alone,” says Hannibal, polite yet firm. “He suffers from nightmares.”

“That’s fine: in that case leave him on his own during the day and only spend the evenings and nights with him. Think of it as quality rather than quantity.” Hannibal gives a regretful sigh at the thought of such a deprivation and Dr Michaels, sensing an opportunity to regain the upper hand in revenge for the critters, pompously adds: “I hardly need to tell you that omegas require a lot of love at a time like this. When you are together you should gentle him: try applying pressure to the bonding spot. And cover him as much as much as he’ll let you, it helps them feel secure. What about behavioural changes – has he started nesting yet?” Hannibal gives a terse nod and Dr Michaels nods back rather jovially, obviously pleased to have his opinion confirmed. “Well leave him to do it on his own. I know alphas like to get involved but most of the time it just causes stress for the omega. They need calm and quiet.”

“Of course,” agrees Hannibal, thinking rather wistfully about the chair. “I’ve encouraged him to control his surroundings as much as possible.”

“Good, you should carry on doing that. Is he having contact with other omegas in the meantime?”

“Not especially.”

Dr Michaels playfully wags his finger, completely oblivious to how Hannibal has started to stare at it as if he’d like to snap it off. “That’s not good. He should have one with him, at least for the next few days while he’s convalescing.”

“Will is rather solitary,” replies Hannibal, forcing himself to stop staring at the finger and focus on Dr Michaels’ face instead. “Talking with strangers isn’t a particular source of comfort for him.”

“That may well be,” says Dr Michaels, immediately reverting to the same pompous tone as before. “But omegas by nature are highly pro-social. Alphas are the individualistic ones, but omegas need to be part of a community – peer bonding is vital for their wellbeing, especially when they’re approaching heat. In fact if he’s been isolated from other omegas as much as you say then it might well have made his problems worse.”

The idea of someone presuming to know more about Will’s preferences than he does means Hannibal’s irritated look promptly returns; and Dr Michaels, realising that he’s pushing his luck, abandons his coffee cup then hurriedly gathers his belongings together as a sign that he considers the conversation at an end. He then murmurs a few discreet words about forwarding his bill before slinking out the house and diving into his car, while Hannibal stands by the window and watches him go with a small frown playing around his mouth and eyebrows. This time, however, the frown is less due to Dr Michaels’ than it is from an internal struggle with a sudden and extremely unpleasant
surge of possessiveness. In fact Hannibal is well aware of how stressed omegas are supposed to benefit from each other’s presence, and the idea that someone can offer comfort to Will which he can’t is highly disagreeable. Even more disagreeable is the knowledge that for Will’s sake he’s going to have to conquer this jealousy; at least for the short-term.

This, of course, now leads to the question of who to ask, as while a similar request for a beta or alpha would be simple enough omegas are a little harder to come by. Anneke is the most obvious choice, yet considering she’s heavily pregnant it’s hard to imagine Beverly agreeing to the plan when Hannibal, as an unbonded alpha, is in the same house. Likewise Will has never mentioned being on friendly terms with any fellow omegas himself (or pretty much anyone else for that matter) and Hannibal has never met any that are sufficiently interesting to want to cultivate any sort of intimacy with. In fact the vast majority of Hannibal’s circle tends to be like him: privileged, patrician alphas with cultured backgrounds and sophisticated tastes who have omegas as mates but not necessarily as friends. This, in turn, now gives Hannibal an idea and he frowns over the problem for a while longer before sitting down to compose a note outlining Dr Michaels’ instructions to push beneath the bedroom door for Will to read when he wakes up. Then he retrieves his coat from the hallway and swiftly leaves the house in order to knock on the door of one of his neighbours (for who he has slightly less contempt than the rest) to see if his mate might be available to sit with Will for a couple of hours.

Despite the short notice and unusual circumstances this turns out to be the case; and which is how Will wakes up a few hours later to find another omega sitting by his bed with a cup of coffee in one hand and a biography of Rembrandt in the other. Will immediately recognises the book as being one of Hannibal’s and for a few seconds is too busy sulking at the idea of another omega being granted the privilege of borrowing it before he realises that the latter’s face is even more familiar than the book is. Then he peers a bit closer and experiences a twinge of genuine surprise to realise that it’s none other than the same male omega he’s encountered several times previously in Dr Reynolds’ waiting room. Admittedly the fact this is the only omega clinic in the city means it probably isn’t a tremendous coincidence, but somehow Will still can’t resist a brief flare of paranoia that this specific omega has been sent here on purpose to check up on him...possibly by Dr Reynolds herself.

“Hey!” says the omega cheerfully when he sees Will looking at him. “How are you feeling? I’m sorry if I woke you up; did I wake you up? Did your alpha explain to you why I’m here?”

This is all announced in such a tumble of words that Will has to take a few moments to sift through them all before he’s able to wrestle them into some kind of order and manage to make a reply (‘not too bad’, ‘no you didn’t’ and ‘yes, he told me what the doctor said’). The other omega beams happily at a sense of an understanding being reached, and despite Will’s lingering sense of unease the general positivity is so infectious that he can’t help smiling back. “It’s good to meet you properly Will,” adds the omega, carefully slotting a slip of paper into the book to mark his page then laying it down on the floor. “I remember seeing you at the clinic a few times but I never knew we were neighbours. Small world, huh?”

Will, who’s had too many recent experiences of this in relation to himself and the Sculptor to find any kind of charm in it, immediately feels his smile starting to fade. The other omega promptly smiles even harder as if to make up for it then adds: “I’m Alex by the way. I can chat to you if you want? Or I could read to you? Or we can just sit in silence if you like, I don’t mind.”

Will rolls onto his back then drags his hand through his hair, slightly overwhelmed by this effusion of friendliness. It’s actually a little like being pounded over the head with it. “Sorry if I’m rambling on,” continues Alex good-naturedly. “I talk all the time, you’ve probably noticed. You seem like one of those people who get their energy from being by themselves and having things quiet. Which is cool if you are, by the way; my brother’s the same and he’s the nicest person I’ve ever met, so it’s not like
I think it’s a bad thing.” He pauses to draw breath then lets out the final sentence in another tumble: “So-just-tell-me-if-you-want-me-to-be-quiet.”

“It’s fine,” says Will slowly. “I’m just a bit tired is all.” There’s an odd clammy sensation on his forearm and glancing down he sees that a large sedation patch has been clumsily attached to it. No doubt Dr Michaels’ stuck it there while he was sleeping…that obnoxious toothy bastard. Mindful of Alex still staring at him he resists the temptation to drop kick it across the room and discreetly peels it off instead then stuffs it under the blankets.

“Yeah, I heard you’d been ill,” replies Alex with obvious sympathy. “Your alpha mentioned it. He didn’t go into details,” he adds hastily when he sees Will starting to frown. “He just said you could use some company from another omega.”

“Right,” says Will, trying his hardest to sound enthusiastic.

“Your alpha,” adds Alex brightly. “He’s very…Well, he’s very alpha, isn’t he?”

Will immediately bristles at this, torn between suspicion of what it’s meant to imply combined with a rather manic surge of possessiveness. In this respect it doesn’t help that his first impression of Alex is amplified tenfold by seeing him so close up: namely that he’s far more typical of a male omega then Will himself is, with glossy coils of hair nestling over the sort of wide-eyed, delicate features which are beautiful while still remaining masculine. In fact everything about him is pure omega, from the long eyelashes and the long legs, to the dewy skin, curved mouth, and the dusting of freckles on both cheekbones which on a beta (or for that matter, on Will) would just look like freckles and on Alex are like sprinklings of nutmeg across a bowl of cream. Will’s eyebrows promptly descend across his forehead. Don’t even think about it, he telegraphs silently at Alex. Go and find your own alpha, you beautiful bastard, and keep your hands off mine.

“Oh don’t worry,” says Alex, who from either tactfulness or naivety appears to have completely mistaken the reason for the frown. “He wasn’t rude to me or anything. I tend to get patronised a lot by other alphas after I was bonded, but yours was very polite. No, I just meant his general manner. You can pick up on it just by looking at him.”

“I guess,” says Will, who feels like he’s had enough of alpha superiority for one day. In fact with Dr Michaels and his teeth on one side, and Hannibal with his razor-sharp cheekbones on the other, it’s been a bit like being in an alpha sandwich. Will’s mind starts to gloomily drift off at the thought of it before realising that’s he’s strayed into a pointless mental ramble comparing himself to a sandwich filling and has to force his attention back to the conversation.

“Is he a thoroughbred?” Alex is asking. Will gives a small nod, hoping he doesn’t look too smug about this, and Alex promptly beams again. “That’s so cool,” he says cheerfully. “My alpha’s taking me to Europe for our bonding anniversary.” Eagerly he leans forward in the chair and clutches his slim knees with the air of someone warming to their theme. “We go on vacation a lot, mostly just to the States, but I love to travel. I figure now’s the best time right? I mean we don’t have kids yet. My alpha’s very keen, but I said I wanted to wait a little longer.” Will grunts in agreement then realises
he’s started to nod rather manically and has to force himself to stop. It’s actually pretty hard not to though, because this is almost always the way. And not for sentimental reasons either but egotistical ones, seeing how most alphas are completely in love with the idea of replicating themselves via spawns of mini-alphas (which of course they then have very little responsibility for raising).

“So yeah, Europe would be awesome,” Alex is now saying. “I want to go to the galleries there: the Louvre, the Prado, the Tate… I’m crazy about that stuff.” Will smiles politely but can’t really think of anything sensible to reply to this. Really though, what the hell do people talk about? It’s like he’s avoided small talk for so long he’s forgotten what the rules are. “You know Will, it’s great to have another omega so close by,” adds Alex, who’s obviously happy to help him out. “We should try and hang out more, seeing as we’re neighbours.” Will smiles weakly, already generating a list of possible excuses to get out of these future hang-outs. “So when did you arrive? Did your alpha bring you here from your parents’ house?”

Although Will’s been fairly content so far to be referred to as Hannibal’s omega this is a bit too much and he now finds himself snapping back (rather more sharply than intended): “He didn’t bring me. I came on my own.”

“Oh heck, yeah, sorry, I remember now,” replies Alex in the same good-natured way. “You met at work didn’t you? That’s cool man – that’s really cool. I don’t really know any other omegas with a job. I mean it’s not even a job is it? It’s a career.” He smiles affably then runs his hand through his hair. “Gosh, I must seem really traditional to you. I went straight from my mom and dad’s house to my alpha’s. I’ve never even been to college.”

Alex, decides Will, is rather like one of those children’s toys with the rounded bases: no matter how often you bat them over they merrily spring back up again for more. In fact there’s something about such sunny optimism that’s undeniably endearing (if a little exhausting) and he now replies in a voice that’s deliberately warmer: “No, you don’t at all.” In fact this is true, because a better word would be oppressed – although saying this would undoubtedly be getting into far too murky waters for what’s supposed to be a light-hearted first meeting. “I’m sorry if I sounded impatient,” adds Will, realising he feels faintly ashamed for his previous short temper. “I’m just not really myself at the moment. It makes me a bit irritable.”

Alex smiles encouragingly, cheery as a game show host, although Will can’t help feeling that as excuses go this sounds incredibly lame so ultimately gives up again and lies back on the comforting coolness of the pillows instead. After all, it’s not as if his usual self is any less irritable. In fact if anything it’s even worse, because there’s no way his usual self would suffer to be described as someone’s omega over and over again. The sense of ownership it implies is actually pretty unbearable (‘This is my house; this is my Bentley; this is my omega, nesting in a chair’). Although at the same time he can’t deny that he’s also let Hannibal refer to himself as Will’s alpha on numerous occasions without objecting. Will promptly decides that this is all too much to think about anymore so just sighs very slightly and lets his eyes fall closed.

“It’s no problem Will,” says Alex kindly. “I shouldn’t be pestering you so much. You can ask me something instead if you like? Or we can just sit without talking.”

Will abruptly snaps his eyes back open then darts a glance at Alex. “Actually there is something,” he says. Alex repeats the same encouraging smile and Will finds himself falling silent again, overcome with a sudden concern that it might be an inappropriate request. In fact it almost certainly is, although it’s also something that’s preoccupied him for a very long time and it’s hard to know when a similar opportunity might present itself. Besides, Alex can always say no. “I hope you don’t mind me asking,” adds Will cautiously, “and I understand if you’d rather not. But…may I see your bite?”
“My bite?” says Alex. “Sure you can Will, no problem.” He obligingly ducks his head, tugging his collar down a few inches for a better view, and Will leans forward rather gingerly as he runs his eyes over the scar. It’s nowhere near as bad as the one he saw in the park: fully healed by now and extremely neat without any of the jagged edges or torn skin he’d come to expect. Even so, the idea that it was made by alpha teeth sinking deep into the fragile flesh is enough to make him wince and he finds himself drawing back almost immediately before retreating to the pillow again.

“Does it hurt?” he says after a short pause. It’s an effort not to let the unease show in his voice, but considering it’s in response to someone else’s body he’s anxious that any signs of distaste might be offensive.

Alex sits upright again and twists his mouth to the side, obviously wanting to answer honestly without causing unnecessary alarm. “Yes,” he says finally. “But not lots. It’s more like a bad sting – nowhere near as painful as a normal bite would be. Alpha saliva has a protein in it that acts as an analgesic. They clean it for you afterwards as well; they use their tongues as a sort of painkiller. Plus you’re pretty relaxed when it happens as they only bite you when you’re…well, you know.”

“Having sex,” says Will matter-of-factly. Alex blushes rather prettily and Will can’t help marvelling at what a sheltered life he must have had if a reference to sex between two consenting adults is enough to embarrass him. No wonder he’s so pathologically cheerful – perhaps even Will might have been too in similar circumstances? Not that it seems very likely though, because he knows he could never be fully satisfied with living in the kind of pampered prison that Alex has been sold into. Casting his mind back to their conversation in the waiting room he remembers Alex mentioning something about liberal parents, so at least in some ways it’s encouraging to meet an omega who got the fabled happy ending: gently ferried from the arms of a loving family to those of a devoted alpha who he was allowed to choose for himself. Will now frowns slightly, mulling this over. No, even that isn’t as satisfactory as it could be, because what matters isn’t so much that a choice was made but the context the choice was made in; and the existence (or not) of alternative choices, such as not having an alpha at all. What if Alex had wanted to go to college? He could have gone and studied Art History, then paid to go to Europe himself. Briefly Will now tries to imagine it: Alex strolling round the Prado, tanned from the Spanish sun and guidebook in hand as he marvelled over the Goyas and the Reubens with his lips slightly parted, secure in the knowledge it was his own hard work that had allowed him to enjoy them.

“Well…yes,” Alex says now. He’s still blushing, the nutmeg freckles highlighted against the pink like the speckled centre of a lily. “It’s very intense, but in a good way.” The blush now deepens slightly, passing from fuchsia pink to cerise. “To be honest it’s a bit of a shame you can only experience it once. It’s really…um, you know. It feels really nice.”

There’s something so sincere and artless in the way he says it that Will promptly feels guilty all over again for patronising him. After all, he certainly seems more peaceful than Will does; and in that respect could probably summon equal amounts of pity for an omega who goes out into the world like Will to get buffeted by all the discrimination and calculated alpha cruelty. Ultimately it’s the system that’s at fault, not just the individuals within it, and it’s hardly Alex’s fault if it’s shaped him into an omega stereotype. And at the very least he’s excelled within its parameters and has created a life for himself that makes him happy. Perhaps he’d see Will’s own rebellion as equally futile and pointless? The thought is a rather grim one, and in an attempt to distract himself from it Will now blurts out: “So how does it feel?”

“What? To be bitten.”

Will clears his throat. “No, to be bonded.”
Alex repeats the same mouth twisting gesture as before. “You feel a lot closer to your alpha,” he says finally. “A lot more attuned, you know? Although it’s when you’re separated that you really notice it. You get overcome with this craving to have them near you. It’s really physical: you feel it in your body. It’s like a drug. Plus alphas tend to be a bit of a nightmare for a few days after it first happens. I mean they get really possessive. At least mine did – yours might be better. Is yours possessive?”

“Y-e-s,” says Will.

“Oh, well, you’ll already know how to deal with him then,” says Alex hopefully. “He’ll be worse than usual straight after he bites you, but he’ll calm down after a while. You’ll need to give him a lot of attention. They can’t help it really; you know what they’re like.”

He pauses long enough for him and Will to share a little conspiratorial eye-roll at the general ludicrousness of alphas. “I suppose it’s not their fault,” adds Alex, obviously trying to be charitable. “It’s because they want to consolidate the bond. They follow you round all the time, and then they just sit and gaze at you. It’s actually pretty cute. I mean it’s hilarious – but it’s cute.” Will gives a snort of laughter, trying and failing to imagine Hannibal in such an unlikely role. “So yeah, be prepared for your alpha to get jealous straight after,” adds Alex. “He’ll constantly need to know where you are and what you’re doing. And if any alphas come near you he’ll go crazy.”

*He does that anyway,* thinks Will wryly. “Yeah,” he says out loud. “I can imagine.”

“Dominance fight doesn’t come near it. You think they’re bad before you’re bonded, but afterwards they’re like Weapons of Mass Destruction. They go back to normal eventually, but you definitely don’t want another alpha near you for at least a week after you’ve first been bitten. Not unless you want a dead body on your hands.” Alex laughs merrily to show he’s not being entirely serious. “Your alpha seems very controlled though. I’m sure he’d be okay.”

Will clears his throat again. “Yeah,” he says after a slight pause. “I’m sure he would be.”

“Of course everyone’s alpha got possessive after the Sculptor case,” adds Alex with a little shudder. “Ben, my alpha, won’t let me out of his sight now. When I get home I have to hit the horn so he can come and walk me from my car to the house. Ben had to stop by his office this afternoon, so he told your alpha to call when I’m done here and if he’s still at work then your alpha has to walk me home himself. I mean it’s only four doors away. But he insisted.”

Will now wonders, rather hysterically, what Alex would say if he found out how Will only started living with Hannibal after the Sculptor left body parts and a threatening note in his backyard. Not that there’s any way he is going to find out about it; not least because there seems a genuine risk that confiding this detail might make him expire with shock and the last thing Will wants is his alpha storming round to start bitching at Will for giving his omega PTSD. Not of course that he would come to Will; he’d go to Hannibal instead, the same way a dog owner would come and complain to Will if one of his own behaved.

“But let’s not talk about that,” adds Alex, who’s once again mistaken the reason for Will’s gloomy expression. “It’s a bit depressing isn’t it? And the FBI know what they’re doing, I’m sure they’ll catch him soon.” Will makes a derisive grunting noise then immediately feels guilty for being disloyal. “I saw an interview with Agent Crawford on the news yesterday,” adds Alex. “Have you heard of him? He seems very capable. Even my alpha thought he was impressive.” Will promptly forgets about loyalty and repeats the grunting noise even louder than before. “Didn’t you say you worked in law enforcement?” adds Alex. “Or am I remembering wrong?”

“No, you’re not,” replies Will. “And I do.” Alex opens his mouth, no doubt to inform Will of how ‘awesome’ this is, so to save him the trouble Will adds: “I’m sort of…a psychologist.”
“Oh wow Will, that’s so exciting. You must have had to go to college for that.”

“It wasn’t a particularly good college,” lies Will, even though it was. “And just for a few years.”

“So are you a doctor? Do you have a PhD?”

“No,” says Will, almost relieved that this isn’t yet another thing for Alex to potentially feel inferior over. “I’ve supervised a few but I’ve never had time to do the research for one myself. I, um…I do quite a lot of work in the field.”

“So what about your alpha?” asks Alex, whose supply of curiosity currently seems inexhaustible. “What does he do?”

“He’s a psychiatrist.”

“Oh Will that’s awesome. It’s a similar area to you: you must have a lot to talk about?”

“Yeah,” replies Will vaguely. “I suppose you could say that.”

“So he’s like a medical doctor then?” adds Alex. “That’s good – at least he knows how to look after you when you’re sick. Speaking of which, how are you feeling now? Is there anything else I can help you with while I’m here?”

“Yeah, there is actually,” says Will, who’s just remembered that in staggering from one medical crisis to another he never found time to speak with Anneke as intended. “I’ve decided to stop seeing Dr Reynolds. I don’t suppose you can recommend another omega specialist?”

“Sure,” replies Alex, visibly brightening at the idea of being of some practical use. “The number’s at home but I’ll text you with it later.”

“Thanks, that would be great.”

“I can’t say I blame you,” adds Alex, carefully lowering his voice as if he thinks there’s a risk of being overheard. “I mean she’s good and all, but there’s something about her manner that I always found a little off.”

“Oh yeah?” asks Will, his own curiosity immediately roused.

“Like, she really has an issue with alphas.”

“I know she does. I noticed that too.”

“And she just seemed so angry a lot of the time, as if there was something going on beneath the surface. I don’t mean to be unkind about her,” adds Alex earnestly. “But she’s a tricky personality. She reminds me a bit of Mrs Havisham in Great Expectations. You know? Like someone with a troubled past, stowing themselves away from the world…”

Seeing how Alex is clearly someone with a romantic imagination – and an obvious taste for melodrama – Will isn’t inclined to take this analysis too seriously. Nevertheless, it’s striking that even someone as perennially positive as he is easily noticed the darker hues to Dr Reynolds on the basis of just a few meetings. The daughter of Richard Black, thinks Will grimly; is she even aware of how clearly those secret scars still manage to show themselves to the world? This, in turn, reminds him once more of how Nemesis refers to the goddess of vengeance rather than the god, and how the feminine influence of the name was never truly accounted for. Not that it necessarily has to be of course, given that ‘nemesis’ has a certain cultural currency in its own right. It sounds like a character
in a video game, Jack had said, and it actually really does. In fact wasn’t it the villain from one of those recent super hero movies? The ones with the lantern-jawed heroes and a shower of CGI spectacle…

“So are you okay otherwise Will?” asks Alex, abruptly cutting into this train of thought. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Will blinks a few times, struggling to reorient his mind from the blood and grime of the Sculptor case and back to the matter at hand. That matter being his health, which admittedly isn’t a subject to ever inspire much positive feeling. “I’m fine thanks,” he finally replies. “Just a bit of a headache.”

“That’s too bad,” says Alex sympathetically. “I get them too before my heat starts: apparently it’s something to do with blood pressure.” Will nods wearily, unable to summon enough energy to explain that he’s actually had them for most of his life. “Your muscles probably feel tense; would you like me to massage your head for you?”

Will automatically opens his mouth to refuse, yet there’s something about the simple kindness of the offer – made from nothing but a genuine desire to be useful without expecting anything in return – which makes him hesitate. Then there’s a pause before he finally musters a small smile in return; and when Hannibal knocks on the door a while later, it’s to find him curled on his side while Alex kneels behind him wearing an expression of extreme concentration and rubs meticulous circles across Will’s temples. It’s pretty much a perfect replica of a photograph Hannibal saw in a medical journal about peer-support in omegas, and the sight of Will embracing this aspect of himself without any of the usual shame or reservation can’t help but make him smile. His second impression is how strong and sleek the other omega appears in comparison, and how much he’s looking forward to the time when Will’s heats are finally regulated and he’s equally healthy. Then he reluctantly forces himself to stop admiring how elegant Will looks draped across a bed and discreetly clears his throat before asking if he can get them anything.

Will and Alex both snap their heads up at the same time and beam matching stares in Hannibal’s direction in a way that clearly shows their resentment at an alpha coming into their space without permission. Alex then instinctively leans over Will as if he’s guarding him – another classic omega gesture in the presence of an alpha when one of them is vulnerable in some way – while Will stiffens all four limbs like an offended cat. Like most alphas Hannibal finds this display of territorialism to be rather endearing (and more than a little amusing) but also, unlike most alphas, is careful not to patronise them by showing it. He therefore takes a deliberate step backwards until he’s stood in the hallway then repeats the offer in the same scrupulously polite tone as before.

Alex is the first one to return to normal and replace his rigid stare with a friendly smile and a gracious refusal. Will, predictably, takes much longer and continues glowering at Hannibal from beneath a tangle of hair before he finally comes back to himself as well and seems to remember that there isn’t actually any territory which needs guarding. Then he gives Hannibal an apologetic smile and wrinkles his nose at him in a way that fills Hannibal with a wave of tenderness which even after all this time still doesn’t feel entirely familiar. Not that this is surprising. Will is such a unique specimen, and it’s impossible for Hannibal to deny how his fervent desire to understand another human being in the way he wants to understand Will – from a spirit of pleasure and appreciation rather than raw desecration or destruction – is equally unfamiliar. Which in itself is…interesting.

As Hannibal watches Will yawns then stretches, suddenly docile and peaceful again. Now he looks more like a tiger cub than the predator of a few seconds ago, although there’s no doubt that all that stunning ferocity still simmers beneath the deceptively innocent surface. Yet no one else would ever really see this, because Will is a human puzzle box and a hall of mirrors with a Dark Reflection in them: a volatile, questing, wide-eyed and pale-skinned collection of foibles and uncertainties with a
hint of luminous lethal beauty and a slim dark soul. If fact if he wasn’t in front of Hannibal’s eyes right now then it would be hard to believe something so flawless could be real and not merely a figment of the imagination. Hannibal’s perfect equal and perfect mate: an exquisitely intriguing clutter of consequence and principles who’s wild, wary, precious, audacious, and seemingly designed purely for his breathless capacity to fascinate and inspire. In a world teeming with dull, blind, mechanical people Will alone is imbued with a sublime kind of energy, sense and unconscious sensuality: a voltage that thrums and pulses, and which deserves – demands – to be wrestled and deconstructed before breathed in and savoured.

As Hannibal returns downstairs he can’t help reflecting once again on the deep sense of variance this attachment has created in him. This is to be expected of course: it’s still a learning experience for both of them. But ultimately it doesn’t really matter, because it’s less than a fortnight now before Will is going to be bitten once and for all. And then, finally, the months of patient waiting will be rewarded and he’ll belong completely and utterly to Hannibal.

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Once Alex has left Will falls into the kind of restless, fretful sleep that owes more to lethargy than genuine tiredness and wakes a few hours later feeling sticky and heavy-eyed. The pale sliver of moon peering through the window suggests it’s later than he’d realised, although at least that means Dr Michaels’ stupid curfew will surely have passed and he’ll be able to leave the bedroom. The thought of this cheers up Will considerably and he now struggles out the mountain of blankets before stripping off his crumpled clothes and tugging on the blue silk robe because he knows that Hannibal likes to see him in it. Then he heads down the winding staircase, impatience causing him to break into a half-run for the last few yards, and softly pushes open the living room door. Hannibal is sat at the table covering sheaves of paper with his swooningly stylish handwriting and Will now steals up behind so he can pounce on him and wrap both arms round his chest.

“Hello,” says Hannibal with obvious pleasure. He replaces his fountain pen in its holder then turns round so he can press his face against Will’s arm. “I was hoping you’d come down soon.”

“Curfew,” replies Will, silently marvelling over the existence of something as elegantly archaic as a pen holder. “I was in my quarantine zone.”

“Ten minutes over: I was on the verge of retrieving you myself.”

“You can’t,” says Will. “You’re not allowed.” As he’s speaking he props his chin on top of Hannibal’s hair, wondering for what seems like the hundredth at how they’ve managed to grow so attached to each other that it’s actively harming his health. How did that even happen? Him: the omega who was always opposed to alphas as a point of principal? The warning of an emotional connection being risky without an actual bond seemed so fanciful when it was mentioned to him all those weeks ago and yet there’s no doubt the effects are getting impossible to ignore. Hannibal now makes an irritated sound at the reference to Dr Michaels and Will smiles slightly then nuzzles his face with his own. “Doctor’s orders, remember?”

“I’m hardly likely to forget,” says Hannibal. “Like Pyramus and Thisbe – I’m destined to yearn for you from beyond a wall.”

“It’s not for much longer now,” replies Will, kissing the top of Hannibal’s head. “Don’t be such a drama queen.”

“No,” agrees Hannibal. “Not much longer at all.” He reaches up behind him so he can curl his fingers round the back of Will’s neck, squeezing very gently to apply pressure to the bonding spot. “Speaking of which, you seemed very restful with the other omega. I hope his presence was of use to
“His name’s Alex,” says Will, immediately leaning into the touch. “Not ‘the other omega.’ And yes, he was nice.”

“Nice,” repeats Hannibal with amusement. “Such a very insipid description Will; you’re at risk of damning him through faint praise.”

“He was,” protests Will. “I liked him. Admittedly we have nothing in common beyond gender, but then male omegas are so rare that’s still a pretty big similarity. He was rather taken by you,” he adds, giving Hannibal’s head another nudge. “He kept going on about how ‘alpha’ you were.”

“Yes, I suppose he would,” says Hannibal airily. “He’s been conditioned to view alphas primarily in terms of gender rather than their traits as an individual. I’m afraid you also have a tendency to do the same mano meilė – only in your case the evaluations tend to be negative ones.”

Will makes a vague humming noise in recognition that this is a fair point. “Although in some ways I felt bad for him,” he adds. “I mean he’s obviously happy, but his life seems so restricted.”

“I find that very easy to believe” replies Hannibal, increasing the pressure against Will’s neck then smiling at the way it makes him wriggle. “His alpha always speaks about him as if he’s a porcelain doll: something beautiful yet fragile which needs to be handled with extreme care. At least he cherishes him I suppose; undoubtedly there are far worse ways for an alpha to treat an omega. Yet it seems like such a stifling sort of affection.”

“Yes, stifling – exactly.”

“Because his alpha doesn’t want an equal,” adds Hannibal pointedly. “He wants a possession. It’s a common enough trait among alphas but is not a perspective I happen to share. As charming as your nice Alex undoubtedly is, a dynamic like that would drive me insane with boredom within a matter of days.”

For a few seconds Will tightens his grip around Hannibal’s chest. “Yes,” he says quietly. “I know.”

“And don’t forget it,” adds Hannibal, shifting his face upwards so Will can rub against it with his cheek. “I agree that the available templates for alpha-omega pairings are rather limited but that should never be a source of concern for you. We are simply going to have to create our own.”

Will smiles to himself and tightens his grip even harder before an impulse makes him seize hold of Hannibal’s hand and tug him upright so he can pull him towards the sofa. “What a tyrant you are beloved,” says Hannibal, who seems as if he’s struggling not to laugh. “And is this also consistent with doctor’s orders? Surely we’re contravening medical advice.”

Will smirks then swoops down onto Hannibal’s lap until his own knees are tucked snugly against Hannibal’s hipbones and he can hook both arms hooked around his neck. “Not really,” he says. Gently he tugs Hannibal’s lower lip between his teeth then traces his fingers across the sharp edge of a cheekbone. “This is our allotted time remember? We’ve got until the morning.”

“At which point you’ll be spirited away from me again,” replies Hannibal, shifting further backwards to give Will enough room to unfasten his belt. Impatience makes him clumsy and Hannibal’s smile now broadens slightly before reaching down to help. “Like one of those creatures of fable who vanish when the sun rises. At least I know you’ll be returned to me when night falls.”

Instead of replying Will leans in for a kiss, grinding down with a slow roll of the hips then moaning into Hannibal’s mouth as he feels the robe being slowly slid down his shoulders before it’s pulled off.
entirely. In fact there’s something ridiculously thrilling about doing it like this: messy and passionate across the sofa like a pair of teenagers, with Will so impulsive he can’t even wait long enough for Hannibal to get undressed. But Hannibal doesn’t seem to mind and just cradles Will’s face with his palm, massaging his lower lip with his thumb then murmuring his name very tenderly before taking hold of his waist in both hands. When he’s lowered down Will’s eyes flutter closed and he lets out a little breathy *Oh* sound while he takes the full length of Hannibal’s cock inch by inch. Then he frantically rocks backwards again, gasping against Hannibal’s throat and gripping onto his shoulders as he starts to ride him. Hannibal presses ecstatic kisses across Will’s face and neck – calling him ‘dearest’ ‘my darling’ and ‘my love’ – and as they’re staring fixedly into each other’s eyes Will’s urge to whisper *I love you* when he starts to come is almost overwhelming. Yet something still holds him back and in the end he just buries his face against Hannibal’s shoulder instead, letting out soft little purr-like noises as Hannibal’s hands skim up and down his spine and he feels himself being filled with the tight stretch of a knot.

Afterwards Hannibal tenderly lifts Will up again then lays him down on the sofa so he can check his pulse and temperature while Will squirms and sighs then tries not to complain too much about being fussed over. Hannibal catches his eye after a particularly loud grumbling noise and Will sighs again followed by a half-hearted shrug. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I don’t mean to be ungrateful. It’s not you.”

“I know it’s not,” replies Hannibal, with typical patience. “It’s the situation.”

“Right. I just hate the constant reminders of what Andrew did: it’s like being hit over the head with my own biology.”

Hannibal pulls a regretful face and Will, who always loathes the idea of people feeling sorry for him, immediately scrabbles round for something mundane to change the subject with. “You know I’m actually pretty hungry,” he says finally. “Have you eaten?”

Hannibal promptly repeats the regretful face. “Yes, unfortunately – although I’m very happy to make you something.”

“Just a snack’ll do,” says Will. “I really feel like a sandwich.” He pauses for a few seconds, beset by memories of that ridiculous sandwich analogy from earlier and trying hard not to cringe over it. “I don’t suppose you have any pastrami?”

“I could easily get some. The delicatessen stays open late.”

“You don’t have to do that,” says Will, promptly feeling guilty. “That’s way too much trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all: I can drive there and back in ten minutes.” Hannibal smiles then leans down to trail his forefinger along the edge of Will’s jaw. “You appear to be craving protein and a short drive to acquire some is the least I can do.”

“I am not *craving* anything,” says Will with a small shudder, unpleasantly aware of the associations with heat that this term implies. Hannibal simply smirks as if he knows better and Will decides that it’s too much effort to argue about it so just gives up then waves Hannibal off without bothering to get up from the sofa. But even before the front door’s fully closed it’s obvious how bleak the house is going to feel in his absence, and Will lies there for a few more minutes feeling sorry for himself (*cravings*…for God’s sake) before realising that a thin silk robe is much too flimsy for a winter evening with no alpha to keep you warm so hauls himself back upstairs to get dressed again. As he’s tugging on his jeans he notices his briefcase lying abandoned in the corner and the sight of it immediately reminds him of the journal stashed inside – quickly followed by his earlier resolution to show it to Hannibal. Will now falters for a few seconds, nervously chewing his thumbnail. *Should* he? It had seemed like a good idea at the time, yet the reality of actually going through with the
scheme seems rather gauche and awkward. Although if they’re going to be bonded surely it’s the least he can do? Then he experiences a brief twinge of shame as he remembers his earlier inability to say ‘I love you’ so after a few more false starts picks up the briefcase and stows it under his arm before returning downstairs again.

True to his word Hannibal is back within 20 minutes – and where it’s apparent that merely buying pastrami was far too humble an order, seeing how he’s also returned with a selection of pancetta and prosciutto, an assortment of cheeses, a loaf of rye bread still warm from the oven, and an enticing collection of pickles and salad. “Oh wow, this looks great,” says Will, burrowing into the packages with rare enthusiasm while Hannibal stands to the side and watches him with the same fond expression as before. Laying the table feels like too much effort now, so in the end they eat it cross-legged on the floor like bandits crouched around a camp fire. Hannibal then adds a few more logs to the hearth and turns off the lights so the room is lit by a snugly ambient glow before they retreat to the sofa again, where Will lies in silence in Hannibal’s arms: allowing his hair and face to be stroked and emitting the occasional little rumbling purr-like noise while Hannibal kisses his eyelids and murmurs snatches of words in a foreign language.

“I’ve got something I want to show you,” says Will finally. In fact the journal’s been on his mind ever since Hannibal got home and it’s increasingly hard not to roll his eyes at his cowardice in failing to hand it over. He’d even made a mental deal with himself that once the logs crackled for the fifth time then that would be the signal to move – but the sixth, seventh and eighth consecutive crackling sound have all come and gone without anything happening and it’s actually getting a bit ridiculous. “Can you stay where you are?”

Hannibal presses his lips against Will’s forehead to indicate that he can, and Will struggles free then gets to his feet and rummages round in his briefcase to retrieve the journal. As a final attempt to stall he deliberately takes more time over this then is really necessary; and then even after he’s found it stands still for a few more seconds as he turns it over in his hands, thoughtful and pensive as if it’s a set of Rosary Beads. “So, yeah. This is my journal,” he says at last. “I’ve been keeping it for a while now. In fact you were the one who first suggested it. You probably don’t remember…?”

As Will’s speaking he continues to stare at the cover and therefore completely misses how stiff and tense Hannibal has suddenly become. In fact it’s an extremely unusual posture for him; although this is hardly surprising, seeing how it’s the result of an extremely unusual sensation: namely an acute pang of guilt. Will looks so vulnerable right now – bathed in the firelight like a young martyr as he clutches his innermost thoughts in his hands – and Hannibal is more aware than anyone of what a huge display of trust and courage was required for him to offer access to something as intensely personal as the diary is. Admittedly Hannibal also has no regrets about reading it, yet as he stares at Will’s face even he finds it impossible to remain unmoved at the extent of his own betrayal. Then in the interim Will happens to glance up, still wearing that expression of hopeful trust, and it means that for the first time he’s looking directly in Hannibal’s direction. Admittedly the change in posture and appearance probably wouldn’t be detectable to anyone else: yet a perception as acute as Will’s is can’t help but notice it, and for a few seconds he falters then goes silent before a look of absolute horror passes over his face.

And it’s then, in that exact moment, when Hannibal finally knows that the game is up.

There’s now a long pause which is genuinely agonising in its length and momentum before Will finally clears his throat and says in a voice stretched thin and taut: “You…you’ve already read it haven’t you?”

Hannibal slowly lets out his breath and then tilts his head up until he’s able to look Will straight in the eye. “Yes,” he says.
“You read my journal,” hisses Will. Reflectively he takes a step backwards, reeling as if he’s been physically punched, and even in the firelight Hannibal can see how a combination of anger and shock have bleached his face completely white. “You utter bastard. How could you do that? How could you”

“Because the opportunity presented itself,” replies Hannibal in an eerily calm voice. “And because I wanted to know you better.”

Will’s temples have started throbbing fiercely and he now reaches up to remove his glasses only to realise he’s already taken them off. “When?” he asks, even though the when hardly matters compared to the fact it happened at all. “When did you read it?”

“The night I brought you home from the crime scene,” says Hannibal. For a few seconds there’s nothing to break the silence except the hissing and crackling from the fireplace before he leans slightly towards Will, his angular face eerily illuminated by the writhing flames. His voice is still completely steady: can he really be as calm as he appears? “It was open on the desk so I read it while you were sleeping.”

By now Will has started to move like a wary animal, poised and ready to run with every nerve visibly straining. Then he desperately shakes his head, fuelled by an irrational hope that if he can somehow just disbelieve it hard enough it’ll turn out to be untrue and Hannibal will smile and sigh at the misunderstanding to show Will’s faith in him has been rewarded. Of course I didn’t go behind your back in such a terrible way, Hannibal will add, holding out his arms so Will can go into them. How could you believe I’d ever do that do you?

“I trusted you,” says Will finally, and his voice sounds completely numb as if all the life and emotion has bled out of it. “I thought I was safe with you. You’re the first person I’ve trusted since I was 15.”

Hannibal’s face flickers slightly at this, but Will ignores it and frantically runs his hands through his hair as he attempts to reconstruct the night in question. And oh fuck, with hindsight it seems so incredibly obvious: the noticeable way Hannibal’s manner had changed once Will had woken up, as if he’d been revelling in some secret source of satisfaction. This, in turn, promptly triggers a second memory and Will now makes a low groaning sound as he forces his attention to another glaring anomaly from the same evening: namely their conversation about the heat suppressants. The dramatic disappearance of the side-effects has been a mystery that’s nagged at him for months, yet while it never seemed particularly plausible that the drug dealer had given him the wrong pills it had still been a more comforting explanation than his initial suspicion that Hannibal was responsible. But now the scale of the betrayal over the journal means all bets are off and forces Will to look right back at Hannibal and demand in a voice that’s even more strained than before: “Tell me the truth.” There’s another slight pause; a horrible, sickly interlude in which his heart is pounding in his ears. “Were you the one who switched my tablets?”

Even as he’s speaking, he’s praying that he’s wrong and that Hannibal will look deeply offended to be accused of such a thing. Say no, thinks Will desperately, say it wasn’t you. So it therefore hits him all over again with the force of a physical blow when Hannibal swivels the dark eyes in his direction and calmly replies: “Yes.”

“Oh God,” says Will quietly. “I can’t…” For a few seconds he goes completely silent then draws in a steadying lungful of air, frantically fighting to stay in control even as all semblances of control are starting to slip away. “I suppose I should congratulate you,” he adds bitterly, deliberately taking refuge in anger as a way to ward off the torrent of grief that’s only just below the surface. “Those drugs are still experimental. Even Dr Reynolds didn’t think she could prescribe them.” Briefly he screws his eyes closed as he remembers her describing the complications: ‘You’d need an
extraordinarily skilled doctor to be able to gauge the dose. I’d struggle to calculate it myself, I don’t mind admitting it. You’d need a very precise grasp of the chemistry to get it right.’

“You could have killed yourself on those tablets if I hadn’t intervened,” says Hannibal crisply. “Possibly you half intended to – back then you were certainly self-destructive enough for it. I understand your anger, but I was acting in your own interests.”

“Don’t,” snaps Will. “Don’t you dare.” He draws in another breath then lets it all out again in a long, angry exhale. “Jesus, how can you even attempt to defend what you did? You wanted to force me to go into heat.”

“I wanted to protect you from yourself,” replies Hannibal softly. “And then, after that – to elevate you.”

There’s a curious emphasis on the word *elevate* that immediately catches Will’s attention, and despite the swirling storm of distress that’s dragging him under it’s impossible not to try to decipher the reason for it. In fact to decipher the reason for *all* of this, because he knows that someone as rigidly controlled as Hannibal would never confess so readily unless it was part of a larger plan. *He wants me to understand*, thinks Will wildly. *He wants me to know why.*

Hannibal now raises an eyebrow to encourage him and Will drags his hand across his face again as he constructs exactly what it was about those *particular* tablets. “It was something else wasn’t it?” says Will eventually. “The new pills – the ones you switched. It was…” He pauses then gives a violent flinch as the pieces visibly fall into place in his mind. “It was their side-effects.” Once again it’s impossible not to remember the grave expression on Dr Reynolds’ face as she’d outlined them to him: ‘They can affect the central nervous system so it’s mostly psychological. Aggression, Loss of inhibition. Emotional reactivity…’ It all seems so terribly clear, as if the side-effects of the new suppressants were a customised list of ingredients to season Hannibal’s long-standing ambitions for Will’s Becoming. The panicky shadows in his mind are really starting to scream now and he blinks a few times before summoning an anguished level of effort to maintain his composure. “You wanted me to experience those side-effects didn’t you?” he says now. “Didn’t you?”

Hannibal tilts his head very slightly to the side; an eerily predatory gesture that immediately makes Will wince. “Clever boy,” he replies softly. “We’re beginning to get to the heart of the issue.”

For a few seconds he simply stares at Will then takes a step forward as if he’s trying to touch him. Will automatically twists out of reach and Hannibal’s face flickers again, although just like before it’s impossible to interpret the reason for it. Sadness, irritation, amusement…it could be anything. Then the blank stare returns as Hannibal takes a long breath of his own. “I don’t regret telling you this,” he says finally, “because I had valid reasons for everything I did. My only regret is the impact it’s had: I imagined you would be angry, but not that you would be so distressed. Only now it has happened and I intend to turn the conversation to some purpose.” He pauses again then takes another slow step in Will’s direction: lean, predatory, and moving closer and closer all the time. “In fact I’m glad it’s happened, mano meilė. It’s time we properly understood one another. I wanted to address it before your heat but a suitable moment never presented itself – at least, not until now. So ask me Will. Ask me what else I’ve been doing; what I’ve been responsible for. Because you do know don’t you? I think you’ve known for a very long time. You just don’t want to admit it to yourself.”

The atmosphere in the room has undoubtedly changed now. It’s growing thick and heavy – curdling with menace – and the tone of the entire conversation has begun to stir something in Will: something dark and fathomless, carefully buried within his subconscious which he doesn’t want to acknowledge and the mere hint of which is making his heart pound faster. He can feel it now, throbbing in his ribcage like a piston that’s worked its way free and is spiralling out of control.
Something buried, yet buried alive…writhing and screaming in a shallow grave. But even though the moment’s come he still can’t force himself to examine that darkness directly, and in a final act of desperation takes refuge in all the little anomalies of his own life instead: all those loose fragments and missing puzzle pieces that have been left unexplained for so long. His hands are shaking so he forces them into his pockets in an attempt to hide it and says: “Did you send Andrew after me?” He’s secretly proud of how steady his voice sounds, although even as he’s asking he knows that Hannibal wouldn’t have done this – that it’s not his design – and that the only reason to ask it at all is a process of exposure: to work up to facing the real fear by starting with something more trivial.

For the first time a hint of something genuinely close to anger flits across Hannibal’s face. “No.”

No…not that it ever seemed very likely. The next question is also relatively easy and Will forces himself to look at Hannibal directly and demand: “The anonymous tip to the TattleCrime about the Sculptor contacting me. For so long I thought it was Skinner, but it was you wasn’t it?” This time he doesn’t even need to wait for a reply, and before Hannibal’s even finished nodding he spits out: “Why?”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal with chilling simplicity. “And in the fullness of time we saw it was the means of sending Matthew Brown your way. You already know my thoughts on that – and how your revelations regarding him were of very great service to you.” Will flinches again, briefly overwhelmed by the memory of the night in the parking lot, and Hannibal takes another step forward then murmurs, almost tenderly: “What else Will?”

This time Will just shakes his head, suddenly crushed by the brutal inescapability of his desire not to know. No/know: a battle between the necessity of understanding and the urgent desire to remain ignorant and unaware. Yet it’s impossible to deny what his own impressions are telling him – have been telling him for a very long time – even as his mind thrashes in contortions of increasingly agonised desolation to convince himself that they’re wrong. He knows it’s true and yet can’t bear the enormity of believing it. Because this is it now; the final act of a drama in which he’s unwittingly been playing for months. The game’s afoot. Take your seats. Curtain down. Fade to black.

“No,” replies Hannibal. His tone is still hypnotically soft and is followed by a sighing sound so low and incendiary it might have come from the smouldering remains of the fire. “There’s your measure of truth, beloved. Never limit yourself to the words.”

Will takes another deep breathe, poised now on the edge of the precipice and ready for inevitable plunge into the depths as Hannibal’s eerie warning from several weeks ago veers wildly through his mind: ‘He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not himself become a monster. And when you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you.’

“And his chauffeur…” begins Will then abruptly grinds to a halt.

“Yes,” replies Hannibal caressingly. “Ask me.”

“Did…” Will pauses then takes another anguished breath. Even now he can’t bring himself to say the word kill; as if censoring the description can somehow make it better, like words-as-water to wash the blood away. “Were you responsible for that?”

Hannibal gives another sigh, so long and low that it’s almost a hiss. “Yes,” he says.

“And his Private Investigator?”

This time Hannibal simply smiles very faintly instead of replying before he draws himself up to his full height and looks Will directly in the eye. “You’ve seen it all haven’t you?” he says in the same
soft voice. “You’ve seen it for some time; you just didn’t want to acknowledge it.” In the resulting silence the implication, undeclared yet obvious, wavers in the air like smoke – because of what it would have told you about yourself – and Will stiffens slightly before taking another step backwards. “And do you know why you were able to see it?” adds Hannibal in a tone shot through with tender menace. “Because I let you: I let you see me. I gave you a rare gift Will – are you really going to tell me you don’t want it? So go on. Ask me again.”

There’s a sudden cracking noise and as Will glances down he realises he’s clutched his glasses so hard the lens have shattered. A thin trickle of blood runs between his fingers and he stares at it numbly; stares at the scarlet-splashed shards and slivers of glass and the way they catch the firelight. Just like that teacup he threw at the wall, or the ones which Hannibal drops deliberately: none of them will gather together again. But what does it matter anyway when there are far worse things to break? A promise. A pledge. A heart. The previous panicky horror has faded away now, almost as if it’s too much for his mind and body to bear, and has been replaced by something calmer and heavier that’s laying across his ribcage like a lethal caress and yet in spite of everything is still seasoned with an insane determination to hope. Hope that he’s wrong. Hope that none of this is what it appears to be. Because he wants to hope – he wants it so badly – even though he feels like he’s tempting fate in doing so. Even though hope is avoidant and escapist and complacent. Even though it lies to you.

Stood there now, shipwrecked and stranded, Will finds himself remembering the protective barricade he constructs in his mind when interpreting killers like the Sculptor. The way he defends himself from merging too closely: a slicing, swaying choreograph of perception with himself on one side of the pendulum and the perpetrator on the other. Will’s sense of self and the Other’s sense of self: object and subject, distinct and separate. Only this time it’s not like that because it’s as if he and Hannibal have now merged so far he no longer has any clear sense of where one of them starts and the other ends, as if someone has cut the pendulum string. Blurred and blended together... just as Hannibal had always said about Will and the Chesapeake Ripper: ‘You don’t see the world the same way he does, yet you can assume his point of view.’

No, thinks Will with a final stab of desperation. No, you’re wrong. It’s not true.

But even though it’s not true – and even though he’s wrong – he continues standing where he is as his breath disfigures itself into quick jerky gasps for no other reason than because it feels impossible to walk away. Hannibal is still staring at him without moving, and as Will stares back he understands in that moment that he’s destined to look back on tonight as a watershed moment: a line in the sand between two lives, in which the obliviously innocent version of himself was left behind forever. It was due to die very soon, wasn’t it – that innocent version of Will – and yet at the time he had no idea at all. He’s been like the Sultan from The Arabian Nights whose enemies set up a large slab of rock to fall in his throne room: months of constant plotting and preparation, just so when the time was right they could cut the rope suspending it and the Sultan’s world would literally come crashing down. And the whole time the Sultan had no idea either, just like Will didn’t – he just lived his life as normal, completely unaware that everything needed to destroy him had already happened. It was all set up in place; and no matter what he did, that final blow was destined to come out of nowhere and trigger disaster. The Sultan, just like Will, was at the mercy of fate; even though the fates are capricious and have very little mercy in them. And when he’s thinking this, Will immediately thinks of Hannibal – because it’s so very much the type of thing he would say. In fact maybe he did say it? Maybe he said it to that old, dead version of Will who was so innocent and oblivious and never knew that he was destined to lay a metaphorical wreath to commemorate the loss of himself. Here lies Will Graham. In memoriam; momento mori.

“Ask me,” repeats Hannibal. “Ask me.”

And it’s then that Will finally hears a voice replying; a voice which he knows is his own and seems
as if it’s coming from very far away. It’s a voice that sounds completely raw, like something flayed; exposed in the shock of recognition as all the hope and humanity are stripped away. “I don’t need to ask you Hannibal,” the voice is saying. “I already know.” And then there’s a long hideous pause as the wreath is laid and the line is crossed as with a monumental effort Will finally forces himself to raise his head so the voice can say the unsayable: “I know you’re the Chesapeake Ripper.”
Chapter 42

For a long time now there’s silence.

Will’s not sure exactly how long it lasts. Only that there’s nothing to hear anymore beyond the low crackle of the fireplace and a series of horrified breaths that he knows must be coming from him despite being unaware of making them. Because how can he be? How can he still be breathing after this…how can his heart be beating? All those vessels, cells and fine blue veins; how can they keep on working the entire time he’s standing here, as if they think this is survivable and that life can just continue in the same way as it did before? While he’s stood here like this, with nothing left to protect himself beyond empty words and nothing left to offer except a screaming despairing need not to know. Nothing except a pounding heart and a mind that’s broken and bleeding as everything seems to shrink and expand simultaneously. It’s like being forced into a trance and he’s numbly aware of his body being reduced to purely mindless actions (one breath in, one breath out) because the mechanics of it feel like a last grasp at constancy as the world threatens to cave in. In fact by now his fear and doubt are living things – like wordless spectators in the room – and yet still the only soundtrack to it all is silence. The most pivotal moment of his life and it’s as hushed and reverent as a graveyard, with nothing to disturb the endless stretching stillness except Will’s misguided breath and the murmur of flames from the fireplace.

But it’s only as he’s stood there, with the breath and the fire and the sound of silence, that Will finally understands how it’s not the unexpected things in life that destroy you – it’s the ones that you knew were coming but for which you blindly refused to prepare. The force of the realisation is so swollen and heavy it feels like his neck might snap from the weight of it and it reminds him of how he sat by the cliff on the last night he was happy and the way the swirling horror in the present mimics the movement of the ocean in the past: wild engulfing waves which are threatening to drown him any second in a storm of grief and fear. Because oh God, he is: he’s afraid. He knows this – knows it irrevocably – just as he knows that while he was scared by Matthew Brown, and frightened by the Sculptor, he’s never in his whole life felt real terror until now.

*There’s nothing to fear but fear itself…* people say that all the time don’t they? Will’s heard them; his own father used to say it, remonstrating with him over and over again about his night terrors, his bad dreams, his dread of the darkness and what lay hidden in it. ‘*It’s just a feeling son,*’ he’d say, delivering a series of awkward pats to the shoulder as Will lay trembling on the bed, soaked with perspiration and mute with horror. ‘*Feelings can’t hurt you. There’s nothing to fear but fear itself.*’ But in reality that wasn’t true. It was a lie, just like all the other lies in a false deceitful world…because there are so many things worse than fear. Then for a few tortured seconds he imagines he can see the Dark Reflection watching him with its glittering eyes, still with black blood on its face and dripping gore-stained hands as it waits to welcome Will to join it in their mutual state of malevolent grace. *You knew,* the Reflection is saying. *You always knew. Just like you always knew about me.* How coldly curious and unafraid it is! Pale, patient and attentive as it prowls undaunted in the shadows; calmly accepting of everything that’s happened and with no dread or distress at all. That dark part of Will is filled with a quiet satisfaction – a softly fatalistic compliance – and this simple fact, and what it means and why it matters, is something that’s far, far worse than any level of fear. It’s the Chesapeake Ripper and Will’s own inner darkness, and together they represent the scalding force of realisation, relentless and insistent as a blade between bones. It’s then that Will can feel a sense of moisture on his eyelashes, although at that point it doesn’t occur to him to call them tears.

Even Hannibal’s eternal supply of words seems to have expired because he’s currently as silent as Will is. He’s just stood there: impossibly tall and imposing in the shadows, like his mere presence is a
reproach to Will for managing to see all the predators around him yet never noticing the one that was nearest and deadliest until it was far too late. In fact the angular features, once so beloved, seem vaguely infernal in the firelight’s flickering glow with the shadows casting new hollows and shades that appear fiendish and unnatural; more like one of the Sculptor’s masks than a human face. But Will just still stares at him, stupefied and horrified as time both limps and flashes by, and it’s only from gazing fixedly at his mouth and the way it’s moving that helps him understand that Hannibal has finally broken the silence and is starting to speak.

What he’s saying is Will’s name and he’s doing it in an unusually gentle way (soft syllables, tender on the outbreath) as if he can see that Will is slowly suffocating and has responded to the alpha instinct to offer comfort and protection. Will supposes it’s meant as reassuring, but in that moment it feels more like a trap and makes his breath hitch even louder as his head spins and his heart stutters before he gasps out a small whimpering noise without even realising what he’s done. At the sound of it Hannibal’s expression flickers indecipherably and he prowls forward with a slowly deliberate tread and holds out a hand. “Will,” he repeats. “Come here.”

The tenderness of his tone causes Will’s shoulders to quiver and his face threaten to crumple in a distinctly ominous way and it requires every single shred of self-possession to stay in control and simply shake his head before moving further back. He’s still not all that far away, only a few feet, and yet it’s as if a void has opened up between them: a gaping abyss with Hannibal on one side and Will on the other and a centre steeped in a horror so profound he doesn’t even have the words to articulate it to himself. And Hannibal is still there – still just standing there – offering a hand as if to pull Will over to his side of the abyss and the sight of it makes him want to scream because to be touched in anyway, even with kindness (especially with kindness) would be unbearable and the final blow that breaks him. His briefcase is still lying by his feet and he now instinctively dives into it, letting out an audible sigh of relief as his fingers fasten round the reassuring bulge of the gun.

“Don’t,” says sharply. “Don’t move. I swear to God Hannibal, if you come anywhere near me I’ll shoot you.” He pauses then gives a laugh that’s deeply eerie in how bitter and humourless it is. “Perhaps I should do it anyway? First you and then myself.”

Hannibal doesn’t even flinch but just continues staring in the same impassive way, his eyes more fathomless and intense than Will’s ever seen them. How calmly lethal he seems; tranquil and composed in the line of fire, waiting to see what Will’s going to do with the weapon. Almost, thinks Will wildly, as if he’d actually allow it; as if he’d be content to sacrifice his own life simply for the satisfaction of turning Will into the cold-blooded killer he’d obviously always aspired him to be.

“Perhaps you should,” says Hannibal at last, the insight so sharp and unnerving it’s as if he’s read Will’s thoughts. “Freeing yourself from me or freeing yourself from you…” There’s another pause and the dark eyes narrow slightly. “It’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

But Will doesn’t completely trust himself to answer anymore so just shakes his head instead; numb and sickened as his mind contorts into one flare of anguish after another. Then he shakes it even harder so there can be no mistake, despite the fact he’s no longer sure what he’s supposed to be disagreeing with. His grip on the gun is so tight now it’s starting to hurt his hand and Hannibal runs his gaze across it then slowly returns to Will’s face again. “You’re thinking the same as when you tried to kill Matthew Brown,” he adds softly. “You want to destroy the thing in me which strikes an answering echo in yourself.”

Will nearly groans out loud but forces himself to stifle it and with a miracle of effort keeps his hand completely steady before there’s another sound to add to those of the fire and the breath: the loud, ominous crack of the safety catch being snapped off the gun.
“Look at you,” continues Hannibal, paying it absolutely no attention. “Look at the expression on your face. Do you know what it is Will? It’s disgust.” Will flinches visibly but doesn’t reply. “I’m right, aren’t I?” adds Hannibal in the same soft voice. “Your darkest thoughts and imaginings repel you. So tell me Will, I’m curious to know…how does it feel to hate yourself so much?”

From somewhere amid the silence Will hears someone snarling “Of course you wouldn’t understand that would you?” in a voice that’s kinetic with shock and anger; and it takes a few seconds to realise that it’s actually him who’s saying it, and that the words have made Hannibal’s face flicker again in that indecipherable way. “Of course you’d have to have it explained,” adds Will viciously. “A normal person would get it, but you…”

For a few seconds he trails off, crushed all over again by the enormity of it all as he remembers their conversation at the cliff side house when Hannibal described his thoughts about the Sculptor: ‘I shouldn’t be surprised if it’s someone who’s successfully convinced the world of their inherent righteousness. That he – or she – has crafted a mask of immaculate proportions. And yet you know I almost pity such a creature. No wonder they pursue you: the one person capable of unmasking them. Having perfected one’s disguise, it’s only natural to seek out someone who is not deceived by it.’ And then that quote, which at the time had merely seemed sinister yet in retrospect takes on a terrible, terrible irony: ‘And thus I clothe my naked villainy, With odd old ends stolen out of holy writ, And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.’ Because of course he wasn’t referring to the Sculptor at all was he? He was describing himself the whole time.

Glancing up Will now shakes his head again, struggling not to let the desperation show on his face as a series of brutal realisations spiral through his mind like spikes. You want to bond with the Chesapeake Ripper. Your perfect mate is the Chesapeake Ripper. You’ve fallen in love with a monster. “I don’t know even know anymore,” he says faintly. It’s as if he’s grown half-crazed with grief and horror as the internal crescendo of screams reach a pitch that threatens to push him beyond his remaining shreds of reason. “I don’t know if you’re really a person or just playing the part of one.”

“On the basis of a single revelation?” asks Hannibal in a voice pitched low and chillingly intense. “It’s strange Will – you seem so much more dismayed by sincerity than you ever were by deceit. But if you’re going to condemn the corruption in me then you at least have to examine your own. We’re quite a singular combination aren’t we? Me the doctor with death as a vocation…” There’s another pause as this time Hannibal’s eyes catch the firelight like tiny flames within his skull. “…You the investigator with a secret flair for murder.”

“This is nothing to do with me!” protests Will in something like a snarl. “Nothing.” His resentment is genuine, yet he knows his tone is growing weary with the constant force of revelation: one crashing over him after another, like waves hurling against the cliff side or one of Hannibal’s teacups shattering against the floor.

“As Hannibal’s speaking he rolls his shoulders in an elegant approximation of a shrug, and the gesture is so similar to what Will’s seen him do countless times in much happier circumstances that he has to
bite down on his lip to suppress the renewed surge of grief. The person who’d stroke Will’s face and ruffle his hair, who’d pull him close and offer endless patient advice is all contained in that brief movement; and yet the reality is that that person never really existed at all. Because how could they have done? There’s surely nothing of them left now, no lingering trace, no afterimage…even the memories of them aren’t genuine. Because that was back in the days of counterfeit conflict and the ecstasy of intimacy and exchanging recognition; it was all a game, back then. Back then it wasn’t real. The conflict, the intimacy, the recognition. None of it was ever real.

Hannibal narrows his eyes again, obviously trying to intuit the source of this fresh silence, and Will stares back and tries to understand how he could ever have been so stupid to think that Hannibal didn’t experience real emotion. It was another fatal blind spot among so many others, because right now Hannibal seems iridescent with them: like something inflammable about to ignite, as if his skin would be white-hot to the touch from burning up with a ferociously flaring force of feeling. It’s there in the intensity of his expression and the tension of the muscles around his jaw and shoulders, but more than anything else it’s in his eyes. Even in his more casual moments they’re forceful, but right now they look as if they’re glittering: as if there’s an inferno raging behind them that’s been stoked by dark longing and vengeful passions, like a fiery avenging angel from some Renaissance painting with sword in hand and baleful blazing wings. He’s clearly resentful of the way Will’s rejecting him, yet how unbelievably controlled he is with it. His fury is almost operatic in its gracefulness – less like anger and more like arias – and the result is so compelling it’s impossible not to be overwhelmed by it. Yet despite the anger it’s also obvious that Hannibal is pleased to be fully understood, and once again Will remembers his words from the night in the cliff side house: ‘The finest trick the devil ever played was to persuade the world he didn’t exist.’ Finally, at least in Will’s eyes, he now exists as his camouflaged identity is stripped away and allows him to be seen as he really is. The idea that Hannibal wanted him to finally know, and to accept it, ought to take some edge of the fear; but the implication of what this means for Will himself is too devastating to process and he urgently shakes his head in an effort to banish it.

“Why did you keep coming back to me?” asks Hannibal, and once again it’s as if he’s reading Will’s thoughts. “No one made you, but still you kept returning – over and over again. What made you do it? What did you see that you yearned to get closer to?”

Will swallows audibly. It’s actually fairly unbearable to have his own behaviour used against him like this – as if his past self has actively betrayed him by colluding with Hannibal – yet no matter how much he might want to, it’s impossible to deny how much more content and confident he grew the more intimate they became. Then he takes another deep breath as his eyes flicker wildly from left to right, absorbed and intense as he imagines he can see scenes of the two of them from the past few months: grainy and indistinct like the afterimage of a photograph as they shift around the room, moving, touching, talking in the way they were before the world tipped and everything fell to pieces. He can see how Hannibal is able to interpret Will’s moods and thoughts without having to be told about them and anticipate what he needs before he even has to ask for it. He can see the way Hannibal’s eyes linger over him, how the sharp face softens slightly when Will begins to speak and how Hannibal can not only keep up with Will but often exceed him, inspiring Will to strive towards greater heights of imagination and insight. He can see boldly, recklessly and intellectual daring and he can see moral ambiguity and an approach to ethics which is fluid and contradictory…but surely no more so than many free-thinkers who rebel against the stifling social constraints? No more than Will himself. Two halves of a whole, then; that’s what he can see. Complimentary symbols in the same equation. One a volatile clutter of consequence and principles, the other with the coldly curious topography of a lunar landscape. One with too little empathy and one with far too much and both unique yet both so similar, like the same discordant strain of music pitched on different cryptic instruments. This then, surely, is the reality. It’s what he can see. How could he possibly have been blind to so much else?
“Jack Crawford once said something very telling about you,” continues Hannibal, and this time the voltage in his voice makes it sound as if it's smouldering. “He said ‘Will Graham is genuine. He is always going to come back to being Will Graham.’ He had no idea how right he was, did he? Because right now you’re turning into the next version of yourself; you’re in the process of Becoming, even if you don’t quite lose who you were before. Remember how despairing you were when I first met you?” Briefly he waves his hand as if he’s encouraging Will to imagine it. “Look at you now. You’ve recovered what was left of your sanity and resolution and you’re nearer than anyone else to finding the Sculptor – all because you embraced your true nature and accepted that your vulnerability makes you strong.”

“No,” says Will numbly. “You’re wrong…It wasn’t like that.”

“You’re discovering that you’re only truly whole because of the way you’re broken,” adds Hannibal. “It’s like I’ve been telling you for months: your problem isn’t that you’re becoming a predator, it’s that you’re a predator who can’t admit his predatory instinct. I knew what you could and should grow into – it was only when you refused to accept it that I was forced to act on your behalf.” For a few seconds Hannibal falls silent, slowly stroking his eyes across Will’s face as if trying to commit his features to memory. “It was always a dual hunt, wasn’t it?” he adds softly. “The search for the Sculptor and the search for yourself. I was merely more invested in one than the other.”

Will gives a grimace of disbelief that’s so pronounced he’s practically bearing his teeth. “Invested?” he repeats, and even in the midst of the anguish he’s still quietly satisfied with how strong his voice manages to sound. “How can you say that? How can you? Look at everything you’ve done. You tried to destroy me.”

This time Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately, instead just staring back in lethally coiled silence. “To be a friend to you.”

“Friend! Jesus, are you mad? You’ve ruined my life.”

“You were forced to inhabit the minds of so many monsters,” says Hannibal, never once taking his eyes from Will’s face. “It came close to breaking you. I was merely there to help assemble the pieces.”

Will lets out his breath in a sigh so low it’s almost a hiss. “Yes, you like breaking things don’t you?” he says bitterly. “You like remaking them in your own image.” Once again he remembers the numerous confessions in the Dear You entries about his urge to kill, and at the thought of them it’s almost impossible not to flinch. “No wonder you were so happy when you saw the journal,” he adds. “Everything must have seemed laid out for you.”

“You think I didn’t already know?” snaps Hannibal and the flash of anger, despite its icily controlled veneer, is still intimidating enough to make Will dart his tongue over his lips and tighten his grip on the gun. “Of course I did. I hardly needed your words to tell me – you’d been silently communicating it from the first day I met you. You’re communicating it right now. In fact only once Will; only once did you get close to speaking it out loud, and even then you hardly seemed aware of it.” Hannibal pauses once more then looks Will straight in the eye before quoting in a tone that’s vaguely hypnotic: “‘Wind them up and watch them go. You wanted to see what somebody like me would do.’ That was your moment of self-acceptance wasn’t it? It was your realisation of exactly who you are and what you’re capable of.”

“No,” snarls Will, his brittle veneer of self-control finally starting to fray. “You’re wrong; that’s not how it was.” For a few seconds he can feel himself panicking again, aware of how it’s getting increasingly difficult to dredge his mind back to the present and formulate some kind of rational defence of who and what he suspects he is really is. “I would never have tried to kill Matthew
Brown if you hadn’t lied to me,” he finally manages to say. “And I only killed Andrew because I had to.”

“Oh yes,” replies Hannibal. “I know you were forced.” He pauses delicately then snaps his head upright and looks Will directly in the eye. “But no one forced you to enjoy it, did they?” Will goes completely rigid, visibly paling with the shock at the undeniable force of this – like a vicious slap to the face – and Hannibal takes advantage of his inattention to take another calm step forward. “For it to make you feel so ‘alive,’ if you recall,” he adds, almost tenderly. “You once told me I couldn’t reduce you to a set of influences; that you weren’t a product of anything. But that wasn’t entirely true, was it?”

The knowledge of this is so painful that Will now has to clamp his teeth into his lower lip to stop himself screaming. Then he does it again, biting down so hard he can taste blood: a salty coppery tang of it blooming across his mouth and staining his teeth. In fact the emotional agony is so acute that it’s almost unbearable and there’s a part of him which simply wants to surrender so as not to prolong it anymore and accept the worst that can happen. Because, Christ, hasn’t the worst already happened; hasn’t it been happening his whole life? It’s as if he’s escaped from the doomed vessel of his own mind, so fatally flawed and so slowly sinking, to seize the oar offered by Hannibal and discover halfway through the voyage that the paddle was an anchor the entire time. Yet while it’s too late to go back it’s impossible to venture forwards because there’s nothing left except a dead weight: so alluring and promising so much, yet ultimately poised to pull him straight to the bottom.

“But it wasn’t supposed to be like that,” Will finally manages to say; and for the first time since the whole nightmare began his voice comes perilously close to breaking. “You weren’t supposed to be like that. I wanted you to accept me for who I am. For me. Not just because you wanted some twisted version of yourself.”

At the sound of the words Hannibal’s rigid expression finally softens and he takes another step closer before drawing to a halt again and holding out his hand. “Will,” he says quietly. “Come here.”

The softness of his tone is clearly intended to be comforting, but it actually has the opposite effect and makes Will stiffen even further; mind racing and heart pounding like a wary animal as Hannibal’s previous warning to never try and leave him runs through his mind. There’s no doubt, after all, that Hannibal possesses a strongly pronounced vindictive streak; and after the events of this evening, it no longer seems impossible that it could be turned straight against Will. What if the gentle veneer is a trap – a lure to draw him only to inflict some deadly injury? Without even thinking about it he raises the gun even higher and grimly brandishes it in Hannibal’s direction.

Hannibal’s eyes flick down to the barrel then flick back to Will’s face again. “Please Will,” he says, even more gently than before. “Come here to me. Just for a moment.”

As he’s speaking he holds out his hands to show he isn’t carrying any kind of weapon and Will’s face crumples slightly before finally lowering the gun and taking a few hesitant steps forward. Hannibal moves towards him at the same time, then when Will’s close enough to touch stands behind him and takes hold of his shoulders so he can gently steer him round until they’re both facing the window. It means their reflections are laid on top of each other, just like they were that night in the hospital, and once more Will finds himself staring at an image where it’s no longer possible to tell where one of them begins and the other ends.

“Do you want to know why I acted the way I did?” asks Hannibal quietly. “It was actually very simple. Selfish, perhaps – but simple. Because I didn’t want a version of myself Will; I wanted something which in the whole of my life I’ve never had before.” He pauses as his lips skim against the edge of Will’s cheekbone. “I wanted an equal. Why would I have chosen you otherwise?”
He doesn’t add anything else, but despite its smothering fog of fear Will’s mind is still working quickly enough to deduce the strong implication of this statement and it causes a chill that bites to his very core: because otherwise you wouldn’t have survived me this long. Rather than answer he tugs his head away instead until his reflection is freed from Hannibal’s then stares numbly at the palely haunted face – dry-eyed, defiant and desperate – that’s gazing back. In some ways it looks the same as it always has: still delicate-boned, still with the large eyes above the sensitive mouth, and yet he knows in that moment that the former youthful hope and confidence have gone forever. It reminds him of the photographs of soldiers returning from the Civil War: the blank numbness like a stretch of water thick with ice, the tortured shadows flickering behind their eyes. Such things that I have seen.

“You deserved the kind of transformation I could offer you,” Hannibal is now saying. “You deserved your freedom. I warned you that it would be painful the more you resisted it, but I was always prepared to wait for you. I told you so didn’t I? To wait for you as long as it took; how I knew you were worth waiting for.” With the same deft touch as previously he takes hold of Will’s face again then guides it back until their reflections are once more laid on top of one another. “You never really wanted to be loved as much as you wanted to be understood,” adds Hannibal softly.

“But no one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. With that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved’s potential comes true. Such huge potential Will; but a piece of artistry requires infinite time and patience, just like you with your fishing line waiting to lure your pray. Ho visto l’angelo nel marmo e scolpito fino a quando l’ho liberato – remember when I told you that the first time? I saw the angel in the marble and I carved until I set him free.” Without letting go of Will’s face Hannibal now coils his other arm across his chest then pulls him backwards until their bodies are pressed up against each other. “There’s so much scope for freedom Will as long as we’re together. Endless horizons and limitless views; just like The Bright Hair About The Bone, when the poet imagines the miracles he and his lover could accomplish through the force of their alliance…”

Hannibal’s voice has taken on the same caressing tone that Will remembers from much happier times, and the sound of it is such a contrast to how he’s feeling that it makes him want to scream all over again with a blend of shock and devastated anger. And he is angry; it’s almost a relief to realise it. In that moment he wants to lash out at Hannibal and make him hurt as badly as Will is hurting now. It could be done so simply too. Not requiring fists, feet or harsh words, but merely with forgiveness: because for someone as he now understands Hannibal to be, absolution would be the ultimate form of revenge. Briefly he tries to imagine it; the way he could turn round now and shout it out into the darkness: I forgive you Hannibal. It wouldn’t matter whether he meant it or not, the impact would be just the same: snatching back the pleasure and satisfaction of what Hannibal has done, because where’s the enjoyment in immorality and destruction if you’re just going to be forgiven at the end of it? Briefly he remembers Hannibal’s mocking adversarial stance towards God in some of their earlier conversations and how much sense it now makes as to why Hannibal would want to believe in a vengeful Almighty. Challenging and confronting God is the devil’s ultimate amusement after all; and the devil, likewise, would feel cheated by forgiveness.

“Do you know what I’m thinking?” says Will now. His voice is very quiet and as he’s speaking he forces himself to look Hannibal’s reflection in the eye. “I’m remembering what you told me that time by the cliff: That the finest trick the devil ever played was to persuade the world he didn’t exist.” Hannibal stares back, unblinking and motionless, and Will falters very briefly as he struggles with an urge to lean back against him. “That’s where you got your power from isn’t it?” he adds in an even lower voice. “Just by making sure you always seemed like the sanest person in the room.”

“Are you likening me to the devil Will?” replies Hannibal, equally quietly. “I suppose you have your reasons. But consider, after all, the devil’s original purpose.”

Will pauses for a few more moments, by now almost mesmerised by the way their faces are
overlapped. “I don’t care.”

“Yes you do,” replies Hannibal, and somehow his eerie calm manages to be far more unsettling than the previous anger. “His purpose was to enter paradise as the darkest angel in pursuit of tempting the purest man. The devil’s only concern is with our ability to show faithfulness to our true character Will; to our most authentic self. To enable the purest expressions of humanity: imagination, inspiration, creativity…and empathy. All the virtues, just like yours. You fight so hard against it don’t you? But all I ever wished for was to see you experience your true potential. To enable you to Become – in a way which you’d have never have done on your own.”

As he’s speaking he slowly turns Will round until they’re facing one another then tenderly cups his cheek with one hand. It’s like a classic lover’s pose from a paperback novel or film poster and it strikes Will as faintly surreal: gazing fixedly into each other’s eyes while trapped in the grimly tortured anguish of a romanticism they will surely never be able to have. But he continues standing there regardless, immobile and deadened with a pale face and haunted eyes, because he feels as if the incredible power of their connection – and what it’s revealed to him about himself – is wrapping its hands around the urge to escape and slowly choking it to death. It’s tender yet excruciating, maintaining eye contact the entire time as the last drops of life seep away. Because where would he run to without Hannibal? What would he do without the other half of himself? It’s like waking up from one nightmare only to find yourself pitched straight into another: one in which you can’t live with your realisation but can’t live without it either.

Hannibal now shifts his palm to begin rhythmically stroking Will’s hair while his other hand skims up and down his back. “A zero sum game,” he says and his tone is soft; regretful. “I made you a participant without your knowledge – yet how well you played regardless.” Leaning forward he lightly brushes his lips against Will’s forehead then moves back again so they can continue staring at each other’s faces and breathing one another’s air. “I always told you our imaginations were something we had in common. Don’t you remember? That’s how you found me after all, because we are so very much alike. Without our imaginations we’d be just like all those ordinary people. Yet fear is the price of the instrument. All I’ve ever tried to do is help you bear it.”

It’s obvious by now that some sort of reply is needed, yet for a long time Will remains silent as he struggles beneath the weight of everything he’s just heard. It’s such a nightmarish situation to stumble into: the discovery that every terrible abuse and betrayal of the last few months has been in service of moulding him into Hannibal’s perfect pitch-black fantasy. It’s as if he’s currently staring into the face of the true Sculptor – someone who’s literally carved Will into a living embodiment of their own destructive desires – and in that moment his horror is so intense that he forgets how he’d described Hannibal as his own Dark Reflection almost countless times in the journal. All he can focus on is how Hannibal’s intentions for him have been prowling through his brain, menacingly intent and predatory, since the first day they met without Will ever having the slightest idea of what was being done to him – or by who.

And yet how much more sense it makes that everyone, Will included, have always failed to truly see Hannibal. The fallen angel analogy wasn’t really as fanciful as it first sounded, because he’s so far removed from normal comprehension as to seem vaguely supernatural. He even has his own moral code; admittedly one that’s unlike anyone else’s, and yet he’s clearly never been the villain in his own mind. He’s the Byronic anti-hero: the hyperintelligent outcast who strolls around humanity and is in love with it, and fascinated by it, but never really part of it. And he’s sadistic yet virtuosic, rejecting all conventions, slaughtering adversaries on a whim and elevating death into art while still retaining an almost mystical level of magnetism and charisma which has surpassed all of Will’s reason and reservations. Someone who’s spent a huge amount of time building walls around himself…brick by brick, layer by layer, one after the other over the course of a lifetime with Will the person finally capable of climbing over them. Look before you leap, people often say. Yet Will
hadn’t looked and had leapt regardless, because he’d never really considered what he was going to
discover on the other side. Yet even if he can finally meet Hannibal on equal ground and accept him
for what he is, accepting what that makes himself requires a leap of faith that Will isn’t sure he’s
capable of. And it’s for this reason that he tugs himself free from Hannibal’s arms then stands a few
feet away; alone once more and still clutching the gun, while still wearing the same look of lethal
desperation and the same expression of haunted shock.

Outside the window the wind is howling again and the force of it is making the house groan and
creak like something ancient and pain-stricken clutching its crumbling bones. For a while no one
speaks and then Hannibal finally runs his eyes across Will’s face: “So here it is,” he says at last.
“Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment when the teacup shatters.”

“The teacup’s broken,” says Will in the same low voice. “It’s never going to gather itself back
together again.”

Hannibal continues to stare at him, eerily static and unblinking. “Not even in your mind?”

Will makes a groaning noise then drags his hand across his face, by now half-stupefied with
exhaustion and sickly overwhelmed despair. “What do you want from me Hannibal?” he asks
tonelessly. Remembering his thoughts from earlier he lets out a long breath from between his teeth.
“You want me to forgive you?”

“Forgetfulness can’t be directed,” replies Hannibal crisply. “It’s a state that happens to us. Betrayal
and forgiveness, Will; they’re best seen as something akin to falling in love. But who knows…?”
There’s another pause as once again the dark fathomless eyes flicker over Will’s face. “Perhaps if we
can control forgiveness we can put the teacup back together.”

But Will just screws his eyes tighter closed and refuses to answer, unable to commit to what it means
to agree yet likewise incapable of saying no. And it’s such a cruelly impossible choice, because no
matter which way he turns a part of himself is going to be lost. It’s like a form of dismemberment –
haemorrhaging all hope and happiness – and his entire body aches from the force of it. Because he
could turn round right now and walk away, yet no matter how fast he moved or how far he fled the
truth of what he’s been forced to confront about himself would cling to him the entire time. It would
be like being weighed down by sacks and strong boxes and wrought-iron chests, each one brimming
with misery and horror and constant second-guessing, and each one condemned to be carried for the
rest of his life. Yet if he stays it means he’s murdering the part of himself that rebels at the Dark
Reflection and resists its fascination with the grimly grinning vigour of death. Because you can’t ever
be the same once you deny your sense of what you wanted to be and who you thought you were…
and no amount of reasoning or rationalisation can make up for it because you just can’t ever be the
same. It means he’s been betraying a part of himself the entire time – resonating then colluding with
the part of Hannibal that Will was likewise unaware of – and it means that the story he’s been telling
his whole life about what it meant to be Will Graham was a lie. Then for a few delirious moments he
wonders whether this is how a snake feels when it sloughs its skin before his breath hitches with
anguish at the thought, because no; almost certainly not. They won’t grieve the loss of it, they don’t
cherish or commit to the version of themselves that existed in that moment – merely cast it away and
focus on the next incarnation. The snake knows it exists in a constant state of flux and conversion;
there’s never only one version of a snake. It’s always on the verge of becoming.

Will’s breath finally flutters into a stuttering gasp as he screws his eyes closed tight enough to hurt.
“Enough,” he says, and by now it feels as if he’s speaking more to himself than to Hannibal. “I can’t
be here anymore. Not tonight…I can’t stay here. I need to leave.”

“Where?” replies Hannibal in a voice that’s almost as low as Will’s is. “You don’t have anywhere to
“I’ll find a hotel.”

Hannibal draws in a breath of his own then gently lets it out again. “What about your heat?”

“I don’t know,” says Will, and even to his own ears he sounds so pale and exhausted. “I’ve no idea. I don’t know anything right now.”

Hannibal continues watching for a few more seconds as if he’s weighing up assorted options before slowly reaching into his pocket without once taking his eyes from Will’s face. Assuming some kind of retaliation is imminent Will promptly stiffens and flies for the gun, and it’s almost an anti-climax to see that Hannibal is retrieving nothing more threatening than a simple set of keys. “I want you to take them,” says Hannibal, holding them out on his palm like a peace offering. “They’re for the house at the cliff side. You’ll be safe there, and the place is yours for as long as you want it.”

This reminder of the last time he was really happy almost feels like a deliberate attempt to hurt him, but Will simply nods in numb silence before gesturing for Hannibal to throw them over. Then for a few seconds he simply stares at them as he turns them over and over in his fingers, shattered and overcome as he feels the fight finally seep out of him and the angry resentment bleed away while something more haunted and defeated takes its place. What’s left to fight for, after all? Nothing. There’s nothing left. And he’s tired now…so tired. So exhausted and hollowed-out, as if everything that matters has been scraped away and discarded in a raw reeking heap.

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” says Will eventually without looking up from the keys. “No one would believe me and it’s not like I can prove it.” He pauses once more and then finally catches Hannibal’s eye, feeling that they both know perfectly well that the real reason Will isn’t going to turn him in is because he can’t bring himself to do it. “I understand better than anyone how well you covered your tracks.”

“Then I’ll be here,” says Hannibal. “Right here Will.” He pauses himself, allowing the words to linger suggestively amid the sound of all the silence. “So you’ll always know where to find me.”

Both his words and tone are softly inviting, yet in that moment they somehow feel more to Will like a threat than a genuine attempt at reassurance. It’s as if Hannibal knows how much easier it would be for him if he did disappear, and that remaining accessible is just another way of staying in control by making it impossible for Will to forget about him…as if he’d rather risk being captured then let Will go free. The idea of this is overwhelming and Will takes a few more laboured breaths, fighting an urge to cry out with lonely confusion at how, having been faced with a threat, he’s filled with a painfully powerful need to find Hannibal and confide in him about it. ‘What’s the matter Will?’ Hannibal would say when he saw the expression on Will’s face; and Will would pace around and explain what was bothering him while Hannibal listened patiently without interrupting, a concentrated look on the angular face before delivering a thoughtful summary that would immediately make everything feel clearer and calmer. Because isn’t that what he’s always done? All the times Will’s felt frightened or angry or overwhelmed in the past few months and has gone to Hannibal for comfort and encouragement; all the times he’s laid his head on his knee or curled up against him. How can the source of protection have become the main source of danger; how is it even possible? How can the paddle have broken? A love, a lover…the love of his life.

But it’s impossible to articulate any of this and so Will just continues to stand there as the slow trail of tears, held back for so long, finally begin to slide down his face. It’s such a strange sensation: his features are completely rigid and he’s not actually crying, yet it’s as if all that grief can’t be held in any longer and has no choice but to break itself free. Hannibal gives a low sigh at the sight of it and when he moves forward again Will can’t bring himself to resist and just remains where he is, quietly
lost and enthralled as he allows himself to be circled into Hannibal’s arms. Then he stays there without speaking: motionless, senseless, overwhelmed, and no longer able to summon either the energy or resolve to try and pull away. It’s too much for one person after all: autonomy and empathy…surely it’s too much to bear?

Hannibal makes another soothing noise then gently pulls Will tighter as an invitation to rest against his chest. It’s as if he’s content to hold Will up and bear the weight of everything within him, and as Will feels Hannibal’s cheekbone pressing against his hair he finally lets go and just clings to him. It actually reminds him of being a child when his first dog died and how he’d sobbed beneath a tree in the yard, helplessly hugging onto the trunk with no real prospect of comfort beyond seeking anchorage and security. How is it, even now, that Hannibal still feels like the most solid, dependable thing? Then he pulls away slightly and finally opens his eyes so he can gaze wordlessly into Hannibal’s: seeking some kind of resolution in the darkly soulless stare that’s offering either ruination or salvation – or both, or neither – then opens his mouth to say something and finds he’s still unable to. He doesn’t know how long he’s been standing there, doesn’t know how much time has passed; is no longer really aware of anything except the feeling of Hannibal’s body pressed against his and the sense that everything the two of them have said and done since the first time they laid eyes on one another was nothing more than a series of dripping scarlet footsteps leading up to this moment…poised on the edge of a precipice and ready to fall. A courtship paved with death and destruction and blood-streaked bodies, contorted and lifeless and carved apart, yet still strangely beautiful even in the midst of the carnage.

“The journal,” says Will finally, and his voice is barely above a whisper – so quiet that Hannibal has to lean in to hear him. “I only gave you it because I wanted you to see that I loved you.”

Then he forces himself to pull away and runs his hand across his forehead, his face still bleached white with grief and shock as he somehow manages to stay in control and distil all the desolated misery into only three words: “I’m leaving now.” Hannibal’s eyes promptly widen in surprise and Will adds in a voice that’s impressively clear and calm: “I want you to know one thing after I’m gone. You’re still going to get what you claimed you wanted, because I am going to learn to understand myself. I’m going to be strong and I’m going to thrive, and I’m going to do all of it on my own terms. But not with you Hannibal – not after what you’ve done. I never want you to contact me again.”

This time Hannibal’s face gives a visible flicker – a clear hint of tension around the eyes and mouth – but Will forces himself to ignore it and focus on himself instead. Because I do still have myself, he thinks with a sudden surge of rebellion. It might be a self which is wounded and damaged, possibly beyond repair, but it’s all that he has and he's not just going to surrender it to someone else. My Self: the self that has empathy, autonomy, imagination and inspiration and which has fought its way through a lifetime of horrors with endless strength and fortitude. The self which has steered its own course, made its own rules and conceded to no one – and emerged at the end of it all from assorted miseries and terrors fundamentally unbowed and unbroken. It’s not much comfort, or even much consolation, but it’s some. I can do this, thinks Will defiantly. Can he? But then what difference does it really make, when it’s just one more trial within a lifetime of forcing himself to do what can’t be done? So with a final surge of effort he takes a step backwards from Hannibal as they gaze at each other for a few more agonised seconds before Will scrubs his hand over his face, silently turns round, straightens his shoulders – and leaves.

The door shuts behind him with a restrained little click that feels like a spectacularly unsuitable conclusion for such a dramatic encounter. And Hannibal, in turn, is forced to listen to the sound and watch Will walk away; aware as he does so of the deeply foreign experience of being in a situation over which he’s not in complete control. In fact the shift in dynamic has a terribly surreal quality to it because Will, rebellious as always, has managed to deviate from the script and refused to behave in
the way he was expected or supposed to; and even in the midst of resenting this, Hannibal can’t help but admire how exquisitely unpredictable Will really is. This beautiful, volatile boy…he moves over to the window and looks into the darkness, his sharp eyes seeking out Will’s frail young silhouette as it moves down the length of the driveway before finally vanishing into the moonlight and the fog.

Even after it’s gone Hannibal still remains watching: a silent vigil in the middle of the night. In fact the circumstances are unprecedented and Hannibal is acutely aware of his uncertainty over what’s best to be done about them. Because while he could try and force Will to come home, or manipulate him into it, or delicately persuade or insidiously coerce (and has no doubt that at some point he could accomplish any, or all, of these things incredibly effectively) the one thing he can’t do is the thing he desires the most: which is to have Will choose to return simply because he wants to be there. How are the mighty fallen in battle, thinks Hannibal wryly. Because in a lifetime of tempting fate, scorning retribution and evading pain or penance of any kind, it seems that all it finally took to overpower him was this diminutive omega, fine-boned and fragile with a stunning mind and a slim dark soul, to inflict the most acute punishment possible. So guileless and artless yet so ruthlessly effective: which is to simply take himself away and deny Hannibal access to him.

Normally, of course, there would be various options to muse over in a situation such as this. For example he could take back this most precious possession by force, then lock it away somewhere so fiercely hidden it could never take flight for a second time. Or he could just annihilate it, because destroying something means it becomes yours far more earnestly and thoroughly than if you’d been its original creator. Both would be a means with which to ensure eternal ownership of Will and yet neither can suffice here…neither would be truly fit for purpose. Because if Will was able to abbreviate his emotions into three words then Hannibal is able to do it in two: just two very simple, very concise words, a world away from his usual eloquence and yet which contain an eternity of sensation behind them. Come. Back.

There are other word combinations of course, other pairs: one plus one. Don’t leave. Stay here. One plus one equals two, equals you and I. Equals us. And yet in this moment, in this room, in which every placement of every object is reminiscent of Will’s presence, the same refrain keeps recurring: come back.

Come back and be somewhere I can always find you; and that you’ll always know where to find me. Come back wild and untameable yet provocative and playful; come back grave and enigmatic – come back entirely yourself. Bring all your thoughts and memories with you, all your darkness and your brilliance, all your lethal beauty, every outlawed thought and every forbidden feeling: every day and every hour for the rest of your life. Come back and lean against my desk with your hands in your pockets then run your fingers through your hair and smile and sigh and let me possess you. Come back while you’re young and beautiful and gradually grow old in front of me; let me watch you do it, let me watch you for a lifetime. Let me console, complete and transform you, let me see what you can become. Come back, come back…come back to me. Come back and be mine; come back and let me love you.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Hi lovelies, thanks for stopping by. Just to warn you that this chapter has scenes of a character being threatened with sexual assault – the section has a chapter break marked like this ‘&&&&’ instead of the usual asterisks to make it easy to skip, so if you prefer not to read it and need a plot recap then feel very free to contact me in the comments (if you’d like me to delete your message after replying then please let me know) xox

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear You,

I could write a hundred of these letters.

I could write thousands. Millions. I could wear out every pen and every piece of paper in the world and it would still be a waste of time because they’d all end up identical. Perhaps the choice of words would change. Maybe the length, or the tone, or the way they’re expressed, but they’d all say the same basic thing: they’d all say that I need you. That you should be here. That I no longer understand what my life is like without you in it.

It hurts so much to miss you. I miss you touching me and the way you’d stare then smile, and I miss the sound of your voice. In fact I miss your voice more than anything, because nothing ever sounded so compelling as the way you spoke to me and nothing is so desolate as the sound of the silence you’ve left behind you now you’ve gone. And it makes me want to scream because of how much I hate it. I hate how I'll never have the chance to stop missing you because I'll never have the strength to stop needing you.

Oh God, how could you do this to us? Look at what you’ve thrown away.

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“I’m glad you called me Will,” says Alex. He smiles across the table in what’s a clear invitation to confide – wide-eyed with a reassuring curve of the mouth – and then nods encouragingly in Will’s direction. “I was pleased to hear from you.”

Will just nods back without speaking, already starting to wonder what the hell first compelled him to pick up the phone. Of course gossipy lunches over glasses of wine are the sort of thing omegas are supposed to spend their whole day doing, yet he can’t recall a single instance in his own life of reaching out to another omega for a similar purpose and it’s like stumbling into a script that was written for someone else. Someone sociable and outgoing…someone like Alex. Oh God, thinks Will gloomily. He’s only just arrived yet is already so stranded from his comfort zone there’s a temptation to simply get up and leave. Although perhaps his reason for being here isn’t really all that hard to understand, because it’s obvious that he needed someone to bear witness to his loss and grief and right now Alex seems like the safest option. Most probably it’s the anonymity of it…in fact it almost certainly is. It’s a chance to have a sliver of solidarity that he can clutch to himself like a blanket without the risk of speaking to someone who knows him well and might start asking awkward questions afterwards.
Alex now smiles again across the table as if he really cares about what’s happening – like he really wants to be here – and thinking back on it there’s no doubt he’d sounded genuinely happy when Will first got in touch to suggest a meeting. _Sure thing!_ he’d replied, his sense of pleasure and anticipation practically frothing down the phone. _Where do you want to go?_ But Will had been at a lost to suggest anywhere and after a rather stilted pause Alex had offered his spa as a possible option. The extension of the silence must have indicated Will’s lack of enthusiasm for this, because Alex had quickly followed it up with: _Oh don’t worry, I didn’t mean having a message or anything like that. But it’s got a nice bar area – and it’s for omegas only._ At the time Will hadn’t cared all that much who it was for, but now he’s here he can’t help feeling thankful for the lack of alphas; not least because being out in public with Alex has been an unwanted reminder of how horribly conspicuous male omegas actually are. Before they’d even got inside the building an alpha backing his car into a nearby parking lot had stared at them so intently he’d nearly reversed straight into a wall.

“This place is, um, nice,” says Will now, vaguely waving his hand towards the bar. In fact the flocked wallpaper, tuxedoed waiters and gilded gold paint on everything is far too extravagant for his tastes, but it’s needlessly rude to point this out and he does his best to make the words sound sincere. For God’s sake though, how over the top can one suburban bar possibly be? There’s even a string quartet strumming Bach in the corner, the members all immaculately kitted-out in matching black and gold uniforms. Then as Will’s watching the cellist performs a particularly florid _glissando_ and he immediately finds himself thinking how much Hannibal would probably like it – because of course, almost everything seems to come back to him. If he were he now he’d be savouring Will’s irritation, darting the occasional fond smile and happy to have his own sophistication used as a target of mockery.

“Ben pays for my membership,” says Alex. He glances at the string quartet himself then performs a rather endearing little eye roll. “I know it’s a bit much; to be honest I’d just prefer a regular coffee shop. But alphas aren’t allowed inside and it’s good to have somewhere to go where you don’t have to deal with them.”

“Yeah,” says Will grimly. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Alex smiles again then takes a delicate sip from his wineglass. It’s obvious he can see something’s wrong but is too tactful to push for details before they’re offered; and the display of patience fills Will with a despairing sense that if he doesn’t do something soon then they’ll be destined to sit here in silence for eternity with nothing but Alex smiling and the swooping slide of the cellist’s bow. So he traces his forefinger across the tablecloth several times, clears his throat, adjusts his glasses, then finally glances up with an expression of genuine desolation on his face and blurts out: “I’ve left Hannibal.”

Alex’s breath promptly hitches into a little flutter of sympathy. “Oh Will,” he says. “I’m so sorry.”

Will just shrugs in response. Building up to saying it was such a trial, yet now he’s finally spoken he’s aware that he doesn’t have the faintest idea what else to add. In an odd way it’s like all he really needed was someone to tell the news to – as if saying it out loud could help confirm the reality of his departure and reinforce that he’s done the right thing. Because of course what’s of much greater significance are all the things he _isn’t_ going to say. It’s all the gaps between the words which really matter: like how he can’t tell Alex the exact reasons why he left, or how it’s impossible to admit that the withdrawal from Hannibal has been so crippling that he ended up staying at the cliff house to maintain a sense of closeness to him, despite promising himself that he wouldn’t. He also doesn’t tell Alex that the whole time he’s been there he’s slept with a loaded gun beneath the bed; nor does he describe how the way the cliff is crumbling into the sea seems like a metaphor not only for his relationship with Hannibal but his own fragile sense of self.
“Is there anything I can do?” asks Alex when it’s obvious Will isn’t going to offer any further information. “Do you need anything? Do you need money – or a place to stay?”

Alex sounds deeply anxious as he’s asking this – as if he can’t imagine how Will is supposed to survive in the world without an alpha to take care of him – and while it’s kindly meant Will can’t help wincing at the automatic assumption of omega helplessness. “I’ll go back to my own house eventually,” is all he replies. “I can’t right now, because…” Oh fuck, why is every single subject off-limits? What the hell is he supposed to say: Because it’s a Sculptor crime scene and incredibly dangerous? “Because I’m, um, I’m having some building work done,” adds Will cautiously. “But otherwise, yeah, I’m good.” Then he blinks a few times and falls quiet again. Because he’s not good is he – not really. Yet he’s not entirely bad either; and isn’t that the entire problem?

“Do you want to talk about it?” offers Alex. “I mean the reason you left?” Will gives a tiny shake of the head and Alex leans forward then rests his hand across Will’s. “Hannibal,” he says, pronouncing the name rather hesitantly as if his instinctive respectfulness makes him want to refer to ‘Dr Lecter’ or even ‘your alpha’. “He didn’t hit you did he?”

“No,” says Will. Privately he wishes it could have been something so straightforward then immediately feels guilty. “It was nothing like that. And no one else was involved either. It was more a case of…” Then he trails off helplessly for a second time because, Christ, how can you even begin to describe it? “I guess…I don’t know,” adds Will. “We just weren’t as compatible as I first thought.” He shrugs again without continuing. It seems like the sort of generic explanation that will satisfy Alex, yet of course the truth is the exact opposite because they were far more compatible than Will had ever been able to comprehend. And isn’t that the entire problem too?

Alex repeats the same sympathetic flutter of breath. “I’m sorry Will. That’s tough; that’s really tough. Although it’s better you realised now than after you bonded.”

“Yeah,” replies Will, who’s now staring fixedly at the table. “Much better to find out now.”

“So what about Hannibal – how is he taking it? Is he upset?”

“I think so,” says Will slowly. “He doesn’t really get upset the way regular people do. But yes…he would have preferred me to stay.” He shrugs once more then finally raises his head and looks at Alex directly, suddenly sick of the whole thing and desperate to wrestle the conversation away from its hazardous emotional terrain and back to the reassurance of practical purpose. “Look, I hope you don’t mind,” he adds. “But I have a favour to ask.”

Alex starts nodding before he’s even heard what it is and Will’s mournful expression briefly breaks into a faint smile. “I was thinking of moving on in a few months’ time,” he continues. “Just starting over somewhere totally new. Only it might take me a while to get settled, so if it’s necessary would you…would you be able to take care of my dogs for a few weeks?” The imposition of asking such a thing from a relative stranger suddenly makes him feel awkward and he flushes slightly then adds in a rush: “I know it’s a big thing to ask – huge – but I’d like to know they were somewhere safe.”

“Of course I can Will,” says Alex with charming eagerness. “I’d be happy to. I love dogs. I always had them when I was a kid.”

“Ben won’t mind?”

“I don’t care if he does,” says Alex stoutly. “It’s my house too.”

This little flash of fierceness can’t help but make Will smile again. “I guess maybe he won’t mind if you want them there. He seems to enjoy making you happy.”
Alex smiles back then gives an elegant roll of the shoulders which Will supposes is meant to be a shrug. “It’s honestly not a problem; and I promise that if they need to stay then I’ll look after them as well as if they were my own. But I’d be sad to see you go Will. Are you really going to leave?”

Will hesitates then darts a quick glance to the neighbouring table where a newspaper’s screaming headline about the Sculptor is clearly visible. “There’s something I need to sort out first,” he says grimly. “But after that, yes. There’s no way I can stay here.”

“That’s too bad,” says Alex with more than touch of mournfulness. “I hope we can keep in touch?”

“Sure,” replies Will, despite knowing they almost certainly won’t. “I hope so too.”

“Well, it sounds like the smartest thing,” adds Alex in what’s an obvious attempt to reassure. “For selfish reasons I’d like you to stay but I can see why it makes sense not to. Didn’t you tell me you worked with Hannibal? At least if you moved you can start out fresh.” He pauses himself then adds rather hopefully: “And if you wanted to you could eventually find someone else.”

No, I won’t, thinks Will bleakly. Because there is no one else. No one like him. Fleetingly he now pictures Hannibal’s face: the hypnotic eyes, alpine cheekbones and the sound of the smoky voice as it murmured darkly cryptic truths which Will could never admit he wanted to hear. Because there was only ever one wasn’t there? he tells it sadly. Only ever you.

Abruptly Will now pushes his chair back from the table and gets to his feet. The chair makes a loud scraping sound against the porcelain tiles and a couple of nearby omegas now turn to stare at him with their eyebrows daintily raised. “Thanks for this,” he tells Alex, struggling to keep the tremor out of his voice. “But I should head back to work.”

For a few seconds Alex looks visibly distressed, obviously wanting to offer comfort yet unsure of the best way to do it. In fact it’s safe to assume that he simply isn’t used to such messily insoluble misery as Will’s is; and despite hating the idea of his lifestyle, it’s hard for Will not to briefly envy his naivety because everything is just so simple in Alex’s world. No doubt he’ll go home to his alpha this evening and fret rather prettily over it while the latter does everything possible to soothe the discomfort away. Will has actually met Ben a couple of times and disliked him intensely on principle; a feeling that was clearly returned as it was obvious that he considered Will a bad influence. Yet his devotion to Alex is unquestionable and there’s no doubt that he considers it his job to provide a protective barrier between his beloved omega and the strife and hardships of the world. Hannibal had offered Will deconstruction; admittedly something Will thought he’d wanted. Yet when you deconstruct something you take it apart. And then, by definition – you break it.

Alex, who’s still unhappy that Will’s unhappy, now gets up himself and drops a wad of bills onto the table, waving away Will’s offer to pay half. “Seriously, it’s on me,” he says when Will attempts to protest. “And don’t forget what I said before. I’m happy to help you however I can; I really want you to know that Will. You’re…I don’t know. You’re just special. I’ve never met another omega like you.”

Will isn’t prepared to feel so touched by this simple disclosure and for a few seconds has to battle a genuine swell of emotion because of it. “No, you will have done,” he says gruffly. “They just would have just been hiding the fact they were an omega. I wouldn’t have been open about it myself if I’d had a choice.”

Alex opens his mouth then closes it again, clearly struggling to find a way of contradicting Will that won’t seem rude. “Don’t downplay what you’ve achieved,” he eventually replies. “It’s so much better that you’re able to be open about who you are instead of trying to hide it. I’m not denying how hard it must have been, but just the fact someone like you exists give inspiration to other omegas.
You’ve certainly inspired me.”

“Don’t try and emulate me Alex,” says Will in a flat, toneless voice. “Trust me on this. I’m not someone you want to aspire to.”

After that the rest of the walk to the carpark is made in silence. It’s still afternoon yet already the air is growing dusky and dim with a purple tint that creeps across the skyline like a giant bruise. The wind feels as sharp as a knife on Will’s face and as he’s reaching for his keys he turns round then after a small hesitation puts his hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “For everything.”

Alex smiles at this although his look of concern still doesn’t waver. “You’re welcome Will,” he replies, equally quietly. “You know that.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Of course – whenever you need. You know where I am.”

Will nods and then opens his car door before hesitating for a second time. “You’ll take care of yourself won’t you?” he adds. “Keep your eyes open – don’t take any chances.”

Alex briefly looks confused until he realises what Will’s referring to; at which point he gives a tiny shudder then tightens his coat a little further round his slim shoulders. “You’re talking about the Sculptor aren’t you?” he says quietly.

“Yes,” replies Will, and the bleakness in his tone is so extreme it causes Alex to shudder again. “He’s still out there somewhere. And he won’t stop until they catch him.”

As Will’s speaking he’s well aware that he’s phrased this to make it sound like he’s appealing to a faceless army of FBI officials. When they catch him: a reassuring emblem of Fidelity, Bravery and Integrity who omegas everywhere can trust to have the situation under control. But it doesn’t match what he’s really thinking. Because even as the words are leaving his mouth, the thought that’s running through Will’s mind is: He won’t stop until I catch him.

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Beyond the window the sky is a sheet of gunmetal grey as Jack stands at the front of the room, stiff-backed as an army general with both arms folded, and prepares to convene the latest meeting of the Sculptor Taskforce. On this occasion it’s much smaller than usual, containing just the forensics team, two agents from the Investigative Support Unit and a number of students (handpicked by Jack as being particularly talented) who he’s hoping to groom for future membership of the BSU. When Will walks in the students break into a spontaneous round of applause and he stiffens slightly then glances at them in bewilderment, obviously assuming they’re making fun of him.

Price grabs Will’s sleeve then tugs him down into a neighbouring chair. “They’re showing they’re impressed,” he explains in a whisper. “It’s because of you we know so much about the Sculptor.”

At the front of the room Jack shuffles his papers together then darts a concerned glance in Will’s direction. He looks so small and vulnerable – hunched in his chair like a waif in a shirt that’s far too big for him – and it’s bringing out Jack’s protective alpha instincts despite his best efforts not to. Will had actually insisted several times that he was fully recovered from his seizure but right now he seems frailer than he has for months; rather as if he’s pining for something. And surely that’s Hannibal’s shirt he’s wearing? Poor little thing, thinks Jack tenderly, before quickly reminding himself that this isn’t some random omega he’s talking about, it’s Will – who’s not only fully capable
of looking after himself, but would detest being the focus of such patronising pity. Jack now gives a small frown, speculating about what might have gone on, before remembering that Will’s personal life is none of his business. He’d still like to ask him how he is more generally, but doing so in front of the whole meeting is going to draw attention and there’s no way Will would like it. Jack frowns again then makes a mental note to take him aside this afternoon for a private word.

“So, anyway…” says Jack, forcing himself to return to the matter at hand. “Thanks to Will it looks like the net might finally be closing. We’ve got a fresh lead from the New Orleans PD and if all goes to plan then we might be one step closer to tracing Richard Black’s son.” A small hum of excitement greets this announcement, with the lone exception of Will (who’s aware that nothing ever really goes to plan) and who merely shrugs when the students try to offer their congratulations. “We also have a possible eyewitness sighting from Number Five,” continues Jack. “As you know she never saw the guy’s face, but we have a description of his vehicle and we’ve been able to narrow it down to three makes and seven models…”

He presses a button on his laptop with a rather theatrical flourish upon which the projector emits a depressed spluttering noise without any images appearing on the screen. Jack gives an irritated huff and begins to unscrew the cable. “I hate that laptop of yours Jack,” says Price cheerfully. “It’s one of the worst things ever made by humans.”

Jack flings Price a dirty look and then folds and re-folds his arms as one of the trainees dives in to try and coax the laptop and projector into settling their differences. Once this has been achieved he then proceeds to click through a number of grainy PowerPoint slides to illustrate his point about the car while Will, who’s already heard it several times (and only had minimal interest the first time) leans back in his chair and tries not to let his attention wander too obviously. In fact it’s a struggle to stay engaged at all – the room being much too hot and the conversation far too monotonous – but his highly-tuned mind can never switch off even if he wants it to, and when the discussion moves onto the Sculptor’s choice of weapon Will finds himself snapping back to life again and blurting out “That’s not what Hannibal thinks…” before he’s even realised what he’s said. Jack pauses politely then swivels his eyes in Will’s direction, the PowerPoint slides frozen behind him like an unbearably gruesome tableau.

“Hannibal…” begins Will cautiously, then pauses and blinks a few times. Christ, don’t you DARE cry, he tells himself firmly. If you cry in front of all these people I’ll kill you – and I have a loaded gun at home so don’t even think about fucking with me. Then he straightens up and determinedly looks Jack straight in the eye, playacting casual with an intensity that’s outright exhausting. “Hannibal thinks he changed his routine round about Number Seven,” he adds in a clearer voice.

“Did he?”

“Yes, he did. And I said so too – more than once. The series altered when the victims stopped being linked to the Richard Black case. By that time he’d achieved what he wanted in terms of revenge but he still carried on anyway.” Will pauses again then slowly glances round the assorted faces, inviting everyone to absorb the full implications of what he’s saying. “Because he’d realised he enjoyed it too much to stop.”

“Well I guess we can get Hannibal’s opinion ourselves,” says Jack, raising his voice slightly to try and drown out the mutter of unease that’s now coming from the trainees’ corner. “He said he was going to join us later.”

There’s an immediate sound of a glass tipping over and Jack pauses irritably then glares down the length of the table. “Sorry,” says Will in a tense voice.

“Butterfingers,” adds Price, beginning to fussily mop up the water with a wad of tissues.
“At any rate that’s pretty much the only good news we’ve got,” continues Jack with obvious bitterness. “As you know Matthew Brown’s huckster lawyer got one over on the judge and we were forced to release him yesterday.” A renewed ripple of dismay runs round the room before everyone turns their gaze to Will, who ignores them all and remains staring fixedly at the desktop. “I know, it’s so typical,” adds Jack. “That little bast…” The students now all turn round and stare at Jack with interest. “The little beast,” says Jack firmly. “And naturally there’s still nothing new on the Chesapeake Ripper following the Alderton murder.”

“Of course there isn’t,” says Price cosily.

“Of course there isn’t,” agrees Jack. “Not that I expected there to be. If there’s one thing he excels at it’s disappearing into thin air.”

Right on cue the door now opens and Hannibal enters in a swirl of long dark coat; looking rather pale and hollow-eyed but, being Hannibal, still managing to make every else seem like peasants in comparison. The trainees, who all know of him through reputation, mutter little squeaks of interest and Hannibal nods politely in their direction before pulling up a chair at the end of the table where he settles down then proceeds to stare straight at Will. As Jack renews his monologue about the Sculptor’s weapons Will bites his lip and gazes even more determinedly at the desk top, but the force of Hannibal’s stare has a magnetic pull that’s impossible to resist and he finally finds himself glancing up again – only to realise that it’s now become equally impossible to look away. Hannibal strokes his gaze across Will’s face, lingering over his lips and eyes, and Will stares back in a way that’s so intense and yearning he half expects the table between them to start smouldering from the forceful scorch of so much emotion. And even though he knows he shouldn’t, in that moment he feels like he’d give anything – anything at all – to undo what’s been done and conjure them back to the way they were just before the world tipped and everything fell to pieces.

Hannibal, who’s clearly sensing Will’s distress, now leans forward and places both hands across the table. It’s as if he’s encouraging Will to go to him and the sight makes Will’s breath hitch all over again with a fresh wave of unhappiness. If this meeting had happened just a week ago how different it would have been! Instead of grimly silent anguish they would have been catching each other’s eye, exchanging secret smiles or trading private grimaces at other people’s stupid insights, secure all the while in their own exalted circle of two. They would have held entire conversations without saying a word, with Hannibal offering his own unique brand of solidarity that never failed to make Will feel safe and grounded in a way that he doesn’t usually know how to be. It was only at the last meeting they’d both attended that Will had been gripped by a bout of heat pains so intense they’d made his face go white as the sweat started to bead across his forehead; and Hannibal had taken one look at him then grasped his hand beneath the table so Will could cling onto it and ride out the waves of discomfort in silence. At one point Will had clenched so hard he could feel the delicate bones grind together, yet Hannibal had never once pulled away.

As an ominous prickle of moisture starts to sting at his eyelashes, Will abruptly pushes back his chair and jumps to his feet. “Sorry,” he says, as everyone turns to stare at him again. “I just…um, I just need to get some air for a few minutes. I’ll be right back.”

As Will disappears through the door it swings closed behind him with a loud bang and the students mutter to themselves then exchange looks of confusion. “What’s the matter with Mr Graham?” demands one of them. “Is he okay?”

“He’s always like that,” replies Price. “Skittish: very clever people often are. Well, not all of us obviously. But some.”

Jack, who’s clearly irritated at the interruption, inflates his cheeks like a bad-tempered bullfrog. “That
wasn’t the greatest timing on Will’s part,” he says crossly. “I wanted to run through the interview results with him from the trainee’s murder.”

“Oh yes,” agrees Price. “The worst ‘Welcome to the FBI’ event in recorded history. I remember Will having a theory that it was an inside job.” An ominous pause follows this statement as everyone except Hannibal shifts uncomfortably in their chairs.

“Well with so many people on site it was a big task,” continues Jack, self-righteously clutching his papers to his chest as if they’re a string of medals. “A very big task. But we’ve finally confirmed that 20 trainees were out the room immediately before the lights cut out. Of those, 14 don’t have any witnesses to verify their whereabouts. Naturally we also spoke to staff members…” Jack performs another self-righteous shuffle with the papers, laying heavy emphasis on the ‘we’ despite not having conducted any of these interviews himself. “It turns out there were only two. One went to speak with the janitor after Hannibal asked him to turn the heating down – you verified that didn’t you?” He gestures towards Hannibal (still staring at the spot where Will vanished through the door) who now turns round and gives a slow tip of the head. “The second claimed he was in the men’s room,” continues Jack. “So yeah, there you have it. Obviously we’ll be checking everyone very thoroughly, but I’ll fill you in properly when Will gets back. I have to say I never really believed we had the Sculptor working in the building the entire time, but I’d like him to know we took his concerns seriously.”

As Jack’s speaking he replaces the typed list of names on the table so the audience can see how a number of names have been underlined in scarlet ink. In the column of trainees there are 14 but from the staff members, exactly as described, only two stand out: one being Siemens, the other being Skinner.

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In the end Will doesn’t return to the meeting. Despite claiming to need some air he doesn’t go to the carpark either (the memory of Hannibal’s previous ambushes there still being fresh in his mind) and instead retreats to his office where he locks himself in then slumps behind his desk to rummage for some painkillers. The heat cramps are actually pretty unbearable today, but while there’s no sign his new supply of suppressants are doing anything much to deal with them Will’s still hopeful that a few more days might take the edge off it. Sceptically he now examines the tablets, lying sulphur-yellow in his palm with the company logo that’s supposed to be interlocking circles but at the wrong angle always manages to look like a scowling human face. Admittedly the bastard things are hardly working as hoped for, but at least they were easy to get hold of compared to the fiasco he’d gone through several months ago. This time he’d even remembered to take his gun when meeting the dealer, although in the end it didn’t really matter because the man had clearly recognised him and insisted on doing the exchange in public as if was afraid of what Will might do to him if they were alone.

Will now grimly swallows his cocktail of suppressants and painkillers them washes them down with a glass of water that’s been standing on the desk for God-knows-how-long and has a stale, brackish taste to it that makes him gag. Then he rests his chin in both hands and tries to ride out the simmering sense of panic over what the hell he should to do about the situation. Even he can’t deny that the suppressants are a dangerous long-term solution, but while it feels impossible to go to Hannibal during his heat it’s so far been equally impossible to commit to the idea of a different alpha. As another wave of pain washes over him Will grits his teeth then makes the same promise – often repeated, but never acted on – that if it gets too bad he’ll look into finding someone safe and reliable to take care of him and let nature take its course. It’s not like all alphas are utter bastards, and there’s undoubtedly someone who could be called on to help out. Possibly Jack? Oh Christ no, not Jack. Although Jack could probably recommend someone suitable to ask…?
Will eventually wears himself out worrying about this and falls asleep across his desk in a crumpled heap: awaking some time later with a crick in his neck and the realisation that several hours have passed and evening’s spindly grey fingers are already creeping across the sky. Unnervingly his office is now completely black and the sense of being locked in it, even from choice, suddenly strikes him as ominous and makes him unfasten the door as quickly as possible before flicking the lights on as he summons up some energy for the lonely drive to the cliff side house. Oh fuck – fuck! Where are his car keys? For a few hideous moments he’s genuinely afraid he’s lost them and it’s only when he’s scrabbled frantically through his briefcase and all four pockets that he spots a silver gleam against the carpet and realises he must have dropped them while he was asleep. Will now swoops down to reclaim them with an audible sigh of relief, and is briefly so distracted with it that it takes him a few seconds to register the clicking sound of someone pushing open the door. The flare of hope that it might be Hannibal is impossible to suppress; and while Will firmly tells himself it’s a good thing it’s not, it’s equally impossible to summon any sort of positive feeling at the sight of Skinner’s gaunt silhouette in the doorway. Even from several paces away the sickly sweet stench of whiskey is obvious.

“And here he is,” says Skinner with heavy sarcasm. He takes a step forward until Will can see him clearly, where the oily sheen to his skin, as well as the hazy unfocussed look, immediately makes it apparent that he’s been drinking for several hours. “The famous hunter of the Sculptor…the FBI prodigy.” Skinner pauses a few seconds then spits contemptuously onto the floor, the large globule of saliva glistening rather sickeningly in the light like a rotten oyster. “You’ve been busy haven’t you, you little prick? I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

Even by Skinner’s standards such blatant aggression is unexpected and it catches Will off guard and leaves him briefly lost for a response. “I suppose you’ve heard I’m being transferred?” continues Skinner, speaking with exaggerated slowness as if Will is too stupid to understand and needs everything spelling out for him. “Mr Crawford told me this morning; apparently someone’s been complaining about me. And don’t try denying it – I know it was you.”

Carefully Will sits back behind his desk again and folds his arms, secretly surprised that these particular wheels have already been set in motion. Jack, it would seem, has moved a lot quicker than expected. “Then why did you bother coming?” he replies with a calmness he doesn’t entirely feel. “If you want something confirmed that you already know? Although as it happens it wasn’t just me. It was several people.”

“Bullshit,” growls Skinner, stumbling slightly over the word as if the sibilant ‘s’ sounds are giving him trouble. “There’s no way there was a group of you. No way. Why would there be? I’m damn good at my job.” Will quirks a single eyebrow and Skinner takes another step forward then grinds to a halt again, blinking rather manically as if the light hurts his eyes. “Or at least if that is true, it’s only because you talked them into it. You realise my career is pretty much ruined thanks to you? First I get sent on that omega course as if I’m some kind of sex offender, next I get shipped off to a shitty outpost miles away from DC; and all because you went bitching to the boss about me behind my back.”

“Of course your career isn’t ruined,” replies Will in a bored voice. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Goddamn Jack Crawford and his ‘inclusion policies’,;” continues Skinner with a snarl. “His fucking PC bullshit. Let me tell you something you spoilt omega bitch. When I was a kid my dad used to beat me if my grades ever slipped below an A. It didn’t matter how hard I tried; I could get an A minus and the old bastard would still come after me with a belt buckle. Whereas you…” Skinner curls his lips back, exposing his teeth like an angry dog. “You, just because you’re an omega, get everything handed to you on a fucking plate. Jesus. How many more qualified alphas are there in this unit who should have got your job? But no, we couldn’t have that could we? We couldn’t give it
“Seriously?” says Will, making no attempt to keep the disgust from his voice. “Okay, let me tell you something. I don’t care how much suffering you’ve had in your life: my sympathy for you disappears the second you use it as an excuse to treat everyone else like shit. I mean for God’s sake, you’re an alpha. Don’t you understand what a difference that makes?” Briefly he thinks of his own nightmarish struggles, so assorted and numerous, and hears his voice hardening even further. “If life was a video game, being born an alpha is like being born on the easiest setting there is. Of course you’re going to have challenges – but your chance of getting over them is a damn sight higher than a beta or an omega tackling the same thing. The deck’s stacked in your favour from birth just because you got a set of chromosomes that society thinks are superior to everyone else’s. So why don’t you do yourself a favour and stop feeling sorry for yourself then get the hell out of my office. Right. Now.”

“Fucking omegas,” mutters Skinner, who’s clearly chosen not to register a single word Will’s said. “Always playing the victim; always wanting everything for free. All of this is your fault Will. All of it. I would have been nice to you if you’d been a bit nicer to me.” Considering Skinner has been a complete shit since they were first introduced this is actually a bit of historical revisionism worthy of Stalin himself. Not that it’s exactly worth arguing over, even if Will had the energy for it (which he doesn’t). But what he’s not prepared for is the way Skinner’s face arranges itself into a leering smile before he points a bony finger in Will’s direction like a loaded gun and hisses: “Dr Lecter’s ditched you hasn’t he?” Will stiffens very slightly then leans back in his chair. “It’s obvious,” adds Skinner with poisonous glee. “He’s not hanging round you anymore like a goddamn guard dog.”

Will clears his throat, unaware of how his fingers have started to drum against the desktop. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re pining for him aren’t you?” continues Skinner; and once again it’s as if Will hasn’t even spoken. “I can tell.”

The unexpected reference to Hannibal – not to mention Will’s own desperate yearning – immediately catches him off guard once more, no doubt exactly as Skinner intended. “You know something?” continues Skinner, taking advantage of Will’s strained silence to take another step closer. “If you were mine I’d rename you. Have you heard about that? It’s the custom back where I’m from: after you’re bonded you change your omega’s name to one you’ve chosen yourself.” For a few seconds his pale eyes slither across Will’s body before he pulls his lips back again in a wet gleam of teeth. “You don’t look like a Will, so I think I’d call you Danny. There was an omega in my old neighbourhood called Danny. You remind me of him; he was an arrogant little cunt just like you are. He thought he was so goddamn smart and beautiful that all the alphas should do whatever he wanted. And he always thought he was way too good for me.”

There’s a beat of silence and then Will calmly reaches out and picks up the phone on his desk, never once taking his eyes off Skinner’s face. “Security?” he says. “This is Will Graham in 302. I want you to send a guard here to remove someone from my office. Right now.”

“Oh yeah you’d love that wouldn’t you?” hisses Skinner. “Have someone else do your dirty work then get me into even more trouble. Don’t think I’m giving you the satisfaction you vindictive bitch – I’ll leave on my own.” He staggers back to the doorway again then pauses on his way out, swaying slightly on his spindly legs like a giant insect. “Here’s some advice for free,” he adds without turning round. “Don’t you dare talk to anyone about this: I’m warning you. Because if you do I’ll just say
you’re a crazy, spiteful omega who made it all up ‘cos he’s lost two alphas in a row. I’ll tell anyone who’ll listen to me. You might be trying to take me down but I promise you this – I’ll make damn sure I take you down with me.”

Skinner’s footsteps echo down the corridor as he walks away and Will remains where he is in numb silence and listens to them go; consumed all over again with a yearning for Hannibal that’s so powerful he can feel it like a physical pain. Just like in the bar at lunchtime it’s Hannibal’s face he sees when he closes his eyes – by now a face as familiar as Will’s own is, and far more well-loved – and once more he can feel a sting of tears at the sheer hopelessness of their situation. Yet he still can’t bring himself to open his eyes and let Hannibal go, and so he continues sitting there in his self-imposed blindness as he gazes at his own illusion and murmurs all the things to it which he can never tell the living version. The words are so quiet they get easily swallowed up in the darkness, but Will keeps repeating them anyway as if they’re a mantra or an article of faith – a Universal Truth. I need you, he tells Hannibal beneath his breath. I need you so badly. I need you more than I have words to say.

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Despite his best efforts the scene with Skinner has left Will badly unsettled and nearly another hour has passed before he finally feels able to leave the office. His official explanation for the delay is to give himself time to calm down and regain a sense of equilibrium; but while this might be partly true, he knows deep down that the real reason is how much he hates the thought of going back to the cliff side house alone and that he wants to put it off as long as possible. In fact if he’s brutally honest with himself (and there’s no real reason not to be) it’s deeply self-destructive for him to be there at all. Yet despite knowing this, and despite the emotional pain it’s causing, he’s still never seriously considered going elsewhere. It’s almost a form of penance: like a Medieval hair shirt, or the type of self-mutilation favoured by monks and mystics – an intimate atonement for your most secret sins. Oh shut the fuck up, thinks Will sternly to himself, suddenly tiring of the whole thing. Honestly, what a load of self-indulgent bullshit…the exact sort of thing that Hannibal would say.

Will now gives a small groan and drags his hand across his face. Then he forces himself to stand up, pacing about a few times like someone limbering up for a fight, before lifting the window blinds to take a cautious scan of the carpark and check that the coast is clear. There’s no sign of Hannibal’s car, although admittedly Will’s not sure how much confidence to place in this given that he’s more than capable of hiring a new one just to be deceptive. In this respect Will’s been increasingly aware in the past few days of a sense of someone following him, and while there’s never been any clear evidence for it the sensation has continued to linger and proved impossible to purge entirely. Not that trailing about like an average stalker is exactly Hannibal’s style. Will frowns over this for a few seconds then grimly repeats to himself that Hannibal’s absence can only be a good thing. Then he does it again for good measure – almost to the extent it feels convincing – before pulling on his coat and locking the office door behind him as he finally contemplates the lonely drive home.

Outside the moon looks misty and raw from its thin covering of fog and the sky is pockmarked by stars as hard and flinty as chips of ice. Will’s breath spills out his mouth in a white plume and he thrusts his hands deep in his pockets as he strides in the direction of the car – by now only one of a handful still remaining in the otherwise empty lot. As usual it’s impossible to suppress a shiver of unease as he walks over the site of the Killer graffiti, only it seems that tonight the sensation is destined to be accompanied by something far more physical as well: namely the crunch of broken glass directly beneath his feet. Will tenses slightly then glances down, his unease promptly re-doubling as he realises that someone has shattered the overhead security light. The shards gleam faintly in the blackness, just above the dripping scarlet remains of the letter K, and Will frowns again before turning round to go back inside to report it. Then behind him is a sudden clatter of footsteps and before he even has time to move he’s giving a horrified yell as history starts to repeat itself in
nightmarish form when an arm shoots out the darkness and wraps itself round his throat.

“Shut up,” hisses Skinner, his breath hot and rank in Will’s ear. “Shut up, shurrup! Shut your fucking mouth. If you make another sound I’ll break your neck.”

He gives a vicious wrench to illustrate his point then clamps his free hand over Will’s face and spins him round so fast Will’s feet briefly leave the floor. Will starts to wildly struggle and Skinner makes a bestial grunting sound like a maddened bull before forcing him against the wall then grabbing a fistful of hair so he can yank his head back. Oh shit, thinks Will desperately. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. The intention is extremely obvious – to smash him unconscious against the bricks – and it brings a new surge of terror because he knows if this happens then he’s in serious trouble. With lightning-fast speed he starts to inventory the strongest bones in the skull then as Skinner slams him forward deliberately angles himself so his jaw rather than his forehead takes the force of the impact. The agony of it is like an explosion of crimson and black, but despite the shock and the taste of blood there’s a strong surge of triumph as he realises that his senses remain clear.

Skinner, obviously determined not to take any chances, returns his hand to Will’s mouth then brutally pinches his nostrils together so that Will is forced to gasp for breath instead of shouting for help. Then he leans forward and presses his own nose against the back of Will’s neck with a deep inhale. “You stink,” he hisses. “You fucking omega whore. Why the hell would you go out smelling like that if you’re not bonded? Now you listen to me Danny…are you listening? Make a sign to show you’re listening.”

By now Will feels half-crazed with rage and disgust, yet while every single muscle is straining with an urge to struggle he’s afraid that it’ll just provoke Skinner to grab him tighter; or, more likely, smash his head against the wall again. In this respect Skinner’s superior alpha strength makes a fight unequal, but there still has to be a way to turn the situation to Will’s advantage. There has to be: he has to find one. Fuck it, if he can’t find one he’ll make one. Except bargaining won’t work because he doesn’t have anything to offer, and it’s impossible to appeal to reason because Skinner’s reason has clearly departed some time ago. Can’t fight, can’t run, can’t reason…oh God. The best chance seems to be deceiving Skinner into letting his guard down long enough for Will to get the upper hand, and this immediately reminds him of Hannibal’s theory that Skinner’s real desire was for Will to behave like a stereotypically submissive omega. Will now takes a deep breath then screws his eyes closed as he lets his body go limp and pliant – not too much; not enough to be obvious – but enough to seem as if he’s overcome with fear. Skinner, exactly as predicted, relaxes his grip a fraction and Will grits his teeth then forces himself to nod.

“Good,” says Skinner. “That’s good Danny: because this is what’s going to happen. I’ve got my car over there, and you’re going to let me carry you into it so I can take you back to my place and teach you some fucking manners.” For a few seconds he pauses again then takes another deep breath against Will’s neck. “I think I might try and bite you – I know you’re not in heat yet but it sometimes still works. If we were bonded they couldn’t take you off me again could they? It’s dangerous to separate bonded pairs. They’d have to let me keep you. Even Dr Lecter couldn’t do anything about it. Or Mr Crawford. No one could.” Will forces himself to nod again and Skinner makes a low growling noise and nudes the bonding spot with his forehead. “I bet you’re incredible in bed,” he says, and his voice feels as if it’s literally oozing into Will’s ear. “Are you Danny? Are you a nice tight fuck? I bet you are. You won’t look so goddamn arrogant when I’ve got you lying underneath me and I feel you start to come round my knot.”

I’m going to kill you, thinks Will with a calm flash of certainty. I swear to God you will not walk out of here alive. In fact the conviction is so powerful it has a kind of sedative effect: dissolving the outrage and replacing it with a serene sense of justice whose deadly conviction surpasses even the Dark Reflection itself. But for the plan to succeed it’s essential Skinner doesn’t guess he’s being
played, so Will now simulates a small whimpering sound that’s a near-perfect proxy of an omega in distress. “You’re right,” he says; and making it sound convincing is possibly the greatest acting feat he’s ever had to do in his life. “I’m not okay. I need help. I need an alpha.” He considers adding I need you but ultimately can’t bring himself to do it; although in the end it doesn’t really matter, because Skinner loosens his grip anyway then does exactly what Will was hoping for (fucking finally) by letting go of his throat and spinning him away from the wall.

“Look at that little face,” says Skinner, almost wonderingly. As he’s speaking he traces a fingertip across Will’s cheekbone with a reverence that manages to be even more disturbing than the previous aggression was. “You’re so much smaller than you look. You seem like you might be quite strong from a distance, but now I’m holding you and there’s nothing to you at all. You feel so fragile…I could snap you in half without even trying.”

Will has a sudden wild urge to laugh but forces it down again and continues to make himself look as frail and vulnerable as possible. In his mind he can see Hannibal’s face again, the eyes burning black with intensity.

“You don’t even know what my first name is,” adds Skinner. “Do you little omega? I suppose I should tell you. You’ll need to know what to shout out when you’re getting the best sex you’ve ever had in your life.”

Of course it’s obvious that Skinner’s fragile psyche has finally snapped; obvious that he’s no longer in his right mind…whatever that might have been before society soured and split him and twisted him up. Yet in spite of the drink and derangement there’s an unmistakable arrogance to this statement which makes Will’s lip curl back from his teeth with contempt. It’s a classic show of alpha superiority: supreme conceit, a disregard for consequences, and a preening certainty that nothing exists which is more powerful than they are. And that, decides Will grimly, is what’s always going to be their biggest downfall. His gun is lying in its usual place beneath the bed at the cliff side house, but its absence doesn’t concern him anymore because he knows that all he really needs are his bare hands – exactly as Hannibal had always said. Because in that moment it’s impossible not to think of him: and how satisfied he would be if he knew what Will, Hannibal’s self-defined greatest masterpiece, was just about to prove himself capable of.

Will doesn’t have much leverage from where he’s hemmed in. But righteous anger can achieve all manner of marvels and the limited space is still enough for him to rear back his head then bring it crashing forward onto the fragile arch of bone across Skinner’s nose. Skinner lets out a gurgling roar then staggers backwards just as Will brings up a foot to smash into the pit of his stomach and send all the breath rushing out his body in a stream of foul-smelling air. Skinner promptly sprawls across the concrete like a puppet with its string cut and Will stoops down then leans across his face. Close by he can still see the remains of the graffiti: the crimson Killer marking out the site of his Becoming like a commemorative plaque – X Marks the Spot.

“You’ve lost,” says Will softly. “I want you to know that. And I want you to know that you deserve everything that’s about to happen to you. Do you want me to tell you why?” For a few seconds his eyes narrow with disgust. “Make a sign to show me you’re listening.”

Skinner gasps out a desperate choking noise, the words slurred and animal-like from the mass of foaming blood; and Will leans a little closer then adds in a voice of truly frightening intensity: “Because if you hadn’t then you wouldn’t have been sent a punishment like me.”

The terror in Skinner’s eyes is obvious as his lips open and close like a fish gasping for air: a mute outline of the word Mercy. “And let you do that to someone else?” asks Will in the same softly lethal tone. “I don’t think so. If you’re lucky maybe God might have some mercy for you – because I sure
won’t.”

Then he reaches down and without any hesitation twists Skinner’s neck until it breaks.

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Overhead the moon is still misty and raw from the veil of fog and the stars in the sky are still flinty chips of ice. It’s evocative; almost romantic. The broken wreck on the asphalt is no longer a dead body in this setting. It’s more like a skein of bone and skin; something beautifully dead, like an object in a poem, around which everything floats in suspended animation that’s static and silent and frozen in time. Will’s breath is still a plume of white that dances in the air every time he exhales and as he leans against the wall and gazes at the sky it’s only some time later – when his blood has stopped racing and his heart no longer pounds in his ears – that he’s able to come back to himself and finally realise the full extent of what he’s done.

And it’s then, and only then, that he really begins to panic.

The panic has nothing to do with even a fleeting sense of guilt. Perhaps it should, but there’s no doubt the world is a better place without Skinner in it and Will doesn’t waste time pretending to regret what he’s done. On the other hand the very real concern is how no one else is going to agree with him, and he’s under no illusions of what will happen to an omega that kills an alpha with their bare hands. The best case scenario, if he was extremely lucky, is that he might get a liberal judge who’d accept a claim of self-defence; but even in the unlikely event of avoiding prison, a long spell in a psychiatric institution is inevitable. And then there’s the spectre of Andrew’s recent death to come along and make things even worse, because while one dead alpha turning up round Will might be a coincidence two starts to look like a pattern. In the midst of all the doubt and uncertainty he briefly loses sight of his early suspicions, and in that moment it never occurs to him there’s a very faint chance he might have just killed the Sculptor.

You’ve got this, thinks Will rather desperately. Now calm down and fucking THINK. The shattered security light – in retrospect almost certainly Skinner’s handiwork – seemed so sinister at first, but now the protection of darkness is something to be grateful for and he quickly stoops down again to rifle through Skinner’s pockets with ruthless efficiency and extract his wallet along with his watch and cell phone. Disguising it as a mugging gone wrong is hardly very original but it’s the best he can do at such short notice, and he bundles them into his own briefcase before taking another deep breath and getting to his feet. Then he promptly swears under his breath because across the parking lot the outline of Siemens is clearly visible as it emerges from the building, struggling under the weight of a large cardboard box from where he must have cleared his desk. Siemens calls out some sort of greeting but Will ignores him and focuses on his car instead, all the while resisting the urge to sprint and carry on at a leisurely stroll like someone without a care in the world. Only about 20 more paces now; only 19…any minute he’ll be there. Just keep going, thinks Will. Just get in the fucking car and get out of here, and then you can decide what you’re going to do. Although what the hell is there really do to? Lie low and try to brazen it out or just grab his passport and leave the country tonight? Ten paces now…nine…eight. Come on, mutters Will, come-on-come-on-come-on. When his fingers are touching the handle he finally loses control and fumbles it open in a frenzy before diving inside then locking the door behind him with a loud gasp of relief. His face in the rear-view mirror looks incredibly pale with weirdly glittering eyes, and despite the stress of the situation it’s impossible not to feel disturbed by how exhilarated the reflection looks. Then he takes a few more shaky breaths and hunts out the keys: only to realise that he’s escaped one nightmare and been plunged straight into another, because no matter how hard he tries or how desperate he grows, the car stubbornly refuses to start.

“Oh God,” mutters Will out loud. With genuine panic he rattles the ignition but still nothing happens
– and the shocking perverseness of the timing is what first makes him suspect that it could have been sabotaged on purpose. Jumping out again Will yanks up the hood then peers inside, immediately feeling his stomach turn over at the sight of the severed battery lines. *Skinner*, thinks Will numbly. *It must have been.* It’s horribly easy to imagine it: the gaunt figure crouched over the engine, torch clutched between its yellow teeth as it meticulously sawed and hacked away with a rusty set of wire-cutters. It’s an amateur bit of vandalism at best, and with the right tools the damage would be simple enough for Will to fix himself. But he *doesn’t* have the right tools; and even if he did, the idea of standing in this fucking graveyard of a parking lot for even a second longer than necessary while Skinner’s broken body lies a few metres away is completely unbearable. There’s now a powerful urge to call Hannibal to pick him up, yet even as Will’s removing his phone from his pocket he knows he can’t quite bring himself to do it. Not that it matters: even if Hannibal *was* willing and available to bail him out – and even if Will genuinely wanted him to – the drive from his house could mean he’d take up to an hour to arrive.

*It’s fine, it’s okay,* mutters Will with mounting desperation. A taxi then; that’s what it’ll have to be. No big deal at all. Of course it’ll cost an absolute fortune, but right now Will knows he’d happily sell a kidney if it meant escape came a bit quicker and an exorbitant cab fare is a tiny price to pay. But the first company he calls says the wait will be at least 20 minutes while the second says half an hour. “Half an *hour*?” snaps Will, who by now is finding it impossible to hide the strain from his voice. “Why the hell is it taking so long?”

“There’s been an accident on the beltway,” replies the operator smugly. “And you’re not exactly in the city centre, are you pal? If you want a cab you’re going to have to wait for one.”

Will hangs up then takes another deep breath. *Try a different firm,* he thinks, miserably aware of how hard it’s getting to remain calm. *And worst case scenario, a 20 minute wait’s not so bad. It’s not like you have to stay here; you can go back inside the building.* Even as he’s thinking it he knows it’s a lie and that even two minutes would be bad, let alone 20. But panicking is hardly going to help his situation and he’s just about to return to his phone again when he hears the sound of his name being called.

Stood behind him is Siemens, wearing a foolish grin and clutching a fresh box of belongings to his chest. “Hey!” he says with the usual bouncing enthusiasm. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” replies Will, and in spite of everything he can’t help feeling proud of how calm his voice sounds. “Just calling a cab.” Vaguely he waves his hand in the direction of the hood. “My car won’t start.”

“Oh gee that’s too bad,” says Siemens sympathetically. “You out of gas Will – do you need gas? I have a spare can in my trunk if you do.”

“No, it’s the battery.”

“Oh that’s too bad,” repeats Siemens. “I’d offer you a ride, but I’m in a rush and your place is a bit out of my way.” Haplessly he gestures round the empty parking lot. “I guess most people have gone home by now. That’s Skinner’s car over there, but…I guess you’d rather not go with him.”

Will grunts in the affirmative and Siemens shuffles again then shifts the weight of the box to his other arm as he seems to notice Will properly for the first time. “Hey,” he says with obvious concern. “What happened to your face?”

“Nothing,” says Will casually. “I tripped is all.”

“Your mouth, though,” persists Siemens. “It’s bleeding.”
“It’s not as bad as it looks,” replies Will, even though it’s worse. “It’ll have stopped in a second.”

Siemens frowns then shifts his box again. “I’ll tell you what,” he says eventually. “I can’t take you as far as your house but I could drop you in town if you wanted? There’s a taxi rank by the station. Or you could get a bus? I don’t know if the bus goes past where you live…?"

For a few seconds Will falls silent again, fretfully scraping his foot against the ground as the urge to escape his own crime scene battles with an ingrained reluctance to spend any more time than necessary with Siemens. Siemens, who seems to have interpreted the silence as a refusal, now bobs his head rather sheepishly and resumes pottering off towards his own car, still struggling under the weight of the box. Will watches him go then casts another glance towards the pooling shadows by the wall – and what’s lying within them – and with one last wrench finally makes up his mind.

“Hey!” he calls out. “If you could drop me in town that’d be great.”

Siemens smiles shyly then bobs his head again. “Sure Will. No problem at all.”

By now Will feels a little sickened by the shock and strain of what’s happened, but his mind is still working quickly enough to know that Siemens is a potential witness and it’s essential to appear as normal in front of him as possible. He therefore takes a few quicks strides until he’s caught up with him then nods casually towards the box. “You want me to give you a hand with that?”

Siemens makes a clucking sound to indicate refusal, but Will doesn’t think he can stand watching him staggering around anymore so reaches out and takes it anyway. The box is mostly full of files as well as a withered-looking pot plant, a photograph of a middle-aged women with the same round face and bulging eyes as Siemens who Will assumes is his mother, all topped off with a ludicrous looking pencil case covered in cartoon characters – and whose combined weight, despite the huge performance Siemens was making of carrying it, really isn’t that heavy at all. “It’s awfully nice of you Will,” says Siemens, flipping open the truck so Will can slot it in amongst a collection of similar looking boxes. “At least that’s the last one now so we can be on our way. It’s awful cleaning out your desk isn’t it?”

Will, who’s never had to do this, makes a noncommittal noise in response then waves his hand across the boxes. “I thought you were glad to be going?”

“Well, yes,” agrees Siemens. “Yes I am, but…you know how it is. I’ll still be sad to leave all you guys behind.” Will repeats the same vague grunting sound and Siemens twitters a few times over the boxes as if they’re his dear friends and comrades before closing the trunk and bouncing round to unlock the passenger seat so Will can climb in. “It’s tiring work doing all that lifting,” adds Siemens, dragging his sleeve across his face which is now as pink and shiny as a billiard ball. “I must look like I’ve been in a sauna.” He pauses again then emits a rather foolish giggle. “But you know what they say: alphas sweat, betas perspire, and omegas glow.”

Will opens his mouth then closes it again, struggling with the urge to inform Siemens that this is the biggest bit of bullshit he’s ever heard in his life. “So where do you want me to drop you?” continues Siemens, beginning to execute a plodding three point turn. “Is the station okay?”

“That station would be fine.”

“Cool,” says Siemens, even though Will can’t see what’s remotely cool about it. By now the three point turn has become eight points and he folds his arms and does his best to stifle a sigh of frustration. “I’m awful at these,” confirms Siemens, as the eight points turns into nine. “Are you a good driver?”
“I don’t know. Not especially.”

“Sorry in advance about the child locks,” adds Siemens. “I’ll have to get out to open your door for you. This isn’t actually my car, it’s my sister’s. Hers is that much bigger than mine and I have a lot to store, what with the move and all…” As with most of Siemens’ sentences this one wanders off rather aimlessly then seems to collapse and expire halfway there. “Do you have nieces and nephews Will?”

“No,” says Will, trying not to sound too bored.

“I’ve got two,” replies Siemens with obvious eagerness. “One of each. I mean a girl and boy, not an alpha and omega, or a beta and alpha, or you know…whatever. They’re pretty cool.”

“Great,” says Will, who’s now staring blankly out the window.

“You’d probably like my sister. She’d certainly like you – she’s crazy about omegas.”

Will promptly starts imagining her as a younger version of the woman in the photo, complete with the same bulging eyes and moon-like face. Even in better circumstances he’d hardly be in the mood to be fetishized second-hand by some idiotic Sister Siemens with an omega obsession, and right now the mere mention of it is enough to set his teeth on edge. “Right,” he says in the same flat voice.

“She’s had a rough time though, my sister. She got divorced last year.”

“Sorry to hear that,” says Will mechanically, even though he’s not really listening. Oh shitting bastard fucking hell. What’s going to happen to him – what’s he supposed to do now? Perhaps he should just overcome his pride and reservation and contact Hannibal for help. He’d vowed he wouldn’t get in touch again, but the extreme circumstances require extreme action and if there’s anyone who could help him stay out of prison…

“It’s good I was on hand,” persists Siemens, whose voice now feels as whiny and relentless as nails down a chalkboard. “You need your family around you when that happens.”

“Sure you do.”

“Family is so important Will,” says Siemens earnestly. “I mean your birth family. Your flesh and blood.”

“Mmmm.”

“Between you and me I think my sister focussed a little too much on her husband. I mean she didn’t even change her name back when she got divorced. I told her Will. I said: ‘If it’s good enough for me, it’s good enough for you.’”

Almost imperceptibly, Will’s gaze shifts away from the window. “Oh?” he says, deliberately casual. “I thought you said you got your name from your stepfather?”

“Yes,” replies Siemens in a bland sort of way. “I think you must be remembering wrong Will. I have my father’s name.”

No, thinks Will firmly. You definitely said your stepfather. Admittedly most people would ignore this discrepancy – and it’s hard to see how much it matters in the grand scheme of things – but it’s such a strange thing to lie about that Will’s finely-tuned suspicions are immediately roused. In fact looking back that entire conversation about the stepfather had been odd. Will had been so preoccupied with the parking lot graffiti at the time that he’d barely registered it, yet thinking about it now it’s clear that Siemens had deliberately turned the discussion to make sure Will knew he wasn’t raised by his birth
father, as well as emphasise the emotional significance of his surname – enough to keep it despite the mockery it attracted. But why bother using the stepfather as a cover and just say it was from his real father? It seems like such a pointless game to play.

At the approaching junction Siemens gives the wheel a sharp twist to the right and as the car swerves round it makes the keychain on the rear-view mirror rattle like the clatter of bones. The noise automatically catches Will’s attention but it’s not until he glances upwards that he feels his entire stomach turn over. Because to Will the masks that Richard Black’s son sent his sisters have always been such a powerfully symbolic clue – a literal embodiment of double identity – and which is how he knows straight away that the Aboriginal Australian print of the masks and the print on the keyring are absolutely identical. One by one every single hair on the back of Will’s neck starts to stand on end as he remembers how he’d pushed at Dr Reynolds to establish whether her brother really had spent time in Australia; and oh Christ, how could he possibly have forgotten? A group of them in the lab after the Sculptor’s seventh victim, with Price examining the contents of Hannibal’s gift hamper as Siemens’ voice piped up from the back of the room: ‘I ate kangaroo once when I was in Melbourne…’

It’s then that Will realises his hands have started to shake and he forces them into his pockets to hide it. No, he thinks wildly. It can’t be. It can’t possibly. Then he clears his throat and averts his eyes to the window again, trying to ignore how his heart has started pounding in his ears as he desperately tries to make sense of the all the tangled threads of information unravelling in his head. They’re like the strands of a rope: none of them substantial enough to hold much weight on their own, yet growing stronger and firmer all the time the more of them are wound together. Like how Siemens knew where Will’s house was, or how quick he was to request a transfer once the link with Richard Black’s son fully came to light. Like how Will always suspected that the killer never left the building the night the trainee was murdered, or how Will had told Jack that whoever was murdering omegas was either charming or, more likely, completely harmless-looking in order to lure his victims away without a struggle…exactly the way he’s just lured Will into his car. Like how Dr Reynolds’ described her brother training as an actor when he was younger. And like how incredibly effective it would be for a vicious killer to hide themselves behind a suit of innocence and idiocy then disguise their obsession with Will in a pretence of affection when it was really hatred driving it the entire time.

Hannibal, of course, had a similar mask; a similar human suit to hide behind. Yet while his was perfect Siemens’ sometimes slipped enough to let traces of the reality behind it seep through – the occasional looks or sharp words that Will had always noticed yet never took completely seriously – but ultimately it was still more than fit for its purpose. It was enough to allow its wearer to slip into the FBI undetected. Because just like Hannibal had always observed ‘The finest trick the devil ever played was to persuade the world he didn’t exist.’

Siemens had even said it himself, standing straight in front of Will in the parking lot the day he’d had the seizure: ‘It’s like he’s close by. Hiding in plain sight.’

Very, very slowly Will now reaches into his pocket and wraps his fingers round his phone. He’s used the number so many times since he stole it from Dr Reynolds that he can dial it without even looking, and while he still wants to believe that his theory is wrong, he instinctively knows that it’s not. Of course they’d always been aware that Richard Black’s son had changed his name, and since Matthew Brown arrived on the scene the similarity of the Black/Brown surnames had nagged away at the whole Taskforce. But Will no longer needs the confirmation of the shrill wail as Siemens’ phone begins to ring; because with lightning speed he’s been able to rearrange a series of letters in his head and finally understands that while ‘Siemens’ might not have been the name he was christened with, he really did get it from his father…hiding in plain sight the entire time.

S-I-E-M-E-N-S
N-E-M-E-S-I-S

And it's then Will finally knows that the unthinkable has happened and he’s trapped in a car with the Sculptor.

Chapter End Notes

Two readers spotted the anagram and another worked out the clues, and I am now going to publicly apologise to all of you for my BS-ing responses in the comments when you first mentioned it :-D
Beyond the window the sky is rolling in a sea of frozen clouds that churn and crash together like the wild waves of the ocean by the cliff side house. The lonely stars that peer through the mist likewise resemble phantom ships or drowned souls, and Will stares at them now in something like a trance as he struggles to understand how those same stars that he and Hannibal gazed at on their final night together are now the same ones watching him being carried away to intended death. It’s such an unearthly, frightening thought that it feels like it shouldn’t really be possible – the sort of thing that should never take place in real life. Except of course that it is, because it’s happening. It’s happening right now and he’s completely helpless to do anything about it. Because he is, isn’t he? *There’s nothing he can do.* Nothing that can change the night into an alternate version of itself; one where he never agreed to get into the Sculptor’s car to be driven away beneath the drowned sky with the dead stars...

“My phone’s ringing,” says Siemens calmly.

Will’s shoulders stiffen although he still doesn’t turn away from the window. His nerves are strained so hard it’s making him aware of every tiny detail and without even meaning to he’s found himself focusing on the rhythmic hissing of the tyres on the rain-drenched road: each hiss like an eerie lullaby that lulls him closer and closer to whatever’s waiting at the end of the drive. The sensation is unsettling enough to make him want to scream, and it’s then it occurs to him that this might be what madness feels like.

“It’ll be my sister,” adds Siemens. As he’s speaking he presses down on the accelerator and the engine gives an angry roar like something in pain. “She’s the only one who uses that number.”

“Right,” says Will. He continues staring fixedly at the skyline and there’s another pause as he listens to the *thud-thud-thud* of the car pounding the asphalt. Or maybe it’s not that at all; maybe it’s the desperate pulse of his heart in his ears. “Do you want me to pass it to you?”

Siemens emits an odd laugh: a choking kind of gurgle which starts with a gasp and ends in a wheeze, then finally fades away into a low murmur that blends into the hellish symphony of hissing tires and Will’s pounding pulse. “While I’m driving?” he says. “You wouldn’t want me to break the law now, would you Will?”

His laughter is so eerie and manic that is far exceeds the lame joke about the phone, and Will goes rigid all over again from fear of what it might really mean. In fact he thought he’d been subtle in hiding his feelings, but maybe he hasn’t managed it after all and his shock has been radiating off him in a way that can’t be missed. Oh God is this it then; does Siemens *know*? Only of course it’s not Siemens at all is it? It’s Black: it’s always been Black…it’s been Black the entire time. Will’s hands have started shaking even worse than before and he now grips them together again in an attempt to hide it. The impulse to just grab the wheel and force them off the road is growing overwhelming, yet
the warning about the child locks is still fresh in his mind and he knows that the risk of being trapped inside a twisted cage of metal means the scheme is a uselessly lethal one.

Siemens finally stops laughing and leans forward in a way that makes him hunch across the wheel. “Are you okay Will?” he says softly. “You’ve gone awfully quiet.”

“Headache,” snaps Will.

Siemens gives a soft coo of regret. “That’s too bad. You must have hit your face pretty hard when you tripped.”

“Actually, I feel a bit nauseous…” begins Will. Then he hesitates, because he knows the answer to his next question is going to show exactly what Siemens’ plans are and there’s a powerful urge to take refuge in ignorance for just a few seconds longer. Taking a deep breath he forces himself to add: “Would you mind pulling over?”

“Don’t worry about it Will,” replies Siemens. He’s still hunched over the wheel and Will can see how white his knuckles have gone with the force of the grip, the bones gleaming white and round in the blackness like tiny skulls. “If you think you’re going to get sick there’s a bag on the back seat.”

Will bites down so hard on his lip he can taste blood. So that’s it then – it’s going to happen. Oh God, oh God…it really is. Admittedly it was never likely that Siemens (Black) intended to drop him at the station, but hope is such a fragile thing and impossible to abandon entirely until forced. Yet that moment of force has finally arrived, because Will knows that there is no hope – not anymore – and a part of him simply wants to surrender and unleash a scream of desperate, frustrated fear. It’s the same panicky impulse which longed to grab the steering wheel, but once again he pushes it away because panicking is a luxury he can no longer afford. Survival won’t come from panicking and losing control. It’ll come from a cool head with a solid nerve – and a resolve that can hold onto Hannibal’s earlier advice that ‘If we act like predators they act like prey.’

At the thought of Hannibal Will feels himself calming slightly and he now forces himself to relax his shoulders from their anxious hunch then lean back against the seat. Come on, he urges to himself. You’ve got this. You can turn the situation around. A confrontation is inevitable now, yet if it’s going to happen at least it can happen on Will’s terms rather than Siemens’ – and that means ensuring their destination is one that he’s chosen himself. But how to persuade Siemens to go? For a few seconds Will gnaws on his thumbnail, working as fast as possible to assemble various pieces as a plan starts to form in his mind. Admittedly it’s not ideal…not by any stretch. It’s not even particularly likely to work. But injured and unarmed it’s all that he has, and in such desperate straits a desperate solution is the best that can be hoped for.

“Look, I was wondering if you could do me a favour?” says Will cautiously. “I feel really rough, I don’t think I can manage a bus.” Siemens gives no hint of a response: is he even listening? “Would you mind dropping me at home,” adds Will in a firmer voice. “I can give you some money for the gas.”

Siemens clenches his own shoulders then stoops further forward across the wheel. “I’m not sure if I can manage that Will.”

Will, who was expecting this, waits a few seconds then adds: “It’s not my own house. I’m looking after it while the owner’s away.” Oh God, Hannibal was right about the fishing analogy because it really does feel like that. What was it he’d said? Fishing is a form of hunting is it not? It necessitates planning, persistence and patience. Infinite patience: one sets the bait and casts the lure, then waits for the prey to ensnare itself on the line. What would he think if he could see Will now? Here in the light of the moon as he fishes for a serial killer…hook, line and sinker. “So yeah,” continues Will,
deliberately casual. “It’s quite a bit nearer than mine.”

As he watches Siemens’ face seems to twitch slightly. “You’ve been staying in an empty house?”

Careful, thinks Will warily. Don’t over-do it. “That’s right” he says. “No one but me.” Then he takes an even deeper breath, exerting every last shred of effort to sound as casual as possible. “It’s up by the cliff side.”

Siemens’ breath seeps out his mouth: a sigh so low it’s almost a hiss. “I know that spot. It’s pretty deserted.”

“I guess,” agrees Will. “It’d probably be too lonely for some people but I really like it.”

There’s a small pause and Will hears his heart thudding wildly in his ears as he waits in agonised suspense for the reply. “Why didn’t you say so?” murmurs Siemens finally. “Sure. I can drive you up there.”

Relief washes over Will in a powerful surge, but once again he keeps his voice as calm as he can. “Thanks,” he says lightly. “That would be great.”

Then he turns round again and grimly rests his forehead against the cooling glass of the window, mind racing with lethal precision as he rehearses what’s likely to happen next. So little effort was needed in the end, yet how quickly the prey snapped up the bait. Siemens clearly thinks he’s gained an advantage by having somewhere quiet to take Will to murder him without being disturbed – that much is obvious. Except what he doesn’t realise is that Will wants to take him there for exactly the same reason.

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For a long time now Will retreats into silence as he gazes at the frozen ocean sky with its scattered stars and the glowing moon like a piece of bleached bright bone. Next to him Siemens is humming tunelessly to the radio, so aimless and absurd that a part of Will longs to lean over and snap at him that he doesn’t need to bother anymore – that the time’s finally come to drop the mask and stop pretending to be Siemens and start being Adam Black again instead. “Be my baby, be my girl,” sings Siemens, equally tunelessly; and Will is overcome with a sudden urge to scream because the whole thing is so horribly surreal that even now he can still barely process that it’s happened. Siemens, with his round face and nervous laugh…a deranged murderer the entire time. It feels so impossible on several levels, not least because such a mythic quality has been built up around the Sculptor that it scarcely seems feasible an actual man could be crouching behind it all: a living breathing human being lurking beyond the fear and the chaos and the howling headlines which screamed so loudly all over the world about the brutal killer of omegas. Michael Myers or Freddie Krueger might just as well have crawled off the screen and into the car and somehow the air of unreality couldn’t have been any more intense than it is now. For a few seconds Jack’s words run through his mind: ‘People are going to be writing books about this one for years to come. This one and the Chesapeake Ripper…’

Behind them is a sudden glare of light and Will snaps upright to look in the wing mirror, wincing slightly as the flash of headlamps stings his eyes. By now the rain is lashing down so fiercely it’s impossible to get a proper look at the car beyond it being large and black, yet he’s about as sure as he can be that the same one’s appeared behind them several times in the past half hour. Likewise he’s fairly sure he’s never seen it before tonight, but the way it seems to be pursuing them is deeply sinister and stokes his earlier brooding fears of being followed. Can it really be a coincidence? Will shifts uneasily in his seat, trying and failing to get a glimpse of the license plate. When he’d scanned the parking lot this evening he’d wondered if Hannibal could have disguised his presence by hiring a
car, but staring now into the blackness it’s impossible to shake a plunge of dread that it’s actually Matthew Brown: fresh out of prison and thirsty for revenge. Behind them the car drops a few paces then abruptly rears into view again, plunging though the rain and fog like a hearse or some sort of phantom carriage from a horror film. The driver themselves is impossible to see, veiled behind a thick cloak of shadow.

“Nearly there,” croons Siemens. “Not long now.”

Will glances out the window again without replying. The world looks drowned: dark and straggl ing without a living thing anywhere. “No,” he agrees quietly. “Not long at all.”

Ahead of them the winding road to the cliff side is now growing visible in the headlights just as the roar of the ocean starts to echo in Will’s ears. It’s so dark there’re hardly even shadows anymore; just an expanse of blank black emptiness as the light seeps away and the moon slowly suffocates behind the choking fog. Beside the road the tangle of overgrowth looks wild and ghostly, like something from a twisted fairy tale, and Will briefly screws his eyes closed then takes a few deep breaths as he steels himself for the battle ahead. And it really is going to be a battle…most likely a fight to the death. A mental review of the case notes confirms that while the Sculptor’s victims were all found in the open none of them were actually killed there, which strongly suggests Siemens will stick to routine and find a way to get inside the house. Possibly he’ll ask for a coffee or to use the bathroom, at which point he’ll probably attempt to smash Will unconscious with the same blunt force trauma that was evident on the other victims. What he hopefully won’t realise is that Will’s already onto him and has planned to strike first. Yet Will has seen the autopsy reports and profiled the scenes, and it means the advantage gives him very little comfort because he understands better than anyone the extent of the twisted mind he’s dealing with.

The car has now begun its ascent to the cliff and Will bites his lip as he fights to ignore the churning dread and despair that are coiled in his stomach like a knot and have threatened to overcome him ever since he stood in the parking lot and stared down at Skinner’s broken remains. He knows he should feel successful that Siemens fell for his plan and wound up taking them exactly where Will wanted to go; but right now success feels about as far away as the cold dead stars are, and all he’s really aware of is a sickly sense of fear at how he’s injured, exhausted, sedated by heat suppressants and trapped with a notorious sadist who’s already murdered eight omegas. No, not just murdered. Those victims were desecrated: dissected and sliced apart so brutally that even veteran agents like Jack were left sickened and disturbed by it. Anxiously he cranes his neck to scan the road again but during the few seconds he looked away the mysterious car has vanished into the night just as quickly as it first arrived. It’s hard to know whether this should be a relief or a disappointment, although in reality it never seemed very likely that Hannibal could be the driver. Why would he be after all – why would he bother after Will rejected him about as thoroughly as it was possible to do? For a few seconds Will goes rigid again, remembering the thrum of emotion in Hannibal’s voice as the dark eyes stared so intently into his own: ‘I gave you a rare gift Will – are you really going to tell me you don’t want it?’

As the car finally pulls to a halt in the driveway Siemens turns the engine off then shifts slightly in his seat. “Here we are,” he says softly.

“Yes,” replies Will. “Here we are.” There’s a pause: from the corner of his eye he can see Siemens staring at him, the pale face gleaming in the darkness like a wax mask. In fact the sight is so sinister it’s almost unbearable, and as the urge to escape overtakes him he briefly forgets about the child locks and scrabbles uselessly at the door before flinching when the handle refuses to open. Siemens watches him without comment and Will forces himself to laugh as if he’s embarrassed at the lapse. “Short memory,” he says. “Can you let me out?”
Siemens face flickers again. “Sure Will,” he replies after another pause. “I can do that.” He starts to unfasten his seatbelt then pauses to dart a long slow glance from beneath his eyelashes. “I don’t suppose I could use your bathroom before I head off?”

Oh God, so he really has resorted to that. In spite of himself Will is aware of a weird feeling of anti-climax that the legendary Sculptor has ended up so pathetically predictable. Somehow he’d imagined a more creative adversary, but all he replies is “No problem” in the same casual way as before.

Siemens murmurs his appreciation then climbs out the car while Will stares rigidly ahead; mind raising and heart pounding as he plans his next move. The fight with Skinner has left him exhausted and unsteady on his feet, but he still doesn’t want to risk letting Siemens into the house long enough to retrieve the gun. The sooner he can overpower him the better and his bare hands are going to have to be enough. Rather helplessly Will now glances down at them, so bruised and battered and looking far too frail for the task ahead. Oh God though, what else is there? It’ll have to be enough.

A shadowy outline abruptly appears by the window and Will flinches again at the sight of it then hastily unclips his seatbelt, arm already coiled to fight off a sudden attack. Siemens stands just beyond touching distance and Will slams the door behind him then gestures towards the house. “After you,” he says.

“All right Will,” replies Siemens. His mouth has curved itself into a distinctly odd smile, the lips stretched back across the teeth. Oh fuck, thinks Will desperately. Oh fuck, oh fuck. Somehow it never occurred to him that Siemens might refuse to walk ahead but the devil, as they say, is in the details. Of course if Will was at full-strength he could have taken him out by now with minimal trouble; but he’s not at full strength, and in his current state he knows his only real chance of success is a surprise attack. And this means he’s in serious trouble, because while he has no idea how an ambush will be possible if Siemens won’t go in front, he also knows there’s no way in hell he’s going to risk turning his own back even for the few seconds it’ll take to get to the house. And it’s dark now – so dark – he can barely see what he’s doing. The ground gives the illusion of blending into the blackened sky and no matter where he looks all he can see are curdling shadows with the occasional misty sliver of moon.

“What’s the matter Will?” continues Siemens in the same soft voice. “Why aren’t you moving?”

“Sorry,” says Will, beginning to improvise as fast as possible. “I still don’t feel great. My head, you know? I just need a minute – I’ll give you the keys.”

“Sure Will,” croons Siemens. As he’s speaking he prowls a few steps forward, melting in and out of the dripping shadows like spilt ink. “But I can’t just leave you here.”

Will flinches again then manages to turn it into a shrug halfway through. “I think I might get sick,” he says. This, at least, must surely sound convincing: a fresh trickle of blood is oozing from his injured jaw and there’s no doubt how pale and waxy he must look in the moonlight. “I don’t really want an audience,” he adds, attempting to work a self-conscious tremor into his voice. “I’d rather you just went ahead.”

Siemens makes a regretful noise. “Ah, okay. I’ll let myself in then.” He pauses for a few seconds then repeats the same slow glance he’d performed in the car. “Do you mind if I get a drink before I go?”

“Of course not,” says Will, overcome with a powerful rush of relief. “I’ll be there in a minute.” As he’s speaking he reaches into his pocket for the keys, frantically calculating how many paces he should let Siemens take before pouncing forward. A few metres should do it: enough leverage for
Will to wrestle him to the ground then pound him into oblivion against the asphalt. The pale round skull will rupture like an egg as blood and brain tissue spatter into the air; hot against Will’s hands and shimmering black in the moonlight…oh God. The situation is shocking in its unreality and for a few seconds he finds himself thinking of the Sculptor’s entry in the FBI’s Most Wanted: the stark font, the shocking details – wanted dead or alive. If Jack was the one having to do this he’d favour alive so that Siemens was forced to face the full weight of justice for what he’s done. But Will’s now gone far beyond this point, and as far he’s concerned the other way is more than good enough too.

In front of him Siemens is illuminated by a narrow shaft of moonlight and as he leans forward to take the key his eyes briefly meet Will’s. “I’m sorry about your headache,” he says softly. “It’s a real shame.”

Will clears his throat then shifts another step backward. Oh Christ, the tension is almost physically painful, as if his tendons are going to snap apart beneath the strain. Why can’t Siemens just move? Turn-round-turn-round-turn-round, chants Will internally with the same urgent fervour of a prayer. Fucking turn round you bastard, what are you waiting for? I can’t get you until you’re facing away.

“A real shame,” repeats Siemens, stretching out each syllable as if he really means it. In fact his voice is starting to change now, distorting into something like a snarl, as his mouth gapes open until he’s baring his teeth like a dog. “Only the thing is…” He leans forward as if to take the keys then at the last second clamps down on Will’s wrist instead. “It’s about to get much worse.”

Will rears backwards immediately, every muscle alight with an urge to escape from the gleaming teeth and the hissing voice. Even with a head injury his reflexes are good enough to avoid Siemens’ hand as it grasps at his throat; but it’s still not enough to save him, and when the dull grey gleam of a Taser gun appears Will instinctively knows it’s game over. The agony is unlike anything he could have imagined – so excruciating that oblivion is a relief – and as he feels the scalding voltage rip through his body and hears the shrieking laugh of the Sculptor, his last conscious thought is that he’s going to die in this place. Then it’s all shock and pain and terror…and then there’s nothing at all except darkness.

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Will’s head is an explosion of sparks and jagged gashes that squeeze his skull so brutally it’s a serious struggle to make sense of what’s been done to him. In fact it’s only by degrees that he’s able to pull it all together – painstakingly precise and piece by piece – and start to slowly reconstruct the lonely drive in the moonlight, followed by the ambush in the driveway, and conclude that at some point his senseless body has been dragged inside the house. Likewise he knows he’s in the living room from the crackle of the fireplace and the flow of Bach from the stereo, and as long as his eyes are closed the atmosphere is so familiar that for a few dizzying seconds it’s as if everything was just a bad dream he’ll wake up from and that Hannibal has returned and is about to welcome Will home. The next thing he grows aware of is how his shoulders have spasmed into the same knot of agony as his head, but it’s not until he tries to wipe the blood from his face that he understands it’s because his wrists are roughly handcuffed together and twisted behind his back. Of course the handcuffs are the work of Siemens, just like the Bach and the firelight are, yet even through the choking fog of pain and fear Will knows that the infamous Sculptor has already made two huge mistakes. The first was placing Will in the same chair Hannibal always uses, because the scent of his cologne has lingered on the headrest and it’s giving Will a much needed sense of strength and resolve. The second is that he clearly didn’t read the report of Andrew’s murder – because if he had, he’d have known that Will’s able to slip a pair of handcuffs.

Siemens himself is sat a few feet away sipping what looks like Hannibal’s Cabernet Franc. His appreciation of it is obvious and Will can’t help thinking, rather hysterically, how much Hannibal
would hate the idea of it if he knew. Seeing him watching Siemens now gives a rather feral smile and mockingly raises the glass in his direction, the scarlet liquid swirling in the firelight with the same vivid wetness as blood. In many ways he looks the same as he always has – same round perspiring face, tie still askew in the usual careless way – yet Will doesn’t even need to hear him speak to know that the mask’s been removed and he’s no longer looking at Siemens at all. Because right now he’s face to face with the son of Richard Black: face to face with the Sculptor.

“Welcome back Will,” says Siemens finally. Jesus, even his voice sounds different; deeper than normal with a raspy, guttural edge to the vowels like the scrape of rusted metal. It’s a voice that oozes with cruelty and madness, and despite the horror of the situation Will can’t help being struck by the extraordinary job he did all this time in pretending to be someone else. But then again…is it really that impressive? He’s a true psychopath after all: no guilt, no fear, no shame, no empathy, no nothing. How hard can it actually be to slip a false persona over total blankness?

In the following silence Siemens leans forward in his chair and Will’s stomach promptly turns over as he spots a glimmer in firelight and realises what it is: a gruesome selection of knives and cleavers from the kitchen, all arranged in a neat row by Siemens’ feet. Siemens runs his eyes over them too then darts his tongue across his lips in a reptilian way before his mouth contorts itself into another smile. “I want you to tell me something Will,” he adds. “Have you ever heard the expression ‘People should either be caressed or crushed’?”

“Yes,” replies Will tonelessly. His voice feels hoarse from lack of use, as if he’s been gone so long from the normal world that he’s forgotten how to apply it. Or maybe it’s just the fetid atmosphere of smoke and fear that’s catching at the back of his throat and imbuing the air itself with a bitter, rusty taste. “It’s from Machiavelli,” he adds, even though he’s not sure if it is. In fact he doesn’t even know where he first heard the quote, although admittedly it sounds like exactly the type of thing that Hannibal would say. Terror, hot and acidic as vomit, now surges through his body as he remembers how the rest of it goes: ‘If you do them minor damage they will get their revenge; but if you cripple them there is nothing they can do. If you need to injure someone, do it in such a way that you do not have to fear their vengeance.’

For a few seconds Siemens’ eyes narrow with pleasure as if he’s seen into Will’s mind and can read all the horror and panic written there. “I could leave you alive,” he says softly. “But it would have to be in a state that stopped you telling anyone what happened.” Idly he stretches out and nudges one of the knives with his foot. “Do you understand what I mean?”

Will’s fear is so thick now it’s like being smothered; like being beaten across the head with rusty blood-stained metal. He’s enjoying this, he thinks numbly. Killing makes him feel Godlike – of course he doesn’t want to give it up. In turn he understands enough about this type of offender to know that Siemens wants to see his fear – needs to see it – so to deny him the satisfaction he deliberately keeps his voice as steady as possible and simply answers: “Yes.”

“Go on then,” says Siemens, and the quiver of excitement in his voice is undeniable. “Tell me. Tell me what I should do to you.”

Oh fuck off, thinks Will with a sudden flare of contempt. You pathetic, sadistic piece of shit. “You could cut my tongue out,” he replies in the same flat tone.

Siemens’ breath oozes out his nostrils in a low sign. “That’s good – I like that. What else?”

Will stares back in defiant silence and Siemens holds his eyes for a few seconds before his lips peel back from his mouth again to bare his teeth. It’s so savage and disturbing that every hair on the back of Will’s neck stands on end at the sight of it. But even that doesn’t prepare him for what happens next as Siemens eyes go completely dead and the growling sound suddenly begins: guttural and
thick, loud enough to even drown out Will’s pounding heart, and so deviant and soulless it sounds as if it’s coming from a creature rather than a human being. Will flinches then draws back in his chair and Siemens raises a hand to smash the wineglass against the floor where it explodes in a shower of blood-red shards. “I asked you a fucking question,” he screams. “What else?”

By now Will’s fear is like a knife twisting into his lungs, slow and excruciating and powerful enough to feel a living thing; like a third person in the room. Jesus, keep it together, he thinks in mounting desperation. Keep it together; you’ll never walk out of here if you don’t. Then he swallows audibly, struggling not to let his terror show on his face as he remembers how the only other person to see this side of Siemens all ended up on a slab at the FBI mortuary. “You could cut my hands off too,” he replies, and he’s fiercely proud of how calm his voice manages to sound. “That way I couldn’t write it down.”

This answer seems to satisfy Siemens because he nods a few times before leaning back in his chair and putting his face in his hands. A series of weird gasps proceed to seep out between his fingers and for a few moments Will thinks he’s started to cry before realising it’s actually the sound of laughter. This noise is also horribly unnatural – inhuman almost; like something an animal might do – and immediately reminds him of the Sculptor’s unearthly scream the night the trainee was murdered. Trying to ignore the pain he shifts his shoulders further back and gives the handcuffs an urgent twist.

After what feels like an eternity Siemens finally stops laughing and peers out at Will from behind his fingers. “No, I won’t really leave you alive,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what I did to you; I know you’d still find a way to tell people.” In the darkness his eyes are gleaming with anticipation and he now straightens up and folds his hands across his knee. “God, I’ve been waiting for this. You’ve no idea how long I’ve been waiting.”

Behind his back Will’s wrists are starting to bleed from the brutal grind of metal on skin but he grits his teeth then gives the cuffs an even harder twist. “Yeah,” he says drily. “I figured.”

Siemens slowly reaches up to wipe a trail of saliva from his chin with the back of his hand and then stares at Will for a few silent seconds before breaking out in the same wild laugh. It’s so unhinged he almost seems like he’s drunk, except Will has seen enough by now to understand that the euphoria has less to do with the wine than it does with a soaring sense of his own power and superiority. “I’ll let you ask me,” he adds once he’s calmed down again. “I know you’re dying to. So go on – ask me why I’m doing this?”

Will tilts his head back very deliberately so he can look Siemens straight in the eye. “Because you blame me for what happened to your father,” he says with excessive calmness. “You think he destroyed your family then used it to get a job at the FBI.”

For a few seconds Siemens stares back without speaking before abruptly stooping down to retrieve a shard of the broken wine glass. “Look at that point,” he says softly, swivelling it backwards and...
forwards so that it catches the light. “You could take someone’s eye out with that.” Will winces but
doesn’t respond. “Daddy was trying to achieve something special,” adds Siemens, his voice starting
to quiver with an odd combination of pride and anger. “He showed everyone that alphas aren’t
untouchable.”

Will longs to reply that this is bullshit, only is afraid of provoking Siemens any more than necessary
as long as he’s holding that piece of glass. For God’s sake though, can he really believe it’s true; the
ludicrous fantasy of Richard Black’s crimes as a righteous crusade against alpha oppression instead
of the sordid, opportunistic murders they undoubtedly were? Of course it’s terribly ironic that
Siemens himself was destined to adopt the same pattern, given how the Sculptor series begun as
vengeance for his father’s conviction then descended into random victims simply because he’d
realised how much he liked it and didn’t want to stop. The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the
sons, thinks Will grimly: just as Hannibal had always said. Of course Hannibal, at the very least,
would be happy with this formulation, even if no one else would be. The synchronicity of the link
between Will, Andrew, Richard Black and the Sculptor had always pleased him.

Siemens finally drops the glass back on the floor and Will breathes a low sigh of relief. “I enjoyed
messing with you,” he adds, settling into his chair again with another little smile which clearly
relishes the memory of it. ‘Hiding in plain sight: I did try to warn you Will, you can’t pretend I
didn’t. I even showed that I knew where you lived. But you’re so dumb aren’t you? You still didn’t
figure it out.”

“No,” admits Will. “You disguised yourself incredibly well.” Behind his back his hands are
contorting into increasingly agonised twists, yet the cuffs remain immobile and the stubborn drag
against the carpal bone means even dislocating his thumb won’t be enough to get out of them. As
panic threatens to choke him he takes another deep breath then eases his fingers into his pocket to
pull out his fountain pen and discreetly snap off the clip.

The sound is so faint it’s barely noticeable yet Siemens’ head immediately jerks upright like a feral
dog. Will freezes mid-movement and Siemens eyes narrow slightly before finally sinking back
against the chair again. By now the fire has burnt so low he’s been swallowed up in the shadows and
it means the only thing that’s really visible anymore are the glint of his eyes and teeth each time the
burnt orange light flickers over them. “What did you think when you found my Nemesis note?” he
says, and Will breathes a gasp of relief and continues manoeuvring the pen clip with something close
to frenzy. “I want you to describe how you felt.”

Will grits his own teeth then shifts the clip downwards in a painstaking attempt to lift the ratchet and
convince the lock snap to free. Even if he could see what he was doing it would be difficult; behind
his back it’s almost impossible, yet surely there must be a way? Fortunately Siemens is either too
stupid or too arrogant to have secured his feet, so even if the lock won’t shift there’ll be a chance to
kick him when he comes near. Without the use of his hands though…oh God, how much chance
does he really stand? Will takes another laboured breath, aware of a bead of sweat starting to trickle
down his forehead. There has to be a way; he has to make one.

“Tell me,” croons Siemens. “Tell me. I want to know.”

What the hell is he even talking about? Oh yeah – those fucking business cards. Will eases the clip a
little harder then stifles a groan of disappointment as the pawl stubbornly refuses to move. “I never
got that one.”

Siemens’ breath seeps out his nose in an angry exhale. “Are you lying to me Will?” he says, his
voice low and lethal. “I saw you remember? And you were scared.”

“I never got it,” snaps Will, struggling not to let his full impatience show. In fact the confusion is
genuine, and it’s only by dredging his mind back across the past few months that he finally remembers how Siemens had rattled so dementedly on his office door the same evening Andrew first turned up. At the time it had seemed like a random bit of intrusiveness, but as an attempt to enjoy the effects of his handiwork the action makes far more sense. “Okay, I get it,” adds Will, half to himself. “And that’s why you were so interested in the Private Investigator?” He catches Siemens eye then gives a bitter, humourless laugh without waiting for a response. “Not that I really blame you. It would have ruined your plan if someone else had got to me first.”

“Oh sure Will,” replies Siemens with another little smile. “I had to save you for myself.”

Of course in many ways this had been the first time the mask had fully slipped – a clear indication that Siemens was much sharper than he seemed. “I should probably be grateful shouldn’t I?” adds Will with a trace of wryness. “At least it meant you helped get me out of prison.”

“You know that had me worried for a while,” muses Siemens. “When I thought you really were the Chesapeake Ripper. I didn’t like the thought of that: it would have meant I’d taken on a bit more than I’d planned for.”

As the clip snaps uselessly behind his back Will screws his eyes closed to ride out the fresh wave of panic. “Yes,” he says bleakly. “I don’t think you’d want to face off with the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“But then it was just little old you all along,” crows Siemens with obvious pleasure. “Do you understand now Will? Do you see why I kept you for last?”

Will tries to shrug but finds that the handcuffs make it impossible. “Of course.”

“That’s the thing though,” continues Siemens; and this time there’s a level of venom in the words that makes Will’s skin crawl. “I don’t think you do. I don’t think you’ll ever understand how much you deserve to suffer for what you did.”

Will tries and fails to summon a response, but ultimately finds it impossible because he knows there’s nothing he can say which would change Siemens’ mind. As far as he’s concerned Will has already been found guilty, and now it merely remains to determine the sentence: judge, jury and executioner, all in one. Over in the fireplace the logs suddenly collapse in a noisy flare of smoke and sparks, and as Siemens’ face lights up like some kind of Medieval image of hell Will finds himself thinking of James Leyland: the fifth confirmed victim of the Sculptor who was tortured and torn apart, then left dead in a field with his throat cut so deeply the spinal cord was exposed. Will had always found it significant that the body was dumped so far out of town when none of the others were, and it’s obvious that as Richard Black’s arresting officer Siemens held him in special contempt and wanted to be somewhere he could take his time over the killing. So if that was James Leyland then what the fuck is he going to do with Will?

Siemens’ smile broadens and he stoops down to pick up one of the knives, inspecting it for a few seconds as if appreciating the sharpness of the blade. “That was daddy’s idea too,” he says softly. “He didn’t think it was enough to kill you. He wanted to drive you crazy first.”

“Yes,” agrees Will in the same flat voice. “I get it.” Because of course he does, it was obvious – one of the main reasons he’d started looking for Richard Black’s son in the first place. Does Siemens even realise how his revenge plan was a huge alarm bell that guided Will straight in his direction? The handcuffs are still clicking uselessly behind his back, and more from an effort to keep Siemens talking than from genuine interest he adds: “I didn’t know you’d visited your father in prison. Your sister told me you’d left home before the trial.”

“Was around,” says Siemens crisply. “But I only ever told her what she needed to know.” There’s a
pause as his eyes gleam once more in the firelight. “So go on then – what else did she say about me?”

“Not much,” admits Will. “She was protecting you: it was obvious she didn’t want me to work out who you were.”

“But I knew who you were.” Siemens leans forward a little then repeats the crooked smile. “That’s why I told her I was using the name Andrew.”


“I always liked that touch,” adds Siemens. He falls silent for a few seconds as if he’s relishing the memory and Will takes advantage of his inattention to give the cuffs another frantic twist. “So what else did she say?”

“She said you were affected badly by your father’s arrest – and that you’d travelled around after it happened.” Will winces slightly, cursing himself all over again for failing to notice the Australian link that could have helped him work it out sooner. “She also told me you’d done a variety of jobs… including acting.” He pauses himself then catches Siemens’ eye once more. “I wasn’t sure about the others; I felt that either you’d been lying to her or she was lying to me. But the acting experience I can see. I’ll give you this: you were very convincing.”

Siemens blinks a few times, very slow and hypnotic. “I knew I had to be careful round you Will. You had a reputation for working people out.”

“Not just me though was it?” says Will bitterly. “You were manipulating everyone – including the alphas.” A part of him wants to add something sarcastic about how much Richard Black would disapprove of fraternizing with the enemy, but the brief satisfaction hardly seems worth the risk of provoking Siemens’ anger before he’s had a chance to slip the cuffs. Because, oh God, he is going to slip them…somehow he has to.

“I suppose you mean Skinner?” replies Siemens with another show of teeth. “Didn’t you ever wonder Will – didn’t you ever wonder why he acted the way he did? I mean I knew he had his own reasons to hate you, but he was so useful for making your life more difficult that I decided to help him along.” Slowly his smile begins to broaden, mouth gleaming wetly in the firelight. “Like repeating all the terrible things you’d said to me about him.”

Hiding in plain sight, thinks Will numbly, remembering all the times he’d wondered over Skinner and Siemens’ unlikely alliance. Oh God, how could he not have realised what was happening? Trying to keep the tremor of anger from his voice he replies: “I never said anything to you about him.”

“Well of course I knew that,” says Siemens with exaggerated patience. “But he didn’t. You never noticed the pattern did you Will? You never realised he was particularly vicious to you whenever he’d been around me?” Will gives a visible flinch and Siemens’ smile broadens even further, the teeth slowly revealing themselves as his lips peel apart. “You know in a weird way I think he kind of got off on it,” he adds. “I think he liked the idea that he’d gotten under your skin so much that you’d spend all day complaining about him. He was flattered Will; he’d be so disappointed if he knew you didn’t care.” Siemens pauses then shrugs dismissively, his interest in Skinner having clearly expired. “Not that he really matters – not in the grand scheme of thing. He’s just another dumb alpha.”

Will gives his wrist another frantic twist then replies “Well done,” in the same flat voice as before. Of course Siemens’ use of the present tense suggests he doesn’t know about the scene in the parking lot, although really that hardly matters either – not in the grand scheme of things. In fact if it was anyone
else but Skinner Will might even feel a twinge of pity for him at having lived and died in such an utterly irrelevant way. “He came by my office this evening,” he adds, unpleasantly aware of how their fight was the real catalyst for everything which happened after. “He was very angry. I guess I’ve got you to thank for that?”

Siemens darts his tongue across his lips then gifts Will with a smile that’s truly unsettling; somehow even eerier and more deranged than the previous ones. “Maybe,” he says.

Will lets out a breath between his teeth, overcome with a sudden conviction that it was Siemens, rather than Skinner, who was responsible for vandalising his car. In fact the idea of springing such a convoluted trap genuinely sickens him: like a great bloated spider, waiting with infinite cunning and patience for the victim to stumble straight into its web. “One other thing,” he adds as he feels his fingers slip again; desperate to find a way – any way – to buy a few more precious seconds to work away at the cuffs. “I’ve always wondered. The name: the Sculptor. What did you think of it?”

Siemens shrugs. “It wasn’t as good as daddy’s. But he always said you had to have a name. He said people wouldn’t remember you otherwise.”

Will nods thoughtfully, pretending to mull this over. “You don’t look like your father. Your sisters do – you not so much. And yet you’re far closer to him than either of them were.” Behind him there’s a faint click as the first prong of the clip snaps into place and his heart gives a dizzy soar of hope. “They told me that your father used to take you hunting. Was that when it all started?”

“You’re asking too many questions Will,” says Siemens softly. “You’re not at work now remember? This isn’t a Taskforce meeting. You’re not profiling me.”

“No,” agrees Will. “I never could; not entirely.” In fact the closest he’d got was noting the unusual combination of organized and disorganized killing styles – although at least in that he’d been completely correct, seeing how Siemens had borrowed his father’s signature before finally discovering his own. Of course Hannibal had also been impossible to see, except in his case it was due to a lack of clear motive whereas for Siemens it was having several contradictory ones. Ironically Will had told Jack several times that the Sculptor was playacting, but it’s only now that he understands how close he’d got to the truth without even realising it. Just a few more days could have done it, thinks Will bitterly, remembering Jack’s evidence summary at this afternoon’s meeting. In fact if not for the distraction of Hannibal and his heat he’d probably have cracked the case wide open by now and Siemens could have been arrested in the normal way. Instead it’s come to this: Will’s fatal insight coming a few seconds too late, then destined to be overpowered in a pair of cuffs he can’t get out off as the Sculptor prepares to carve him up.

Siemens is really smiling now, his pale eyes bulging with excitement and anticipation as they slither across Will’s face and body. The relish of all the damage he’s planning to inflict is obvious, and Will grits his teeth again to ride out his nauseous surge of fear at the real possibility that he might not get out of this alive. Oh God, oh God…so many crime scenes that he’s attended over the years, how was he to know that tonight he’d be on the verge of creating his own? The nightmare is so real by now that he can almost see his body as it’s wheeled into the mortuary, broken and butchered beneath the horrified gaze of Price and Zeller. Would either of them cry? Beverly might. Possibly Jack would as well, secretly in his office where no one could see. What about Hannibal; would he cry too? In all the time they’ve known each other Will’s never seen him close to crying – not anywhere near. Besides, it doesn’t make sense for him to cry. As far as he’s concerned Will is already lost, so what difference would it make to lose him a second time? Their lives ruptured apart the night Will walked out and told Hannibal never to contact him again. The teacup’s broken, thinks Will with a fresh surge of grief. It’s never going to gather itself back together.
Beyond the window is a sudden soft clattering from the direction of the yard and Will immediately jerks his head upright, briefly letting go of Hannibal as he tries to focus on the source of the sound. Siemens has obviously heard it too because he goes straight to the window to peer into the misty swirls of darkness. “Look at your expression,” he says mockingly when he turns round again. “You thought someone was here to help, didn’t you? There’s no one there Will. No one’s coming for you; no one knows you’re here. No one cares.”

Fleetingly Will thinks of the phantom car and how it darted and weaved across the road before seeming to vanish just as quickly as it arrived. At the time he’d been afraid that Matthew Brown was the driver, but his situation has grown sufficiently desperate by now that even an enemy’s appearance feels like something to be grateful for. Because there’s no doubt time is running out for him – that possibly he has only minutes left to live – and yet despite the fear and the failure and his raw and bleeding wrists, Will still refuses to give in to despair. He’s still got feet to kick with after all. Still got teeth to sink into Siemens’ skin. Still got blood and breath and the courage to die fighting…

“I don’t want them to identify you straight away,” adds Siemens as he starts to slink back towards the knives. “That means I’ll have to destroy your teeth. Dental records are no good without them are they? And then I’ll slice up your face. I won’t bother with your fingertips though Will, because by the time they do find you you’ll have rotted.” Siemens’ own teeth gleam again in a gruesome counterfeit of a smile: in the flickering light of the fire his mouth appears like a hole in the centre of his face. “Not even Dr Price could get prints off a pile of bones.”

*When my grave is broke up again,* thinks Will numbly. *Some second guest to entertain...And he that digs it, spies a bracelet of bright hair about the bone.* The memory of that night is so intense that for a few seconds it’s as if he can hear Hannibal’s voice murmuring the words; can imagine the long fingers ghosting through his hair as the dark eyes stared so intensely into Will’s own. If their roles were reversed right now – if it was Hannibal in the same hopeless situation he’s in – then how different their responses would be! Hannibal wouldn’t be afraid; not like Will is. If he were here then he’d be staring at Siemens with an equally unsettling smile and a veneer of ruthless composure that was impossible to crack. He’d be all glacial calm and serenely smiling patience: daring Siemens to risk coming near him and in full control of the situation, irrespective of the head injury or the handcuffs.

*You were always the ultimate predator,* reflects Will with a sudden sense of calmness. *And I loved you so much, even though you were never what you seemed to be.* Of course Hannibal’s mask was infinitely more sophisticated than Siemens’ ever was, but Will’s blindness to both had still been equal. There’s even a sober kind of symmetry to it, because the Sculptor case always hinged on hidden names and masked identities – Siemens and Nemesis; Black and Brown – and he and Hannibal had likewise possessed their own secret faces to hide behind from the world. Hannibal had said as much, his mouth quirking into a faint smile as he reflected on the contradiction between a title and the person that it actually describes: ‘We’re quite a singular combination aren’t we Will? Me the doctor with death as a vocation; you the investigator with a secret flair for murder.’

For a few seconds Will lets his eyes fall closed as the full weight of the revelation washes over him. *I know,* he tells Hannibal in his mind. *I understand it now...I understand why it meant so much to you.*

Siemens has left the curtains ajar and when Will opens his eyes it means he can clearly see his reflection for the first time as it glimmers in the window. The rigidly lethal expression is something that’s frightened him in the past, yet gazing at it now he understands that what Hannibal said was true – and has always been true, no matter how much Will’s tried to deny it. The attempt to lance the darkness and make it seep out led Will to reject their relationship, but no amount of denial or rejection can change the fact that the darkness was always there. Will now catches the reflection’s eye, exchanging solidarity and silent recognition, and it’s in that moment he finally understands that
while Siemens believed one person was lured into his car tonight it was really someone else all along. That person is now staring back within Will’s Dark Reflection; cold, calm and unafraid; and it’s then that he hears a softly seductive click as the lock on the handcuffs springs open.

“I won’t lie to you Will,” adds Siemens. Picking up one of the knives he holds it up to the light, admiring it from different angles as the blade snaps and gleams. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

Will stares back, static and unblinking. Good, he thinks, with the same eerie certainty. I’m going to enjoy it too.

Siemens, who’s clearly mistaken Will’s blank expression for fear, smiles to himself then replaces the first knife so he can pick up a larger one. “Ahhh Will, it’s really kind of a shame,” he says, deftly swinging it from hand to the other like he’s sampling its weight and heft. “If things had worked out differently we might have been friends. I could have respected you, you know?” There’s a pensive tone to his voice which seems genuine, and it occurs to Will that perhaps this was another clue all along: the undeniable draw he seems to have for monsters. ‘All these degenerates,’ Hannibal had said as he stroked his eyes across Will’s face. ‘You’re like catnip for them aren’t you? How do you manage to attract such very sinister suitors?’

Having selected his favoured knife Siemens now swivels round and plunges it into the fireplace until the blade is glowing hot; and Will watches him do it and draws in his breath, all nerves twitching and every muscle straining as he calculates the best possible moment to pounce. His timing will make the difference between life and death, yet he doesn’t really understand anymore what it is he’s fighting for. To save a life? To lose one? He doesn’t even know if he can save himself. Maybe not – not anymore – and maybe that’s just fine. Then in spite of himself he hesitates, because even in the midst of his pounding heart and racing thoughts it’s impossible not to notice the expression on Siemens’ face. The change that comes over it is swift and striking and it happens right in front of Will’s eyes: one mask getting switched with another as the mocking triumph fades away and he stares in horror at something just beyond Will’s shoulder. Then suddenly, shockingly – so suddenly Will can hardly believe it’s happening – there’s a quiet rustle of footsteps as a figure steps out of the shadows and a warm palm curls itself protectively round the back of his neck.

“Good evening Mr Black,” says Hannibal, very soft and lethal. “I don’t suppose you were expecting me were you?”

For a few seconds there’s nothing but agonised silence. In fact the tension is so electric it feels it could almost ignite, but while Will himself goes completely rigid Siemens just continues to stare: wide-eyed and open-mouthed in mute disbelief. “No, of course you weren’t,” continues Hannibal in a voice that smoulders with pure menace. “So excuse the lack of invitation to your gathering. Even so…” Drawing himself up to his full height he prowls a few paces forward then runs his eyes across Siemens’ horrified face. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to make room for one more.”

Chapter End Notes

Uhh SO sorry I didn’t update sooner my lovelies. I’d hoped there’d be no more delays with this fic, but the negativity it attracts has got a bit exhausting and it’s not making me feel very creative. I know the fic quality in the Hannigram fandom is super high, so I do understand why it’s disliked, but a big part of what makes writing fun is knowing people enjoy the story and it’s hard to stay motivated when the negative feedback is so extensive compared to the positive. (Sorry also if this sounds ungrateful – I’m hugely
appreciative of everyone who’s left encouraging comments or kudos, and it really does mean a lot to me).

Anyhoo, on the plus side, I’ve started working on another (non-Hannigram) story which has had a much better response than Bright Hair and it’s really helped recharge my Writing Mojo – hence this chapter finally arriving! And apologies again to anyone who’s had the patience to still read this and has been waiting for an update. I have a few back-up plans to try and get it finished quickly (the most exciting being someone else taking over the remaining chapters, which would be AMAZING if it happens because he’s a way better writer than me and would do a phenomenal job) but one way or another I’ll keep doing my 100% best to make sure you get a proper ending as fast as possible.

Lots of love to you all in the meantime! MissDis xox
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

A few people have been apologising for not commenting more and I just wanted to be clear that no one has anything to be sorry for! The fact so many readers have been motivated to be critical about this fic is my fault, not yours, so please don’t ever feel bad about not leaving feedback :-) 

In other news, check out this gorgeous art the supremely talented RenJaegerjaques has drawn for us to accompany chapter 20, which I hope you’ll love just as much as I did <3 

Also, anyone who’s read my first fic might like these fabulous animations that Lumerence very kindly made for it (and if you haven’t read it then still check them out anyway, because who doesn’t love animated Murder Husbands, amirite? :-D). And extra hugs and kudos again to RenJaegerjaques who’s also made other art for it this week which is simply breathtaking and could have come straight out of the show xox 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Will it feels like what follows is one of those rare moments of crystallised silence, one in which the whole world seems to close it eyes and holds its breath. It’s the type of moment where time also grows fluid and porous as one of Dali’s melting clocks and manages to lose all its meaning: just endless stretching seconds, where no one moves or speaks and Siemens stares in the same stupefied way as Hannibal stands impossibly tall and menacing and Will just sits there in the middle of it all and wonders how the hell any of it could have happened. By now the darkness surrounding Hannibal is so complete he might have almost melted into the shadows and become one of them; but Will still stares at him anyway, numb and overwhelmed and with eyes that can still see clearly yet at the same time are trapped in a world of melting clocks where everything’s too close and confining yet also much too far away. Then for a few seconds – only a few; only the length of a heartbeat – he remembers their final confrontation and he understands that perhaps this was always going to be their fate: that it truly is a zero sum game, just as Hannibal always said, in which the two of them are so indivisible that each gain and every loss is destined to be balanced out on the other side. Because no matter how far he and Hannibal might go to try to harm one another, Will knows in that moment that it’s always going to be impossible for either of them to see the other hurt by someone else.

In the end it’s Siemens who’s the one to smash the silence first. He does this by fumbling for a knife and waving it in Hannibal’s direction, and despite the frenzied danger of the flashing blade or furious face Will still finds something deeply pitiful about the gesture. Siemens still thinks he’s in control; he hasn’t realised yet that he’s not. As if to prove this Hannibal flicks his eyes contemptuously across the knife then returns his gaze to Siemens’ face again without flinching, and Siemens flinches instead for both of them then rears back his head and screams “Get out!”

His tone is forceful yet his eyes still dart manically around the room while his fingers twist and clench like large white crabs. Underneath the anger he’s clearly afraid, and course this fear makes sense because – why wouldn’t he be? He thought he only had one person to deal with and it’s turned out there were two all along: and always have been. One plus one and the Sculptor makes three, thinks Will rather wildly, briefly overcome by the enormity of who he’s currently sat in a room with.
It could almost be a set-up for a bad joke, like Zeller’s attempt at gallows’ humour the night Andrew’s body was found. ‘The Sculptor and the Chesapeake Ripper walk into a bar…’ But then what does that make Will? The punchline? Very deliberately he now gets to his feet, casually extending both arms to show the handcuffs dangling uselessly from his wrist, and Siemens’ eyes bulge even wider as another flicker of fear spasms over his face. Not that this is surprising either, because he never was a true predator. The Sculptor’s pursuit and pleasure was always easy targets – confrontation with a stronger adversary is a source of dread for him instead of a thrill or a challenge. The contrast between them couldn’t be more obvious, and once again it reminds Will of Hannibal’s words on the night he’d tried to kill Matthew Brown: ‘It’s alphas who are supposed to be the apex predators. I’m sure you knew that didn’t you? It means we are at the top of the food chain. So at the top of the food chain are alphas: but on top of the alphas is me. Me, beloved…and now you.’

It’s at this point Will realises that he’s moved so far backwards his spine is starting to press against Hannibal’s chest. Hannibal’s breath is ruffling his hair; their hands are brushing together. How did that even happen? He’s not really sure, although it hardly seems to matter anymore and he makes no attempt to pull away. “My commiserations Mr Black,” adds Hannibal in a voice that’s truly chilling. “It’s quite the predicament you’re in.”

Anger is always described as a hot emotion but Will knows that Hannibal’s anger is glacial and cold: the type of cold that burns the skin and shatters everything it touches into shards. Likewise he also knows that this anger has little to do with the Sculptor’s trail of dead omegas and is only based on the fate of one omega in particular – Hannibal’s own – which Siemens has been so rude to lay his hands on without permission. The last thing Will knows is that this misplaced anger should probably bother him, and yet right now it doesn’t. Just like how it doesn’t bother him that beneath Hannibal’s smouldering fury is a clear sense of pride at how Will, his self-described greatest Masterpiece, is poised to fulfil Hannibal’s perfect pitch-black fantasy. In fact in that moment it’s as if Hannibal is the true Sculptor: someone who’s literally carved Will into a living embodiment of their own destructive desires. Yet none of that bothers him either, because for the first time ever he’s no longer aware of the Dark Reflection prowling around scenting for blood. There’s no ruptured splitting at all in fact. There’s just him, ready to do what needs to be done. Just one person – just Will Graham.

“How did you…” begins Siemens. Will raises an eyebrow and the sentence stutters then fades into silence as Siemens seems to realise that the how of slipping the handcuffs is far less relevant than the fact Will’s done it at all. So Will stares back at him without blinking, watching and waiting and entirely unafraid as behind him he feels Hannibal placing something into his hand. It’s something that feels flat and cool – strangely comforting – and he doesn’t even need to glance down to know it’s the handle of a knife.

Another agonised pause then follows before Siemens breaks it again a growling noise that’s even more horrifying than his first one was. It’s snarling and bestial – a sound that could have been ripped straight from something dead or dying – and his expression twists into an ugly mask of rage as he draws back an arm and hurls the knife he’s holding straight at Hannibal’s face. Hannibal neatly swerves to avoid it with minimal effort and Siemens snarls even louder then scoops down to retrieve a second. It’s the same knife he thrust into the fire a few minutes ago and as he brandishes it the blade gleams all over again with an eerie sense of déjà-vu; as if the three of them are destined to be stuck here in an endless loop of flinging and brandishing that’ll carry on indefinitely until there are no knives left.

“You two are dead!” screams Siemens. “You’re dead.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitches slightly in a way that’s hard to interpret: possibly it’s a smile, possibly not. “You think so?” he says, and somehow his calmness is far more unnerving that Siemens’ hysterical fury. “Yes, of course you do. You already have a number of the dead to your credit.”
mouth twists again in the same Sphinxy way and he now waits a few seconds then slowly runs his eyes down Siemens’ face then trails them back up again. “I have to tell you that I admire your vision enormously. For the inspiration you should be congratulated. The implementation, on the other hand – much less so. But you were seized by a fantasy world, weren’t you? A way to reclaim power while purging your grief; it took you a step beyond being alone.”

He’s using the rhythmic tone that Will recognises so well – an invitation for his listener to slowly drown in the fatal intimacy he’s offering them – and the effect on Siemens is striking as before Will’s eyes he seems to shrink a little, growing small and vulnerable and almost childlike in his frailty. In fact for those few seconds it’s as if he can almost catch a glimpse of Richard Black’s youngest son as Siemens stops being the Sculptor and briefly transforms into the boy he must once have been before his father’s warped worldview destroyed him and made him lash out in frustrated fear at a world that’s tailor-made to hurt and thwart. But of course Will also knows that none of this changes anything and that it still it doesn’t matter. None of it matters…not anymore. Because Adam Black isn’t something to feel compassion for: instead he’s a warning. He’s a cautionary tale of what happens when you don’t believe in anything outside yourself.

“I want to kill you,” thinks Will now as he calmly stares at Siemens’ face. Because, oh God, he really does; and it’s a struggle not to revel in the magnificent truth of it, even though the statement is insufficient on its own because it feels like killing the Sculptor is no longer enough. He wants to annihilate him. He wants to tear him into tatters and scatter the dripping remains to the wind, demolished so utterly there isn’t even anything left to put in a casket for his sisters to mourn over. I know you now, he thinks to himself, once more running his eyes over Siemens’ face as he meticulously dissects the prey he’s been hunting so long. I know that a part of you – whatever’s in there that’s still human – understands what you’re doing is wrong but that you’ll never stop because it gives you a sense of power and fulfilment that’s unavailable to you anywhere else in your life. I know that killing makes you feel God-like and that you want to possess your victims completely, even in death. I know that in murdering them you’re trying to murder your own sense of misery and inadequacy. I know all this, but the thing is – I don’t care. I don’t care anymore about understanding you. I only want to stop you. And then after that, I will destroy you utterly.

“I don’t usually kill the alpha,” Siemens is now muttering to himself. “I kill their omega instead. I always kill the omega.” Fretfully he shifts from one foot to the other, appearing almost petulant at having the rhythm of his beautiful schemes disrupted without giving him time to prepare. “I wonder what daddy would think,” he adds in a louder voice. “What would he say about killing the alpha?” For a few seconds he rolls his eyes in a truly chilling way – as if he’s conferring with the spectre of Richard Black about the best course of action – then spits out “Which one?” in a tone of sensual excitement that makes Will’s skin crawl with disgust. In fact his voice has thickened by now, curdled and coagulating like the way the blood clotted across the bodies of his victims, and as he’s speaking he slowly waves the knife from Will to Hannibal and back again like a grisly game of Eeny meeny miny moe. It finally stops in Will’s direction and Siemens smiles very faintly then makes a few brutal stabbing motions in the air. “Omega whore,” he says. “I’ll kill you first. That way you can watch.”

He turns his head to Hannibal, mouth gleaming wetly in the flickering glow of the fire as he bares his teeth. “By the time I’m done you’ll be begging me to finish him off. You’ll want me to put him out his misery.”

Hannibal makes a sharp movement forward. It’s only a step or two – very poised and restrained – yet it’s striking to Will how Siemens automatically shrinks back at the sight of it. Possibly he’s not even aware he’s intimidated? In fact he almost certainly isn’t, seeing how it looks more like instinct than conscious choice. It’s something primal: impossible to articulate and simply showing that the victim knows it’s facing a threat that’s too dangerous to manage successfully. If a furious, snarling dog was present Will feels like it too would sense the menace in the air and grow subdued and silent – and likewise it wouldn’t fully understand why.
“You think you have the authority to grant a merciful death?” asks Hannibal, very low and intense.
“That you’re the one with the power to decide?”

Siemens bares his teeth but doesn’t actually reply. He’s begun to stroke his hand across the knife, the same the way you might caress a favourite pet, but while he’s pressing hard enough for blood to seep between his fingers he shows no signs of being in pain. “You arrogant alpha bastard,” he says very softly. “You’ve got no idea what you’re dealing with have you? You don’t even know who I am.”

“I know who you are,” replies Hannibal. The rest of the sentence is unspoken, but clearly implied: and I really couldn’t care less.

“But you don’t know who he is,” adds Will. A look of confusion briefly flits across Siemens’ face and Will waits a few seconds, struggling with a sudden sense of uncertainty over what actually led him to say this. To intimidate and disorientate would be the main reasons, probably; the sort of thing even Jack might do. Tactical reasons. Good ones. Yet deep down he knows a third reason also exists that’s even more powerful than the others – namely the sense of pride which wants to claim ownership of the superior predator in the room. Of course this sense of pride is just as misplaced as Hannibal’s anger is, yet having reached the realisation Will promptly decides to make peace with it and gestures in Hannibal’s direction instead without missing a beat. “You were right all along you know,” he tells Siemens. “You really did take on more than you planned for.”

Siemens darts his tongue across his lips with the same lizard-like gesture as before. It’s obvious he’s dredging over their earlier conversation to try and make sense of what Will means; and Will can see the exact moment he works it out, because his waxy complexion drains pale with shock in a way that even the smoky firelight can’t disguise. “No,” he says, and it’s like he’s talking half to himself. “You’re the Ripper? You?”

“Yes,” replies Hannibal with chilling simplicity. “Me.”

At the sound of his voice Siemens’ face visibly spasms: a layer of jerking muscle which leaps and convulses as if insects are crawling beneath the skin. It’s the same snarling ferocity of a rabid animal, yet while in theory it makes him even more reckless and lethal than he was before it does nothing to deter Will from tightening his grip on the knife and taking an ominous step forward. Behind him Hannibal shifts slightly and Will doesn’t need to see his face to know the satisfaction that’s written all over it, just as he doesn’t need a translation of what it means when Hannibal’s fingers brush lightly across the side of his wrist.

Go on, the touch says. Do it: it’s what you’ve been waiting for.

As Will steps towards him Siemens opens his mouth very wide and begins to scream. It’s not a scream of distress. Instead it’s one of rage and reeking raw aggression – and while it’s the type of thing that would probably have paralysed Will with fear in the past, right now it does nothing except strengthen his resolve. So he continues prowling forward as he moves in for the kill, and Siemens screams again then at the final moment leaps forward himself, his movement so slithering and disjointed in the flickering light of the fire that he looks like a giant insect. The blade of his knife catches the firelight too, and for a few frenzied moments it’s all crawling shadows and flashes of silver as Will ducks away from the crazily swinging knife with both striking speed and a stunning lack of fear. Siemens screams even louder then stoops and snarls before catching sight of Hannibal and appearing to lose his nerve, abruptly twisting out of reach instead and making a mad lunge for the doorway. Will swerves round after him then hisses with anger as another knife soars through the air and past his face, forcing him to lose precious seconds ducking to avoid it before sprinting outside in pursuit. The whole thing has a confused nightmarish quality to it with the darkness and helplessness; the feral growling sounds Siemens is making, or the way the moonlight and fog swallow them up in a ghoulish, ghost-grey covering that stings the skin and chokes the throat. Yet how exhilarating it all is regardless! The powerful flare of triumph that this time – finally – the
Sculptor’s not going to get away.

Outside the wind slices his skin like another knife as overhead the moon’s pale face watches his progress in silent sterile oblivion. Briefly Will now glances up at it, noting the way it wildly rolls amid the ragged clouds and the scattering of drowned stars that he’d gazed at so helplessly just a few hours ago. They look exactly as they did through the car window, yet as he stares at them now he has a sudden dull certainty sense that once tonight is over he’ll never see them the same way again. Only it’s not the stars that will change but Will himself, because he now understands, with a softly fatal acceptance, that even if he survives what’s ahead the person who comes back afterwards won’t ever be the same as the one who arrived.

“You’re going to die Will!” screams Siemens. His voice is crazed and shrill in the silent air, echoing like a ghost across the rocks and trees and the sound of the ocean. “I’ll cut you up like I did the others. You owe me a debt. You owe me.”

Will grinds to a halt, slowly turning his head like he’s scenting the air as he tries to detect exactly where the voice is coming from. *It’s just us now,* he thinks with a blank destructiveness. *Just us, playing games in the dark of the moon.* It’s what he brought Siemens to this lonely spot for after all; what’s he’s hunted through every crevice of Baltimore for…what’s he’s been waiting his entire life for. Behind him Hannibal’s footsteps glide in the darkness, although Will only pays them minimal attention because he knows Hannibal won’t intervene unless asked to. Right now he’s simply here as spectator: an eyewitness to Will’s Becoming. Blood, breath, bone, skin…a cauldron of destructive ecstasy that commemorates the death of the old then consummates the beginning of the new. Hannibal had always said so: the way Will needed to emerge from the chrysalis, transformed and ascended, having finally become one with his darkness. Only in this version Hannibal himself was a sculptor, and it’s hard not to think of it now: the way he’d gazed at Will with something close to worship as he quoted the words of Michelangelo, the most famous sculptor of all: ‘I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.’

How quiet and lifeless everything has become. Will can hear his heart in his ears now; the way the blood soars and pulses in the moonlight as he slowly assesses the scene. In fact his head is throbbing fiercely from his injured jaw while his limbs are heavy from heat suppressants, yet in the thrill of the hunt he’s forgotten both these things as he focuses on an anger that’s so burning and powerful it obliterates everything else. Besides, there’s no time anymore for weakness or injury because he’s currently in the centre of his very own killing ground: a personal amphitheatre for a fight to the death. As arenas go it’s a suitably sinister one. The air is frigidly cold and eerily silent, with stunted silhouettes crouched in every corner as sea mist creeps across them like skeletal fingers that twitch and tremble. *Come out come out wherever you are,* murmurs Will beneath his breath. In his hand the knife feels as if it’s already grown to be part of him, the blade long and wickedly sharp as it glints in the moonlight like grinning teeth.

From somewhere ahead the silence finally breaks with a sharp hiss of breath and Will stiffens when he hears it and immediately knows it’s the Sculptor. The way it repeats itself is oddly insistent, and while Will also knows that this is just a trick of acoustics – an illusion created by the wailing wind and pounding sea – it briefly seems as if the hiss is coming from all four directions at once; as if it’s everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time. *I’m going to kill you,* vows Will with ice-cold certainty. *Before tonight is over I swear to God I’m going to kill you.* In his ears his heart has started to pulse even louder with anticipation: a weird, unnatural rhythm that’s dramatically different to how it pounded so fearfully earlier in the evening.

“You’re dead!” screams out Siemens from somewhere in the darkness. His tone burns with hate and menace, yet once again it’s impossible to gauge exactly where he is. “I’ll slice your skin off your bones. You’re going to suffer for what you did...”
He’s still rasping and snarling the way he did in the house, yet it’s so hard to listen anymore to the rambling stream of words. Words like ‘betrayal’ and ‘disrespect’…there might even be an ‘injustice’ in there somewhere too. Noble weighty words that belong in a courtroom or the pages of some moralising novel, yet lose all their meaning in a scene like this where justice and nobility no longer have any value. No one here is noble; they don’t subscribe to conventional ideas of honour. Not Will, not Siemens…certainly not Hannibal. Then everything goes silent again before the snarling resumes even louder than before and Will spins round and sees that just ahead – there he is. The Sculptor.

His face is bleached strikingly pale in the moonlight and Will knows his own must look the same, just like two solitary ghosts confronting one another amid the shadows. Like two lost souls. And then, as he stands and watches, Siemens suddenly starts to move: lit up like a wraith beneath the dead moon and drowned stars as he bears down in a series of loping strides like an animal, eyes piercing the shadows while his knife gleams and his teeth glint through the gaping hole of his mouth. Eyes-teeth-knife….all looming closer, all the time. The eyes are as cold and dead as a shark’s with a crazed yellowish tinge but Will stares into them without flinching as the Sculptor descends on him like some relentless nightmare figure and the knife comes slicing through the air and whistles past his ear with a shrill, high-toned wail like something crying. Then he releases a long breath he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding as he faces his prey with a face that’s cold and set and an expression that’s unreadable. He’s nearly trance-like in his calmness and it’s a profoundly odd sensation: as if he’s taken a step sideways out of time and is now hovering overhead, watching himself and waiting. Hannibal is still invisible amongst the shadows, yet Will still feels his presence anyway and likewise knows that he’s observing everything that’s taking place.

It’s all so different now to how it was before. There’s no wince of distaste. No quiver of fear. Just a sinister inertia on both sides, with Siemens stood in front of Will like a blasted slab of stone as both knives glimmer and flash in the moonlight. It’s impossible to see his eyes now because they’re too obscured by shadows, but Will can see the gleam of his teeth as well as the way his breath is heaving in the frozen air in a series of icy billows. From both sides the rage and revulsion are so strong that the air is choked with them and Will feels as if they’re starting to colour his vision, like a veil of red gauze draped across his face – yet still neither he nor Siemens speak or move. Then Siemens takes a step forward, raising the knife as he does so, and it’s this gesture that finally jolts something in Will and makes him come rushing back to himself. He was only gone a few seconds, yet it feels like a lifetime before something shifts and the world is no longer monochrome and slow but fast-paced, pulsating and saturated in colour: shades of scarlet shot through with silver and crimson.

So as the Sculptor prowls towards him Will arches his back and then springs: supple and fearless with the savage grace of a predator as Siemens gives a shout of rage and stumbles backwards, his knife catching Will with a glancing blow that only misses by a hairsbreadth. Together they crash down onto the frozen ground and to Will there’s a certain brutal elegance to it – he’s always thought so – as he marvels at how swiftly, simply and beautifully a human body can be breached and broken apart. Siemens lunges forward too as he lands, his movements unnaturally fast and his grip unfeasibly strong, then makes a desperate grab at Will’s throat and tries to jerk his head back. Will, completely undaunted, kicks himself free then draws back his own knife and sends it plunging to its target in Siemens’ chest before a sudden rush from the heat suppressants briefly blinds his focus, quickly followed by an explosion of pain as the world goes white, then red. His face feels like it’s caught fire and it’s impossible to scream, so he doesn’t; but he can hear a stifled panting sound that he knows is coming from him – the sound of someone starting to choke on their own blood.

Siemens grunts with pleasure as he twirls his own knife between his fingers and despite the pain and confusion, Will still understands enough to know that he’s exploited the effects of Skinner’s earlier assault to smash a fist straight into Will’s damaged jaw. It’s a decidedly underhand move of course – the type of thing that would have no place in an honourable fight – yet Will doesn’t waste time
resenting it when he knows that conventional honour no longer has any value. By now an angry mantra has started repeating itself in his head – *No-no-no-no-no* – yet he knows it’s not coming from a reluctance to die, or even a fear of it, but from a simple raw refusal to allow this creature to claim him without a fight. And so he summons an almost supernatural level of effort and continues to resist: ferocious, fierce and lethally effective as he battles the onslaught, ignoring his injuries and failing strength and refusing to even cry out with pain as his injured face is pounded with the handle of the knife. Siemens grinds his teeth in fury, clearly frustrated that an omega who’s physically slight and small compared to himself has not been the easy opponent he anticipated; and Will’s just getting ready to stab him for a second time when suddenly Siemens is being tugged away, leaving Will free to roll to the side then jump to his feet.

The wind is sobbing and screaming behind them as Hannibal pins Siemens in place, one arm round his neck while the other claps his chest to keep him still. He makes it look effortless – almost cat-like, with litheness and silently agile stealth – and Will takes a step back then stares at them both, aware of an eerie rupture inside himself where one half is flayed from shock as the other burns with outrage. Because while his face feels like a living sculpture of carved-up skin and scorched-down pain, the only thing he can really focus on are all those other sculptures: all those dead and desecrated omegas, whose lives were destroyed for no better reason than to avenge the useless death of a monster.

Amid the moon and wind the crashing waves Will now draws himself up to his full height, strong and resolute despite the pain, and briefly catches Hannibal’s eye as he lets himself revel at how incredibly attuned the two of them have become. It’s as if they can sense and anticipate the other in a way that’s graceful and almost balletic – the ultimate *danse macabre* – and even amid the choking, grinding agony he feels a fierce exhilaration that burns even brighter than the pain. Because in that brief moment as their eyes meet he understands that the final responsibility for carving up the Sculptor belongs to him; and that this is the way it needs to be. He knows he can’t hand the knife to Hannibal to deal the fatal blow. He can’t call the police. In fact there’s only one thing he *can* do, and so it’s exactly what he does: which is to draw back the knife with a hand that’s totally steady then slam the blade straight into Siemens’ gut. *To the Devil his due*, thinks Will with blank finality. Then he tugs the knife free with a wetly crunching twist, ignoring the fresh fountain of blood that sprays across the grass, and thrusts it forward again as deeply into Siemens’s ribs as he possibly can. It’s done in the blink of an eye, seasoned with all the exaltation of a hunter whose patience and planning have finally been compensated, and it blazes in every possible sensation: the way the blade feels carving through flesh and snapping off bone as the skin ruptures and the muscles slice apart. Siemens screams in horror then fumbles blindly at his abdomen, helplessly pressing against the gleaming coils of viscera that protrude from it as if he thinks it possible to push them back inside his body. Then he screams again and kicks Will away, wrenching the knife out his chest with a slickly nauseating sound that’s straight from an abattoir while his life gushes over his trembling hands and drenches the grass in a scarlet cascade.

As Siemens staggers and reels Hannibal lets go of him then neatly steps backwards, flexing his shoulders then looking on in eerily silent spectation as the shared prey crumples downwards. He doesn’t speak a single word and Will himself is equally silent, lying just a few feet away from where he was thrown in the struggle as he stares up at the sky with its drowned stars and silver slice of moon amid the roar of the ocean. In fact there’s no real desire to move because he feels so deeply peaceful: serene, almost, even though he knows it’s wrong to be so – to feel so calm after what he’s done. He can see the blood on his clothes and hands (dark and thick, curiously shiny) and he can feel it too; how warm and wet it is and the way it pours and surges. But right now nothing seems as engrossing as the stars are: luminous sky-dwelling spheres which are constant and unchanging yet in this moment, exactly as predicted, feel like he’s seeing them for the very first time. It’s as if a veil has been lifted so the outlines and colours of the world can steal out of the shadows and refashion
themselves into something fresh and new, starting first of all with them. He doesn’t know the names of their constellations although suspects Hannibal probably would. And of course he can see them too, just as Will can, because right now some of their stars are the same. Just as they always have been.

For a few seconds Will allows his eyes to fall gently closed as he bathes in the newfound sense of peace. It’s so quiet now the sound of the fight has died. Hushed and reverent: nothing to hear at all except the pounding of the ocean and the way his breath is seeping up his chest and out of his mouth before sinking back in again. Just Will, lying there in the moonlit in the midst of carnage and distortedly deformed delights – a beautifully broken tragedy – yet aware of a haunting sense of contentment in spite of it that burns like purification. It’s exactly like Hannibal said all those months ago: how passion means pain; attaining your own ecstasy and revelation through your own suffering.

It’s at that exact moment, and without even looking, that Will senses Hannibal is close to him and when he opens his eyes it’s to see him leaning down, offering a hand to help pull Will to his feet. He’s covered in blood too, just as Will is: they’re both drenched in it. “It really does look black in the moonlight,” says Will, and his voice sounds very far away. Then he reaches out blindly with both arms: moving forward until he’s being enveloped and held close, a single sharp cheekbone stroking against his hair like the comfort of cradling hands.

“See,” replies Hannibal quietly. “This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.”

“It's beautiful,” says Will; and he knows that he means it. Except what’s most beautiful of all isn’t the fact that the Sculptor is dead but the fact he was murdered – and that Will is the one who killed him. Vaguely he’s aware of a tear starting to run down his face: a last streak of purity amidst all the blood. Hannibal doesn’t reply but his arms are still holding Will close and they stay like that for a while as the waves rush below and the moon glimmers above: Will trembling slightly and Hannibal stroking his shoulders and rhythmically moving his face against his hair. And it’s there, stranded in the middle of the moonlight and the streaming black blood, that Will has a clear sense of how Hannibal has finally got what he always wanted: a joint hunt, a shared kill, then Will in his arms at the end of it all. But even though they’re stood so close to the edge of the cliff he makes no attempt to steer them away. He knows that Will could lunge for him at any moment; knows that he has every reason to tip them into that pounding, cascading expanse of black water below. Yet he still doesn’t try to take himself to safety because it’s as if he’d be peacefully content to die like this. Just stood here, just like this. Stood here with Will in his arms…having finally got what he always wanted. And even Will, with his boundless empathy and endless imagination, finds it impossible to picture a greater show of devotion than the way Hannibal is standing there, calmly prepared to face death itself, if it only means the chance to have Will in his arms for a little longer – quietly curled up against his chest in a bloody embrace like a piece of himself that was broken away and after endless patient waiting has finally been restored.

“I can’t get rid of you can I?” says Will finally in a voice that’s very low and strained. “There’s nothing I can do. I could hurl you over this cliff and I’d still have to go with you.” It’s a statement, not a question, and the truth of it has a brutal blunt-force clarity as it occurs to him that he’s speaking as much to that dark part of himself as he is to Hannibal. Both of them are entwined into his soul and it’s impossible to cast them out. Hannibal doesn’t respond and Will now gestures towards the window where the glow from the fireplace is visible amid the gloom like an eerie will-o’-the-wisp. “I could burn you alive,” he adds numbly. “But I’d still have to breathe in the fumes.” Because of course he would; it’s both love and loathing in their mutually mismatched morality. It’s both beauty and horror – and in that moment Will is truly overwhelmed at how he’s possibly the only person capable of ridding the world of the Chesapeake Ripper while being equally crushed by the knowledge that he can’t ever bring himself to do it.
“I missed you Will,” is all Hannibal replies. It’s announced very softly and sincerely, and it’s not at all what Will was expecting him to say. Not that he really knows what he should have expected. Cryptic speeches perhaps, or elaborate metaphors – but nothing as piercingly simple as being missed. “You’ve been haunting me,” continues Hannibal, starting to gently run his fingers through Will’s hair. “That beautifully tortured mind and ravaged soul. Like an open labyrinth, Will: after one’s been drawn inside you there’s never a way to leave again. You’re impossible to let go of.”

Will doesn’t answer but simply tightens his grip as he struggles with the impossible task of finding the right words in the right order. It’s so overwhelming: English has an almost infinite selection to offer him and yet he can’t seem to find a single one. Then as he touches Hannibal’s chest his hand brushes something ominously warm and wet and when he realises what it then suddenly the words don’t matter anymore…none of them matter at all beyond two: ‘please’ and ‘no’.

“Oh God,” he says in tone of obvious panic. “What’s the hell is that?”

There’s another pause. So many pauses; it’s as if they could hold an entire conversation in all the gaps between the words. “What it looks like,” Hannibal finally replies.

“You’re hurt!”

Hannibal gives a hint of a shrug. “So are you.”

“Not like this though,” snaps Will. Pulling away he tugs Hannibal’s coat open then goes visibly pale. “Not stabbed. Oh Jesus – how bad is it?”

“It’s not so bad,” replies Hannibal with the same eerie calmness.

Will automatically presses down against the wound, trying to apply some pressure because it’s the only thing he can think of to do. “We need an ambulance,” he says, wincing at how fear has made his voice grow thin and strained. “Right now.”

“That would probably be wise,” agrees Hannibal as his own fingers brush across Will’s. “Not you though – put your phone away. Let me call it myself.”

“For God’s sake,” explodes Will. “What difference does it make?”

Instead of answering Hannibal removes his own phone from his pocket and proceeds to make the call with the same calm efficiency of someone ordering a taxi. “Because it’s better you’re not placed at the scene,” he replies once he’s finally hung up. “I want you gone before the police arrive.” Will opens his mouth to protest and Hannibal holds up a hand as a request for silence. “How many times have you said it to me?” he adds. “How many times have you longed to just disappear? Well, tonight’s your chance – and I want you to take it.” Will stubbornly shakes his head and Hannibal gives a faint smile. “It’s an occasion that deserves to be commemorated Will. You were magnificent. I knew you would be.”

“You should have stayed away,” says Will, wincing even harder at the way the bloodstain is starting to seep across Hannibal’s shirt. “Why didn’t you? I could have handled it myself.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal with another smile. “And normally I would have preferred to let you. But you’re injured and sedated; there was a real risk you could have been stabbed.”

“So now he’s stabbed you instead,” says Will, beginning to frantically scan the road. “For God’s sake, where’s the damn ambulance? What’s taking so long?”

Hannibal merely shrugs: serene and poised as a Grecian statue like someone without a concern in the
world. “Humour me Will,” he says. “Sit down with me awhile; just like you did the last night we were here together. Do you remember?” Will nods without speaking to show that he does and Hannibal smiles again then neatly folds his long legs beneath his body as he settles onto the grass. “Still wild and untameable,” he says softly as he stares out across the ocean. “Still just like you.”

Will shifts anxiously from one foot to the other then finally sits down too and lays his hand across Hannibal’s. He feels surprisingly warm beneath Will’s skin. Humid, almost, even as Will himself is freezing from the inside as his body contracts and his mind folds and his limbs grow slow and uncoordinated like a marionette being jerked and tugged by a clumsy operator who doesn’t know how…who doesn’t understand.

“I want you to promise me something,” adds Hannibal without turning his head away from the sea. “No matter what happens, I want you to promise that you won’t forget what you learned about yourself tonight. Don’t betray your true nature again Will. Don’t forget how beautiful it was.”

Will briefly shuts his eyes, remembering the quiet ecstasy of the hunt and the intoxicating thrill of the kill as Hannibal’s fingers move across his own, intimate and entangled amongst the blood. “I won’t,” is all he says.

“You mean like you?” says Will with a half laugh. “I suppose you’ve ascended so high you’ve started orbiting the earth.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal with another smile. “Although at least at such heights one is no longer limited by the laws of gravity.”

“Yeah sure,” says Will. “Principles, integrity, moral scruples…they’re just for us boring mortals down here on the ground.” He attempts to laugh again but this time it goes wrong halfway through and cuts into silence as he abruptly tightens his grip on Hannibal’s hand. “Don’t you dare leave me,” he says suddenly, his voice very low and intense. “Don’t you dare.”

There’s a small pause. “I’m going to be fine Will,” replies Hannibal who’s still continuing to gaze at the sea. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. The ambulance will be here soon.”

“You promised,” says Will. “Don’t you remember?” He draws in a shaking breath and when he speaks again his voice is on the verge of cracking. “You promised you’d never go anywhere I couldn’t follow you.”

Hannibal finally turns round and stares at Will for a few seconds before reaching out to gently cradle his cheek with his palm. “Yes beloved,” he says. “I do – I remember it very well. But I have to break that promise because you can’t follow me now. You need to go Will, do you understand? The Sculptor’s dead. This is the chance for freedom you’ve been waiting for.”

“I can’t,” says Will, tightening his grip even harder. “I can’t just leave you here.”

“You can,” replies Hannibal calmly. “And you must. Then have faith that I’ll find you again mano meilė – because you know that I always will. Maybe not immediately of course; but then you also know that I’m able to wait. I can wait for as long as necessary Will. I’ve already been waiting a very long time. I was waiting for you before I even met you; before I even knew such a person as Will Graham existed. I would have waited a lifetime – and if the wait proved fatal then I’d make sure I found you in the next life and waited for you there.” Leaning forward he places a soft kiss on the bonding spot on Will’s neck then adds with quiet intensity: “Echoes through time, beloved. Some
“Time’s running out Will,” says Hannibal, who’s watching them too. “And if you stay – if Jack Crawford finds you here and discovers what you did – then you know as well as I do that your dreams of freedom will die forever. Like some beautiful wild being preserved in amber, frozen in time as the world passes it by. I didn’t put myself between you and the Sculptor’s blade to watch you stifle to death in the FBI Will. I want you to go.”

He gives Will’s hand a final squeeze then deliberately withdraws his own, and Will swallows audibly then falters one final time before forcing himself to struggle to his feet. “Good boy,” says Hannibal in the same quiet voice. “Now run: fast as you can. Don’t look back. Trust me to take care of everything here. And then, after that…trust me to find you again.”

Will’s hands are really shaking now, far more than they ever did previously, and there’s a wetness across his eyelashes which prickles and stings with a grief that feels impossible to express. Leaning forward he presses his lips against Hannibal’s forehead, holding there for a few seconds as if he’s trying to breathe him in. Then as the wail of the first few squad cars begin to echo along the coastal road he finally straightens up, draws in a breath – and he runs.

Chapter End Notes

Ughhh, I’m really sorry guys. I know some people were excited about this, but I spoke too soon when I said my super-talented friend might be able to finish Bright Hair in the next few weeks. I shouldn’t have mentioned it until I was sure, but I got a bit carried away and it turns out he’s unlikely to be free to take it on until summer. On the plus side he’s going to help me re-edit it which should hopefully fix some of the problems, but I really don’t want to leave people waiting that long for the ending so will do my very best to finish it myself in the meantime. I’m going to put my non-Hannigram projects on hold until it’s done so am feeling pretty optimistic! But just to reassure people that if things don’t work out then I’ll post a detailed summary of the remaining chapters here on AO3 so that anyone who doesn’t mind spoilers can get a clear sense of what’s coming to tide them over until Danny can finish it properly later in the year xox
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks and hugs to RenJaegerjaques who’s made some more breathtakingly beautiful art for Chapter 29 and Chapter 45 that you should definitely feast your eyes on before reading this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months later

Inside the chapel the air is musty and stale with a lingering smell which steals into the throat and stifles the senses: a persistent, melancholy potpourri of candle wax, dusty prayer books and the citrusy tinge of furniture polish that’s fermenting in the pale beams of sunlight from the many rows of high-backed pews. On either side of the lectern someone has arranged a large bunch of Easter lilies (languishing in the gloom with an extra air of sadness as their waxy faces drip pollen to the floor like tears) while next to them are a row of flag stands, all currently pulled to half-mast. And behind the lectern itself is Jack Crawford: solemn and severe in a crisp black suit, whose face is even sadder than the lilies are and is etched all over in deep creases like someone in pain. After 20 minutes of speaking he’s nearing the end of his eulogy and it’s striking how in all the time he’s barely glanced up at the audience. The stagecraft and showmanship that were on such dazzling display at the welcome event are long gone now.

“I still don’t know why they’re doing this,” mutters Zeller in an undertone. His eyes have a pinkish tinge like a rabbit’s, although if anyone asks he’s insisted that it’s just a result of the pollen. “They never found a body. They don’t know that he’s…that he’s…”

“Dead,” snaps Price. “You might all well say it.”

“Dead,” replies Zeller stubbornly. His mouth twists up as he’s speaking, spitting out the syllable as if the word itself tastes bad. “Except that you can’t be declared dead without a body.”

“Which is why this isn’t a funeral,” hisses Price. “It’s a memorial service.” From the row in front one of the trainees turns her head to see where the noise is coming from and he stares at her indignantly until she lowers her eyes and swivels round again. “He might not be legally dead but that’s just a technicality,” adds Price. “Face facts Brian. Do you really think he survived the fall from that cliff?”

Zeller shoulders arrange themselves into a defiant little hunch. “They found Siemens’ body easy enough. He washed up the next day.”

“Indeed he did,” replies Price grimly. He pauses for a few seconds, mouth twitching with emotion, then noisily blows his nose into a large white handkerchief. “And I wish he’d been alive so I could have killed him again myself.”

Jack has now paused in his speech and Price and Zeller obediently fall quiet as from up on the stage he raises his eyes from his notes and looks directly at the audience for the first time. “You don’t need me to tell you how unique Will was,” he finally continues in a quiet voice. “How dedicated. How the gifts he had were never easy for him to bear, but how he bore them anyway because saving other people’s lives mattered more to him than fulfilling his own.”
“Very true,” mutters Price, reaching once more for the handkerchief.

“Countless lives,” continues Jack. It’s not the first time he’s said, yet once again he gives a visible wince at the use of the past tense. “We can’t ever know how many. Just think about that. How many possible victims were spared death because of the killers Will managed to stop? And how many of those people’s children will go on to be born in the future because of it?” Jack leaves the question hanging for a few seconds, inviting the audience to speculate at the breath of salvation offered by such service, then draws in another deep breath before retrieving a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* from his pocket. The book is brand new and shiny in its cover, clearly having been purchased for the task at hand, and Jack now carefully leaves through it until he finds the section he wants then clears his throat again. “I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss,” he reads, slowly pronouncing each word in a voice that’s far from steady. “I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy. I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

From the front row comes a subdued sound of sobbing and Jack replaces the book on the lectern then folds his arms as he gazes out at the sea of stricken faces. “So do me a favour,” he finally adds. “When you leave here today, keep your eyes open for someone who needs your help. Maybe it’ll inconvenience you to help them. Maybe it’ll even hurt you. But you offer them your help anyway do you hear? You go above and beyond.” He falters for a few seconds as his voice finally breaks with emotion. “And when you do – tell them that Will Graham sent you.”

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Many miles away, on the other side of the world, Hannibal takes a leisurely sip of his Masseto then leans a little further across the balcony to admire the view of the sea. Technically, of course, this is a cousin of the same waters that pounded by the cliff side house and yet how striking the difference is between them! A very distant relative, decides Hannibal: this one being the glamorous flighty member of the ocean family while its American counterpart is the irascible patriarch who’s greying and careworn and prone to fits of violent temper. In fact the Atlantic is very much on his mind this morning, given that as far as the FBI’s concerned it’s also Will’s last resting place and those roaring waters have formed a grave of coral and salt for his delicate bones. Yet the Atlantic is also an entire world away right now while the Mediterranean is a brilliantly piercing blue that laps against the sand in a lazy, sensuous way as if tempting onlookers to come and lie in her arms. Hannibal smiles with satisfaction then replaces his glass on the ledge as behind him he hears a soft tread of footsteps from the living room.

“It’ll be your memorial service today,” he says without turning round.

For a few seconds there’s silence before Will makes a vague humming noise in response. The hum is deliberately casual and unconcerned as if it’s slipped his mind entirely, even though both of them are well aware that he’s thought of almost nothing else all week. “Abiit nemine saluato,” quotes Hannibal wryly “‘He went away without bidding anyone farewell’.”

Will repeats the humming noise and Hannibal waits to see if he’s actually going to say anything before taking another sip of wine. The strained silence is still continuing, so no – obviously not. “I can just imagine the performance of Jack Crawford,” continues Hannibal with a rather malicious little smile. “The breast beating and the gnashing of teeth, doing his best to make it all about himself. He does so enjoy turning his remorse into a spectacle.”

“Maybe,” admits Will. In fact this is not something he particularly wants to think about: Jack’s speech or Jack’s guilt – especially Jack’s grief. “I guess it’s going to be hard for him.”
“Undoubtedly so.”

“Finding out that the Sculptor was working there the entire time,” adds Will with a tiny shudder. “And then me missing-presumed-dead. He must feel terrible.”

“I’m sure he does,” says Hannibal happily.

Will scowls at this and then falls silent again for a few seconds, fretfully gnawing his thumb nail as he tries and fails to not imagine it. “I wonder where they think you are,” he says eventually. “Everyone’s going to notice you’re not there.”

“Indeed they will,” agrees Hannibal. “I suppose they think I’m inconsolable with sadness and couldn’t bring myself to attend.”

“No one thinks that,” says Will irritably. “It’s impossible to imagine you being inconsolable about anything.”

Hannibal nods at the fairness of this assessment then follows it with an elegant wave of the hand. “Then perhaps they’ll assume I’m overcome with professional remorse. I suppose I might well have been: it was my responsibility to safeguard you after all.”

“I know it was. Didn’t do a very good job did you?”


Although this makes Will frown he ultimately chooses not to pursue it and resumes biting his thumbnail; on realising there’s nothing left to gnaw, he then frowns for a third time before switching hands to make a start on the other one instead. “It’s still a weird feeling,” he adds after another pause. “It’s the finality of it: knowing I can’t ever go back.”

Hannibal glances up sharply. “Why? Do you want to?”

“No,” admits Will. “No, I don’t want to go back. I’d never want to get trapped in the system like that – not ever again. But I would have liked to say goodbye to people.” Briefly he reimagines the scene at the memorial service and gives a loud, mournful sigh. “I’d have liked them to know I’m okay.”

“Don’t be too downcast mylimasis,” replies Hannibal in a gentler voice. “You’re to be congratulated. You stage-managed your own death with extraordinary success and then abandoned both your crime scenes with your reputation fully intact.”

“I guess,” says Will vaguely.

“It’s not a matter of guessing. From now on you’ll be celebrated and spoken of in terms of great respect and esteem.” Hannibal pauses himself then gives a faint smirk. “They’ll probably name a classroom after you or something equally sentimental.”

“Oh shut up, you’re not funny.”

“Or perhaps a scholarship programme?” adds Hannibal with relish. “The Will Graham Memorial Fund. Imagine the kind of candidates it could attract: I might be tempted to ask Jack’s permission to sit on the interview panel.” Will makes an exasperated noise and at the sound of it Hannibal finally relents and reverts back to his previous, more serious tone. “Don’t forget what you managed to escape from,” he says, reaching over to briefly rest his hand on Will’s shoulder. “If you’d stayed then yes, your colleagues would have had you alive – but you’d also have been scrutinised and studied as
the violent omega, after which you’d be forced into becoming an unyielding cog in Jack Crawford’s relentless machine. And that’s the best case scenario.”

“I know,” says Will irritably. “I know what would have happened. You hardly need to tell me.”

“This way your peers get to cherish the memory of you as a selfless hero who laid down his life in the line of duty – and in doing so disposed of a particularly vicious serial killer.”

Will gives another loud sigh. “At least they’ll be half right.”

“Only half?”

“I’m not selfless,” says Will firmly. “And I’m not a hero.”

“No?” replies Hannibal with a small smile. “I suppose the hero archetype is a little too clichéd for your tastes. We can keep you in the role of the warrior seeking justice instead; or would you prefer to be a rebel? It doesn’t really matter, does it Will? You can still keep your perceptions of your monsters to yourself and appreciate their design without becoming them.”

In response Will merely repeats his earlier humming noise, although this time there’s a clear quilting of tension in his jaw as a muscle starts to flicker there beneath the skin. “You’re still feeling guilty about them aren’t you?” adds Hannibal, who’s observing Will’s reaction with interest. “Don’t be. And don’t feel completely hopeless about an opportunity for closure.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They think I’m dead.”

“At the moment, yes,” concedes Hannibal. “But only because it’s more convenient for them to think so. There’s no reason you couldn’t contact them in a few months’ time, alive and well. I imagine amnesia would be as good a cover story as any.” He pauses and smirks again. “Then Freddie Lounds will write lots of exclamatory articles about you full of wild speculation and bad grammar, after which the tabloids will pick up on it and consider you a miracle case.”

“My acting skills are hardly up to that,” says Will impatiently.

“They wouldn’t need to be,” replies Hannibal with a hint of smugness. “You’d have a very respected psychiatrist on hand to examine you and vouch for the veracity of your symptoms. Posttraumatic retrograde memory loss: it’s rare, certainly, but by no means medically implausible. And since you’re an omega I’m afraid everyone would find the idea of a complete mental breakdown extremely easy to believe.”

Will darts a quick glance at him from beneath his eyelashes. “You think I’m dead.”

“At the moment, yes,” concedes Hannibal. “But only because it’s more convenient for them to think so. There’s no reason you couldn’t contact them in a few months’ time, alive and well. I imagine amnesia would be as good a cover story as any.” He pauses and smirks again. “Then Freddie Lounds will write lots of exclamatory articles about you full of wild speculation and bad grammar, after which the tabloids will pick up on it and consider you a miracle case.”

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Will darts a quick glance at him from beneath his eyelashes. “You wouldn’t.”

“No,” agrees Hannibal. “I would never have believed that. Fortunately I’m not the one you’d have to convince. Anyway, at least you have the option – and I’m certainly not suggesting you return to America anytime soon. In fact I’m not suggesting you return at all; it’s merely a cover with which to establish some long-distance contact with Beverly, Jack and the rest.” Hannibal pauses again then adds grudgingly: “If you really wanted to.”

“Well, we’ll see,” says Will, although he looks distinctly more cheerful at the thought of it.

Hannibal, content in the knowledge that there’s plenty of time to dissuade Will from anything so ridiculous as bothering to salve Jack’s guilty conscience, luxuriously stretches out all four limbs then closes his eyes against the glare of the sun. “It’s a rather poetic legacy you left them with,” he adds thoughtfully. “You and the Sculptor, tumbling into the sea like great adversaries. Shades of Holmes and Moriarty at the Reichenbach one might say.”
“You mean that you left them with. I can’t really take credit for that one.”

“No indeed,” agrees Hannibal with clear satisfaction. “Although at the time I confess I was more concerned with practicalities than poetic purpose. The rocks did their job very well; no one was any the wiser that you’d sliced him into such beautiful pieces beforehand.” He reaches out to take another sip of wine then gives a rather beatific smile. “And then of course there’s Mr Skinner. Such bad luck for him to encounter the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Oh give it a rest can’t you?” snaps Will. “I’ve already thanked you for that – more than once. And it’s not like it was even necessary. I’d already disguised it as a mugging gone wrong.”

Hannibal opens his dark eyes very wide. “But how was I to know that mano meilė?”

“You knew,” says Will firmly. “You just wanted an excuse to hack him up.” Hannibal smirks again then turns around to admire the view of the sea. “You were stalking me the whole time,” adds Will in confirmation. “I mean seriously – hiring a new car?”

“Stalking is such a sensationalist word beloved,” replies Hannibal, lazily stretching his arms behind his head. “You sound like Freddie Lounds. I was merely offering my assistance to you in a way that was sufficiently discreet to be acceptable.”

“Yeah, exactly,” says Will with heavy sarcasm. “You were stalking me.”

“If you insist,” replies Hannibal in the usual sardonic way. “Yet aren’t you glad that I was?”

Instead of answering Will briefly closes his eyes then draws in a deep lungful of air, intense and focussed as if he’s inhaling something which in his whole life he’s never really had before: the scent and taste of total freedom. Then he finally turns round and glances at Hannibal as for the first time his face breaks into a genuine smile. “Yes,” he says simply. “You know I am.”

*****

Even now, safely buffered by the protection of time and distance, it’s still hard for Will to look back at the past few months and decide which of the many nightmarish moments he’s endured managed to be the worst. In fact a single choice is pretty much impossible, given how they’ve all seeped together in his mind in a tattered kaleidoscope of anguished scenes and bloody images – although one thing he can be clear about is that the tone of dread was very firmly set the second he’d first turned his back on Hannibal on the cliff side.

To begin with there’d been the moonlit escape through the countryside, desperately hiding in bushes and ducking out the view of squad cars before he’d finally put a safe enough distance between himself and the crime scene to risk standing in the open to wait for a cab. There, injured and sedated, he still hadn’t dared go to a hospital and had ended up hiding out in Hannibal’s house instead with the curtains drawn, ransacking the contents of the first aid kit and then miserably crouching by the phone to wait for a call which never actually arrived. It was during this first night of hiding that he’d discovered how Hannibal had spun the crime scene in a way that obscured the full truth of what happened; and then, a few hours later, of how Skinner’s body had been disguised as a Ripper attack. But this was about as much as the TV or the TattleCrime could offer him, and he’d finally been forced to acknowledge that no amount of wishing or hoping could get him the information he’d wanted most of all: whether Hannibal had survived the night and was ever coming home.

A truly wretched week had then limped past in which Will had grown increasingly drawn and desperate from the fear that Hannibal might actually have died. It was clear he’d lost a lot of blood after all; and surely he’d have been in touch by now if he’d been able to? Yet even though it meant
disobeying what might well have been Hannibal’s last request, Will still couldn’t bring himself to disappear until he knew for sure. He’d therefore chosen to stay exactly where he was – rationing the food to make it last and creeping out in the dead of night to source more heat suppressants – before another week had crawled along in the same tormented way as the first and he’d finally got the message he’d been waiting for. Hannibal, it emerged, had been far more seriously injured than he’d been letting on, but after several blood transfusions and two separate surgeries was finally out the ICU and due to come home in a few days’ time.

Hannibal’s voice on the phone had sounded hoarse from lack of use and it was clear he’d been surprised, although extremely pleased, to realise that Will had run no further away than his own house. Yet despite keeping such faithful vigil for more than a fortnight, once Hannibal did come back a new source of distress had promptly emerged once Will had realised how impossible it was to relate to him with anything like the same affection as before. Too much had happened and forgiveness was still too far away, and so despite having his patience rewarded with an early reunion he’d found he was only able to interact with Hannibal in a cold, formal way that didn’t bear even the slightest resemblance to their previous intimacy. After a few more days had passed he’d finally thawed out a bit and was prepared to spend more time together – even sharing the occasional joke or fond remark – although there was no question of any physical contact and he’d made it painfully clear from the start that he expected separate bedrooms. Instead of attempts at anger or bargaining Hannibal had taken all this with his usual calm patience, almost as if he’d been expecting it; and it had finally occurred to Will that when he’d made the cliff side pledge to ‘find you again’ he wasn’t referring to physical separation at all, but rather a promise to find a way of reducing the emotional rift his behaviour had caused.

After another week of housebound hiding Hannibal had finally started to talk about leaving the country for good and travelling to Europe. Admittedly this had been the plan long before the night on the cliff so Will had found himself agreeing rather passively – without really letting himself consider what it could mean – simply because it seemed like it was easier to go than to stay. In this respect the future felt like a dark well that was mysterious and unknowable in its murky depths and after a few hours of tormenting himself with everything that might go wrong, he’d finally stopped forcing it to give up its secrets and focussed on the easier task of just stumbling from one day to the next instead. In the short-term this had included how to leave the country undetected, so to avoid leaving any kind of trail Hannibal had arranged for Will to travel under a false name on Hannibal’s own passport as his registered omega. It was impossible for Will not to think how outraged he’d have been if Andrew had ever suggested something similar, and it was clear that Hannibal had also remembered their conversation at the FBI because when he was showing it to Will he’d made a point of adding: “You know this is only for practical reasons don’t you? Even if you were my omega, I’d never try and limit your independence in that way.”

“It’s fine,” Will had replied in a rather aimless voice. “I don’t care.”

In fact he couldn’t help suspecting that Hannibal would like nothing better than to control his every move if he thought he could get away with it, and had therefore taken great care to conceal his own passport in his luggage to ensure that a means of escape would always be on hand if needed. Nevertheless when he’d arrived at the airport he’d actually found that he did care – very much – because the situation with the passport was such a grisly reminder of how bonded omegas have a legal status that’s only marginally better than a child’s would be. In revenge he’d ended up doing a grotesque parody of every omega stereotype in existence by fluttering his eyelashes like a Disney cow and pretending not to understand the instructions about hand luggage so that Hannibal would be forced to explain them to him in painstaking detail in front the entire first class lounge. Although even this had backfired in the end when it grew obvious that the surrounding alphas were getting dangerously enamoured by the display of idiocy; smiling fondly and then nudging each other at the sight of him as if say ‘goddammit guys, look at that enchantingly adorable dumbass.'
“Isn’t he lovely,” the check-in agent had said loudly to Hannibal while scanning their joint passport. “Look at that little face. I can’t even remember the last time I saw a male one.” She’d then proceeded to ask Hannibal where he’d found him – rather as if Will was a dog – then ‘ooohed’ and ‘aahed’ over Hannibal’s alarmingly fluent lies about Will coming from a wealthy family in Fairfield County as if she was hearing about the discovery of the Magna Carta as opposed to a bullshit story about buying a random omega from a bunch of rich assholes. The whole thing had been excruciating, and Will had had absolutely no choice but to stand there and listen to it (scowling like a goblin the entire time and twitching irritably at the scarf he’d been forced to wear to disguise the lack of bite mark on his neck).

“Well, you certainly got your money’s worth,” the woman had finally concluded. “He’s as cute as a button.” And it had taken a truly superhuman level of effort for Will not to simply turn round and tell her to fuck off.

“You might want to flaunt your omega traits more sparingly,” Hannibal had said afterwards in obvious amusement. “What if it unleashes some primal alpha instinct in me? I might decide I prefer you like that all the time.”

Will, who was still sulking over being compared to a button (a goddamn button) had snapped “Then you’ll wind up disappointed won’t you?” and proceeded to bury himself in a magazine and read the same article about Noam Chomsky three times in a row to avoid making further conversation. In fact the entire trip had felt strained. Unlike the last time they flew together he’d refused to curl up against Hannibal or fall asleep with his head on his knee, and when the air steward referred to him as Hannibal’s omega he’d shown no sign of being annoyed about it, the clear implication being that ‘it’s only an act, so why should I care?’ Every so often he’d catch Hannibal staring at him with the sort of blank expression on his face which on anyone else might be described as sadness; but then all the memories of the journal and the betrayal and the unbearable fact of who Hannibal really was would resurface themselves and Will would turn his head away and stare determinately out the cabin window instead, watching as the roiling grey waves of the Atlantic gradually turned into the deep, dreamy blue of the Mediterranean.

Over a month later and Will is now less wary and far more relaxed, although there’s no doubt that their shared villa is more like a sublet or a business tenancy than the lover’s hideaway he’d imagined when he and Hannibal originally agreed to run away together all those months ago. In fact even the expression doesn’t seem to fit anymore. Run away: it sounds so romantic and compelling – shades of Romeo and Juliet with forbidden love that’s seasoned with wine and roses and long summer evenings where the sun always shines. Right now is feels more like they’re on the run, even though that’s not quite either because no one is actually looking for them. Perhaps he’s on the run from himself, then? Trying to outrun the past.

Hannibal, in turn, takes Will’s aloofness in his stride and appears to accept the constant rejection with the same calm patience as he did in America. Being Hannibal this means he manages to suspend himself in a state of serenity whose porcelain perfect veneer never seems to crack – and yet every so often he’ll still give himself away. Mostly this happens in the evenings when the sun is low and the sound of music and laughter drifts in through the open window and Will catches Hannibal staring at him with the same yearning sadness that he did on the plane. And whenever it happens Will always ducks his head and turns away; yet somehow he never manages it quickly enough for the expression not to remind him of Hannibal’s cliff side pledge and the way it’s being uttered in that single look in that single moment. I’ll find you, the look says. I’ll wait for you. I love you.

*****

Later that day Will finally pulls himself together long enough to stop brooding over the memorial service and summons up the effort to walk down to the seafront instead for a much needed change of
scenery. Once there he buys a chocolate gelato (which is the type of thing it’s only possible to do if Hannibal isn’t around to witness it) then eats it rather mournfully as he leans against the railings and watches a number of dogs gambolling through the surf with their assorted owners. There’s a fresh zesty breeze in the air that feels very pleasant against his skin, yet the sun’s still far too fierce to stand in for long so he finds himself returning home again earlier than planned – and where he heads straight to the kitchen to splash some water across his face before announcing, possibly for the fortieth time that week “Oh God, it’s so hot.”

This is accompanied by a small, disdainful snorting noise as if the heat is a point of personal offence; and which means that Hannibal has to reply (also for the fortieth time): “It’s the Mediterranean beloved. It’s supposed to be hot.”

Will now repeats the snorting noise in Hannibal’s direction – as if he thinks that he and the weather are conspiring together to be unreasonable – before stalking into the living room to curl up on the sofa. Hannibal follows through behind him and Will now glances upwards in order to deliver a woeful look from over the top of his glasses. “There were lots of dogs on the beach,” he says unhappily. “I miss mine so much.”

“I know you do.”

“It’s frustrating. Quarantine takes forever.”

“You visit them constantly and spoil them shamelessly,” replies Hannibal with a hint of waspishness. “They have absolutely nothing to complain about.”

Will huffs for a few seconds and then quickly glances at Hannibal again, briefly playful and impish in a way he hasn’t been for a while. “Okay, I get it,” he says. “You’re jealous aren’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” replies Hannibal with dignity.

“Course you are,” says Will cheerfully. “You always hate me paying attention to anything that isn’t you.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes then leans back in his chair and folds his arms. “If it pleases you to think so.”


“Indeed?” says Hannibal. “I’m surprised to hear you speak of your hairy children so disparagingly. From the way you eulogise them I would have thought their affections were more than worthy of competition.”

Will smirks then stretches out his foot as if he’s going to nudge it against Hannibal’s before seeming to change his mind halfway through and retreating again. “I suppose I can hardly fault you for your fondness,” adds Hannibal, who’s watching the foot’s progress with interest. “It’s astute of you isn’t it? You know better than anyone how animalistic human beings can be. A preference for human company is supposed to reflect our more civilised tendencies, yet dogs are the only creatures you’ve ever considered safe enough to share your home with.”

“Apart from right now,” says Will pointedly. “So what does that say about you?”

Hannibal, who always enjoys Will’s verbal jabs, begins to smile appreciatively in response. “What it says about me,” he replies, “is that I don’t subscribe to the fiction that human beings have evolved very far beyond our original, more primitive instincts.” Hannibal pauses for a few seconds then gives Will a long, slow glance from beneath his eyelashes. “And neither do you beloved: just look at what
you did to the body of Andrew.”

At the reminder of this Will visibly flinches, although whatever he’s thinking doesn’t seem enough to make him want to respond. “You broke down the human/animal divide rather beautifully and literally made a beast of him,” continues Hannibal with obvious approval. “It fascinates me, Will. I’m fascinated by all human capacities, as you know, but perhaps none more so than our cherished misassumption that we’re the superior species.”

This time Will goes completely rigid. It’s like he’s rehearsing something in his head – something dark and forbidden which needs to be twisted into increasingly anguished angles in order to fit – and Hannibal watches patiently without interrupting until Will finally proves he’s got the courage to go there after all and replies: “Yes, it’s a thin line between humans and animals isn’t it? Very thin.”

“Positively permeable,” says Hannibal with a low sigh.

“All our intricacies,” adds Will, half to himself. ‘Consciousness, sentience, self-awareness: yet in many ways we’re still no better than…” He gives a small flinch then finally forces himself to look Hannibal directly. “Food.”

Hannibal gives another sigh, struggling to conceal how impressed he is with Will’s darkly moral daring and how brightly and fiercely it burns. “For you, maybe,” continues Will with obvious sharpness. “But not for me.”

“Naturally not,” replies Hannibal, rapturously stroking his eyes across Will’s face. “Ah, I wish you could see yourself now Will. You’re wearing that defiant expression again: it’s the same one you always use when you’re trying to distinguish yourself from me. You look just like you did that night in my house when you accused me of trying to remake you in my own image. Do you remember? How deeply you rebelled at the thought it? ‘I wanted you to accept me for who I am,’ you said. ‘For me: not just because you wanted some twisted version of yourself.’”

“Of course I remember,” snaps Will in the same terse voice. “You think I’d forget something like that?”

“But do you remember what I said?”

This time Will doesn’t reply straight away as a shadow of something indefinable flickers across his face. “Yes,” he says finally. “I remember. You said you didn’t want a version of yourself: you wanted something which in your whole life you’d never had before.”

“Exactly so,” agrees Hannibal, and there’s now a gentleness in his tone which wasn’t previously there. “I wanted an equal, Will; genuine partnership. That means I embrace your past, defend your present and embolden your future – and it means we can exist side by side without you having to become me.” He pauses then smiles very slightly. “It’s what you’ve done with all your monsters after all. You empathize without participating.”

Will abruptly removes his glasses and scrubs a weary hand across his face. “You lied to me,” he says, and for the first time there’s a real quiver of emotion in his voice. “I trusted you and look what you did in return.”

“Yes, I betrayed you,” replies Hannibal without flinching. “Over and over again.”

“You were manipulating me the whole time. Virtually nothing you said or did was sincere.”

“I know,” replies Hannibal in the same gentle voice. “And I know I need to spend a long time before I can make it up to you. But at the very least you know why I acted the way I did?” Will sighs with
impatience, but while the angry crease doesn’t fade from his forehead he still gives a faint nod of agreement. “You had one foot on the side of beauty and one in that of horror,” continues Hannibal softly. “Incapable of choosing one side or the other yet equally unable to reject them – and poised on the brink of destruction the entire time. That night on the cliff Will, when you said how beautiful it was. That was when I knew you’d finally found your freedom.”

Once again Will doesn’t reply straight away, instead silently shifting round to inspect his face in the shiny surface of the door panel. The Dark Reflection is there as always, maintaining its usual prowling presence at the edge of his consciousness, and yet how little resemblance it bears to the grotesque figure from a few months ago. Now it’s simply hovering in the background, stripped of its power to devastate because he can finally see it for what it is: a caricature woven together from fear and ignorance in the chambers of Will’s own mind. I’m more than just you, he thinks quietly. You’re not who I am. The Reflection stares back at him, pale and watchful as ever with its glassy dark eyes, but Will now ignores it and slowly returns his gaze to Hannibal again. “Perhaps,” he says slowly. “But it’s still not as simple as that. It’s nowhere near. Because you’re right what you said Hannibal – I’m not like you.”

As Hannibal opens his mouth to reply Will sharply holds up a hand for silence. “Sure we’re similar in some ways,” he adds. “Like two sides of the same coin. People say that don’t they? When separate things are similar…” two sides of the same coin’. But it’s still not perfect proportion, because no coin is ever identical on both sides. And that means you don’t get to dictate the terms anymore Hannibal: not ever again.”

Hannibal leans back against his chair and regards Will through eyes that are very faintly narrowed. “I understand that.”

“Do you though?” snaps Will. “Do you even know how?”

“But even if I didn’t it would hardly matter,” replies Hannibal, very calm and precise. “Don’t you see? At the place you’re in now my manipulations would be useless, even if I did want to apply them. You’re poised, strong, self-possessed – free of any kind of terror or oppression. You’re no longer afraid of yourself Will; and that means you no longer need to fear my attempts at influence.”

For a few moments he falls silent again, briefly closing his eyes as if reimagining the roar of the Atlantic and the moonlit shadow of the cliff. “We’ve already relinquished our control together haven’t we Will?” he adds in an even softer voice. “Like a leap of faith from the same precipice. The same plunge into the same abyss at exactly the same time.”

Will slowly nods as he processes this before finally giving a shift in his seat as if he’s abruptly coming back to life again. “I honestly don’t know what’s going to happen,” he says at last. “I admit it – I don’t know. What I need from you, what you need from me, what we’ll end up doing together… we’re going to have to figure it out as we go along. But there’s one thing I do know.” Leaning over he darts out a hand to seize hold of Hannibal’s wrist; and while the grip is hard enough to hurt, Hannibal doesn’t flinch or pull away, appearing content to tolerate whatever it is Will wants to administer. “I’m serious,” says Will in a voice that’s low and intense. “If you ever do anything like that to me again…”

He pauses ominously and Hannibal gives a faint nod in return. “It’s all right,” he replies. “I know what you’re going to say. And I know that you don’t intend to start haranguing or threatening to harm me because you understand, sadistic boy that you are, that you can warn me off with something even more severe.”

Will stares back, coolly appraising. “Which is what?”

For a few seconds Hannibal’s eyes assume their yearning far-away expression before the moment
has passed and the look has gone, and he curls his hand over Will’s and gently strokes his thumb across the knuckles. “You know perfectly well,” he says softly. “To find a way to leave.”

*****

A few weeks later sees Hannibal basking on the balcony like a large cat as he earnestly tries (and sincerely fails) to convince Will to come outside to join him. In this respect it’s obvious that Will isn’t particularly fond of the sun and seems to spend most of his time hopping from one patch of shade to another – although even this hasn’t been enough to stop the hot climate leaving a delicate dusting of freckles on both cheekbones and added a few dark strands of gold to his hair. Sun-kissed, thinks Hannibal approvingly; as if Will is so irresistible than even the sun feels a need to caress him. His own skin, which never needs much persuasion to turn olive, is now stained with a deep tan but it seems like Will is much too pale and porcelain to ever manage the same. The dainty collection of freckles and a rather charming blush colour are about as far as he seems able to go.

“Come out of your cave beloved,” says Hannibal now. “I want to show you something.”

There’s a small pause and Hannibal waits patiently until he’s rewarded with a pattering of footsteps as Will appears and pokes his head through the doorway. “Closer,” says Hannibal leisurely. “Or if you insist on staying there you’ll need your glasses.”

Will falters for a few seconds before appearing to decide that the effort of venturing outside is preferable and proceeds rather gingerly to the chair next to Hannibal’s. “I don’t know how you can stand this,” he says fretfully. “The air’s scorching. It’s like the hell fires.”

“Then I suppose I must be at home in the hell fires,” replies Hannibal with a small smirk. “You’ll get used to it eventually.” Will makes a disdainful sound. “Well it doesn’t matter too much if you don’t,” concedes Hannibal. “It’ll be autumn before much longer and the temperature will drop.”

“What do you want?” says Will, who still sounds irritable. “The sun’s giving me a headache.”

“I hope you know why?” replies Hannibal. “Because if you don’t then you should.” Cracking open an eye he now gives Will a rather severe look. “Photosensitivity is a common result of misusing heat suppressants.”

“Oh God, don’t start with that again.”

“Why not?” asks Hannibal in a firmer voice. “Just because you’re in denial about the long-term effects doesn’t oblige me to do the same. You need to decide what you’re going to do Will – otherwise you might as well just opt for efficiency and reserve your place in the emergency room right now.”

“I said leave it,” snaps Will. “We can talk about it later.”

“Yes indeed,” replies Hannibal tersely. “The later which never actually comes.”

Will tosses his head like an angry horse and Hannibal watches him for a few seconds while struggling with a rare urge to lose his temper and snap back something angry himself. In fact Will’s refusal to stop taking the suppressants has turned into a source of great personal concern, but he likewise knows it’s pointless to push any further when Will’s being this defensive and stubborn. Reluctantly Hannibal now chooses to drop the subject and reaches into his pocket instead to retrieve his phone. “Look,” he says a gentler voice. “I saw this advertised and thought it seemed quite amusing. Would you like to go?”

Will takes the phone and squints at it, one hand shading against the glare of the sun. “Maschera,” he
reads, running his eye across the picture rather critically. “What’s that?”

“It means mask. Similar to a masquerade ball; think of the carnivals they have in Venice.”

“Oh sure, like the Phantom of the Opera,” replies Will as he hands the phone back. “Great. And no—absolutely not.”

Hannibal smiles again. “I suspected that would be your response. You wouldn’t have any objections if I go alone?”

“No,” says Will rather sulkily. “You can do what you want.”

“Your approval is appreciated.”

“I really don’t see the appeal though,” adds Will even more sulkily. “And look how expensive the tickets are.”

“It’s a charity gala.”

“More like daylight robbery.”

“And it’s being hosted in a private house. One expects such events to be exclusive.”

“You mean you want to go and hang out with all the other rich alphas,” says Will. “You’re such a snob.”

“No doubt,” replies Hannibal, who doesn’t sound remotely concerned about this. “Although my interest isn’t purely social. There’s a chamber orchestra playing which I particularly want to hear, and the food promises to be very good.”

“I bet it’s not,” says Will with morbid satisfaction. “Rich people are always cheap with stuff like that. I bet it’s just microwaved lasagne poured into expensive bowls.”

“On the contrary,” replies Hannibal, gesturing once more to the phone screen. “The catering firm is listed as one of the attractions.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to. But the owner is someone whose work I admire very much.”

“I’ve never heard of him either. And how can you call it ‘work’? It’s cooking, not painting the Sistine Chapel.”

“In that opinion you are completely mistaken,” replies Hannibal briskly. “To cook well is to make an art out of necessity. It requires creativity, imagination, dedication and passion; and which makes a true chef an innovator who works with food the same way as a painter works with oils and palette. I see you’re looking sceptical but I am perfectly serious. What is an artist, as Oscar Wilde says, if not a creator of beautiful things? And what’s more conducive to the service of beauty than taking what is deplorably dull and stolid—‘our daily bread,’ as the vernacular has it—and transforming it into something that entices the senses; which can innovate, or even provoke, but ultimately acts to the purpose of rendering something exquisite from the banal and mundane?”

“Are you done?” says Will, miming looking at his watch.

“I am not done. Art appears in all sorts of unexpected places. Consider what Thomas De Quincey had to say about it. It’s an essay of his published in 1827—you should read it some time. I think it
might amuse you.”

“Who?”

“Look it up,” says Hannibal smugly.

Will narrows his eyes and doesn’t reply, although despite the pretence at disinterest he still waits until Hannibal has closed his own eyes and appears to be dozing in the sun before promptly sneaking his phone out of his pocket to have a look. The essay itself is easy to locate and has a title that leaves little to the imagination: ‘*On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.*’


“Yes, I thought so,” says Hannibal whose eye are still closed. “I’m glad you agree.”

Will can’t help starting to laugh at this and Hannibal finally opens his eyes and turns round as his face arranges itself into one of its rare genuine smiles. In fact it’s the type of moment that’s brimming with shared humour and mutual connection; the sort of scenario that would once have prompted Will to playfully swipe at Hannibal with his hand, probably followed by kissing his forehead or even climbing onto his knee to teasingly tug at his hair. But now he simply returns the smile and then waits a few more moments before getting up again and quietly going back inside the house.

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After the first conversation Hannibal doesn’t mention the ball again which means Will doesn’t either, despite secretly hoping the entire time that Hannibal might change his mind about going. Only he evidently hasn’t, because a few days later when Will returns from visiting the dogs it’s to find an empty house and a spare ticket lying on the table next to a note in Hannibal’s elegantly swirling handwriting advising ‘*If you change your mind.*’

“No chance,” Will informs it, before realising that he’s talking to a piece of cardboard and that in no version of reality could this be considered a sane or sensible thing to do. The ticket itself stares smugly back, basking in its glossily expensive glory with its copperplate font and many intricate drawings of masks – which are probably meant to look elegant, but instead strike Will as faintly sinister because of their association with the Sculptor case. In fact masks are always going to feel tainted now. And not just from the Siemens link either, but from their broader reminder of Hannibal’s betrayal, the hazards of secret identities, and Will’s own lurching crisis of self-deception. In other words…fuck masks.

Will now stares at the card for a few more seconds before realising he’s biting his lower lip and has to force himself to stop. In fact it’s an uncomfortable thing to admit to, but having spent only a few seconds on these more serious concerns he’s ashamed of how he’s promptly started obsessing over something far less dignified: namely the idea that there’ll be other omegas there tonight. *Lots of omegas, most likely…hordes of wealthy, beautiful bastards who’ll all look like Alex and be prowling round for eligible alphas.* Admittedly it’s not the first time this thought has occurred to him, but while he’s never raised it with Hannibal he now can’t help wishing that he’d mentioned it while he’d had the chance. Only…what would he have said? He’s always found those sort of intimate discussions to be difficult at the best of times; and considering he’s barely let Hannibal touch him since the night on the cliff, it seems a bit late to lay down ground rules out of nowhere when to all intents and purposes they’re both currently single.

“It’s *fine,*” Will loudly informs the ticket, briefly forgetting the earlier resolution not to talk to it anymore. “I don’t want to go and it’s *fine.*”
The ticket gazes back with a superior expression on its glossy golden face and Will turns his back on it and busies himself with brewing a cup of coffee that he doesn’t actually want. Then he drinks it propped up against the counter and traces an aimless pattern on the tiles with his foot as he considers how nice it’ll be to have the house to himself for once. Because it will be won’t it? It’ll be *nice*. Defiantly he takes another sip of coffee and tries to imagine it: the niceness of not having Hannibal’s long legs taking up all the space on the sofa, no beady black eyes following him round, no incessant requests to sit in the sun like a big lizard…

By now Will has finished his coffee, so he makes another one – and drinks it, and washes up the cup and the cafetiere – but even then finds he still can’t quite commit to following his original plan of crashing out in his bedroom with a trashy film and a few bottles of Peroni (despite how *nice* it’ll be not to have to listen to the type of horrified protests from Hannibal that would be more appropriate for someone drinking bottles of urine than cheap Italian beer). Briefly Will narrows his eyes again. Hannibal, of course, will be sipping vintage Dolcetto from crystal glasses with slender stems right now, no doubt surrounded on all four sides by omegas. The omegas are probably handing the glasses to him and delivering extravagant compliments about the dark eyes and long legs – the first of which won’t get described as beady as opposed to ‘soulful’ or ‘striking’, and the second for which the omegas would happily give up room on their own sofas.

“Oh God,” says Will finally. “You did it on purpose didn’t you?” Because of course Hannibal has (the crafty old bastard); yet somehow the awareness of being manipulated still isn’t enough to stop him hauling himself upstairs to get changed. Making a lot of effort feels like a bad idea out of principle, so he deliberately pushes his more formal clothes to the back of the closet and instead opts for jeans and a simple black shirt with no tie and the top two buttons undone – although still steals some of Hannibal’s expensive cologne before running a few drops of gel through his hair to give it the sort of definition it never usually has. Then he stuffs the ticket into his pocket and after a brief hesitation leaves his keys on the table and calls a cab instead, because getting mindlessly drunk is probably the only way of making the evening bearable.

Having committed himself to going Will now finds that he’s started to lose his nerve and ends up hoping that the taxi will take ages to arrive in order to delay things a bit longer. In fact considering the decrepit state of the local firm this actually seems quite likely; which promptly adds another layer of irony when it turns up nearly straight away with an alpha behind the wheel, who keeps running his eyes over Will with obvious interest until Will gives him such a fierce glare in his rear view mirror that he awkwardly clears his throat and focusses on the road again instead. In this respect the pheromone spray has been much harder to access than it was in America, yet its absence doesn’t particularly bother Will and it’s hard not to bask in how confident he feels at being in public without it. Then he settles back against the seat and gazes out the window as bleached blonde fields of wheat slowly give way to a tangled thicket of trees like a fairytale forest and he’s forced to acknowledge that when Hannibal said the ball was being hosted in a private home he’d somehow neglected to mention that it was more like a goddamn castle.

“*Castello di Giacinto,*” explains the driver, who’s clearly desperate for an excuse to get a conversation going and proceeds to deliver an unbelievably boring lecture in broken English about the villa’s past and present occupants that Will can’t even be bothered to pretend to listen to. Although even with the not-listening and the bad English it’s impossible to miss the excessive references to the *Viscontes* of so-and-so and the *Marcheses* of something else – and which at least partly explains Hannibal’s enthusiasm for being here tonight, because that sort of shit is right up his alley. In fact isn’t Hannibal some sort of Count himself? Will’s fairly sure his father was, although it’s not totally clear if the title is hereditary. What if it is though? And what if they *had* been bonded; what would that have made Will? A Countess? Will rolls his eyes slightly then resumes staring out the window again to where a sinuously winding driveway is starting to curve like a snake through a grove of Cyprus trees and an occasional life-size marble statue gleams pale as a ghost in the
duskiness. In fact the driveway is so long that it seems to take hours to reach the house although they
manage to get there eventually; at which point Will promptly remembers the Viscontes and
Marcheses and decides it’s fairly safe to assume that he’ll be the only person turning up tonight (or
possibly ever) in the back of a beat-up local taxi. Once this would probably have embarrassed him,
but as he steps out amid the sleek collection of limousines he can’t help taking a perverse satisfaction
from the surprised glances he gets and defiantly slams the car door behind him as the driver
mournfully waves him off.

“È inglese, signore?” asks the concierge on the doorway, who’s holding out a velvet-gloved hand
for the ticket and is obviously acting as an upper-class equivalent of a bouncer.

“Americano,” snaps Will. The concierge looks faintly surprised at the rude tone and Will catches his
eye and immediately feels guilty for being so short-tempered. In fact he looks much more like a beta
than an alpha and is no doubt just trying to be friendly, except the irritation of being constantly flirted
with means it’s hard not to automatically assume the worst. Fortunately the man’s clearly used to
dealing with petulant omegas, and while is no doubt thinking that Will’s a spoilt little shit merely
smiles politely then wishes him a good evening as he hands over a slim ID bracelet made from the
same glossy gold card as the ticket.

Will now pockets the bracelet without bothering to put it on and quickly escapes from the stifled
atmosphere of the foyer to lose himself in the soothing swirl of anonymity offered by the
masquerade. Having grown up in New Orleans he’s always been very used to the festivities of the
Mardi Gras, although it now takes only a few seconds to realise that the current setting is a world
away from that – and definitely counts as ‘adults only’ owing to the sensuous, slightly dangerous
atmosphere which saturates the air and pulses like a living thing. All around him are a sea of masks,
their owner’s eyes glinting through the holes in a way that’s both evocative yet faintly sinister.
Fortunately he can’t see any Aboriginal ones that resemble those belonging to the Sculptor, although
admittedly pretty much everything else seems to be accounted for: from pierrots and Florentine
voltos, to jesters, Chinese dragons and even a rather fearsome crow’s head whose wearer is sheathed
in a swirling black cape like a medieval plague doctor and who turns round to stare at Will as he
walks past.

The house (castle) is so enormous that it promptly occurs to Will that he could be destined to wander
in aimless circles all evening in a doomed attempt to find Hannibal, especially as he has no idea what
costume he’s wearing. In retrospect the plague doctor seems a strong possibility, although when he
retraces his steps to check the crow’s head has been removed to reveal a perspiring alpha with wine-
flushed cheeks and a layer of shuddering jowls that quiver like a turkey every time he laughs. Will
rolls his eyes at himself for such a stupid mistake then retreats back into the main ballroom again,
doing his best the entire time to dodge the clasping hands and leering eyes of the numerous drunken
alphas who seem like they can’t quite believe their luck at seeing an unescorted omega. In fact shouts
of “Piccolo omega! Sei così bello! Sei qui da solo?” seem to be ringing out from all directions
wherever he goes, yet despite their loud insistence – and despite the eyes and the hands – it still feels
like it doesn’t really apply to him because he knows that he’s not on his own. Present or not, he still
has an alpha.

A noisy group of female alphas in elaborate Renaissance-style dresses now barges straight past him
on their way to the dance floor, and as Will ducks out their way he finds himself gloomily thinking
(not the first time) how his life always manages to veer from one surreal extreme to the other when
he happens to glance up across the room and finally sees Hannibal. Contrary to Will’s predictions he
isn’t surrounded by omegas, or even by other alphas, but is instead stood completely alone by the
musicians’ podium; and while the solitude doesn’t look remotely lonely or vulnerable in the way
most people’s would, Will still feels a surge of protectiveness anyway and strides off towards him. In
fact he’d been expecting a lingering sense of awkwardness or embarrassment yet now he’s here
nothing much seems to matter anymore beyond being reunited, regardless of how many drunken
alphas he has to punch out his way to get there. Hannibal spins round immediately as if some sixth
sense has alerted him to Will’s presence then runs both eyes across his face in the usual Sphinx-like
way.

“Buonasera carissimo,” he says softly. “I was wondering if I could expect to see you.”

Will opens his mouth to say something sarcastic about the obvious manipulation attempt with the
ticket only to change his mind halfway through and close it again, because his relief at seeing
Hannibal alone means it somehow doesn’t matter anymore either. Hannibal stares back without
speaking, very intense and focussed, and Will catches his eye again then holds out a hand and says:
“Vorresti per favore ballare con me?”

“Are my ears deceived?” replies Hannibal with a slow smile. “I thought dancing was one of your
prohibitions? You’ve always refused me when I’ve asked in the past.”

Will smiles too, briefly remembering the FBI event and his horror at the idea of any kind of public
intimacy. “I know,” he says simply. “But I was a different person back then.”

As Hannibal’s own smile starts to broaden he reaches out a hand to take hold of Will’s, his grip
possessive yet at the same time surprisingly gentle. By now the shouts of the surrounding alphas
have gone completely silent and no one tries to grab at Will or ask him if he wants some company;
although even if they did, he suspects he wouldn’t notice any more because of Hannibal’s uncanny
ability to absorb every bit of space in a room. “Why weren’t you schmoozing with the rich people?”
he asks now, secretly wondering if he should let his head rest on Hannibal’s shoulder. “I didn’t
expect to see you on your own.”

Hannibal ducks his face slightly so he can skim his lips against the top of Will’s hair. “I was,” he
says. “At least initially. But all I could think about was how unsatisfactory their company was
compared to yours. Eventually my patience expired and I found I much preferred to listen to the
music than any of them.”

“You should have listened to me;” says Will firmly in an ‘I-told-you-so’ sort of voice. “I warned you
it would be boring.”

Hannibal laughs and for a few seconds Will feels a single sharp cheekbone pressing against his hair.
“I’m still very glad you came,” he says. “I was hoping you would.”

“I didn’t really plan to.”

“So what made you change your mind?”

“As if you didn’t know,” replies Will with a small eye-roll. Having finally decided to do it he now
leans far enough forward to rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder, tucked rather snugly just beside his
chin. “It was obvious there’d be lots of omegas here and…well, I guess it made me realise
something. It was a bit like when you’d been stabbed and I thought I was going to lose you.” He
doesn’t elaborate exactly what ‘it’ was, although supposes it’s probably not necessary because
Hannibal already knows. “I guess you were counting on it weren’t you?” he adds wryly. “You set it
up on purpose.”

“Which one?” asks Hannibal, skimming his palm across Will’s back.

“Both. You’re such an attention seeker – you probably stabbed yourself.”

Hannibal laughs out loud and then tightens his grip on Will’s waist. “Even if I had the inconvenience
would have been entirely justified,” he says. “You were perfect that evening. It was worth a hundred stab wounds to watch you discover yourself.”

“Death by a thousand cuts,” replies Will rather vaguely.

“Indeed. And the first cut is the deepest – although admittedly we’re mixing our metaphors.” While Hannibal’s speaking the musicians finally reach the end of their piece and as the surrounding guests break into applause he raises a hand to trail his finger down the edge of Will’s face then along his lower lip. “So much potential,” he says; and his voice, though very quiet, still sounds chillingly precise over the roar of claps and cheers. “How I’d love to see it fully flourish by teaching you to hunt.” Will, who wasn’t really expecting such a frank confession, blinks a few times with confusion and Hannibal gives a faint smile then adds in a voice that’s practically a purr: “Consider, after all, that Matthew Brown is still at large. I’m sure he’d be delighted to have a visit from the two of us.”

This time Will doesn’t even attempt to reply and just falls silent instead as once more he finds himself struggling with Hannibal’s gleefully gothic conception of what constitutes a person’s potential. In fact it’s probably something he’ll be wrestling with for the rest of his life, because it’s not a concept that can be judged by normal standards. Instead it’s an invisible thread and a rite of passage: a moral barrier which has Will and Hannibal on one side and the rest of the world on the other – a world who can never understand them and which neither of them can ever fully fit into. It’s why Hannibal had tried to carve Will into his own world by force with actions that had seemed so deeply dark and malevolent; a sign of how great cruelty requires empathy. Hannibal had even admitted as much when he’d compared Will to a living sculpture and tacitly admitted his own private conflict as the architect of Will’s Becoming. ‘Of course the change may be painful,’ he’d said, and there’d been a pensiveness in his voice which at the time Will hadn’t fully understood. ‘Who’s to say that the marble doesn’t suffer through the sculptor’s endeavours? Even though each blow is inflicted from a place of tenderness and creativity. For the sculptor seeks artistry, and beauty – and so acquires himself tirelessly on his creation’s behalf. It would be far easier for him to simply strike the marble to smithereens, to destroy it; but he does not. His compassion becomes inconvenient. His life, his liberty, the performance of his philosophy: all subsumed in his creation’s interests, simply because its’ potential to flourish and prosper within the world grows more dear to him than his own.’

It was a journey that came so close to destroying them both, and yet…here they are anyway. Safe and whole and in each other’s arms, even though every rational thought and imperative suggests that they should be pretty much anywhere else. So Will lets out a long breath he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding just as Hannibal moves forward again and presses his lips against Will’s forehead.

“The irrepressible Will Graham,” says Hannibal softly. “So fragile yet so fierce and resolute. I adore it, Will. I’m captivated by it. You’re beautifully broken but never broken-spirited. The two things aren’t the same, did you know that? All these pieces of you and yet you’re never truly fragmented: the light shines through your slivers and cracks – luminous in all your damage. What would it take for you to fully appreciate yourself?”

You, thinks Will with startling clarity. And it’s only then, surrounded by a swirling sea of hidden faces, that he feels Hannibal’s skin against his own and it finally occurs to him how out of everyone here tonight, the two of them are the only ones who chose not to wear a mask.

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The rest of the evening canters by in a manic swirl of music and wine: starting with a bit of dancing and ending with a lot, then ultimately concluding in the back of a chauffeur-driven car with Will once more staring from the window at the moon and the stars. It almost seems like they’re watching him, and considering their role during the night on the cliff side it feels as if they’ve become
spectators who’ve been following his progress since the beginning and are still waiting patiently to see how his story’s going to end. Will now finds himself smiling at them rather wryly then finally turns away and after a brief hesitation places his hand over Hannibal’s. Hannibal immediately returns the pressure and in the end they spend the rest of the journey like that in companionable silence, sat upright side by side as Hannibal’s thumb rhythmically strokes itself across Will’s knuckles.

Back at the villa Hannibal prepares some crostini then sits and smiles indulgently while Will devours it and in between mouthfuls provides a running commentary of all the annoying alpha behaviour he’s had to put up with tonight (including Hannibal’s) from the taxi driver onwards. Some light rosé wine is then drunk, after which Hannibal locates a Bach aria from his extensive music collection which Will heard this evening and has announced a fondness for, before the two of them finally head upstairs and Will finds himself hovering awkwardly outside his bedroom door as all the embarrassment he didn’t feel earlier in the evening comes crashing over him with full force. Hannibal stares back in the calm way that’s become so familiar and Will clears his throat and finally pushes down on the handle. “Sleep well then,” he says. Hannibal dips his head to indicate that he will, and Will clears his throat even louder and leans forward to press a kiss against his cheek. “Thanks,” he says, rather shyly. “I had a really nice time tonight.”

Hannibal merely smiles without replying and Will clears his throat for a third time then abruptly turns round and bolts into the safety of his bedroom before shutting the door behind him with a determined little click. Once there he runs his hands through his hair a few times then strips off his clothes with record speed and dives into bed as if to signify to himself ‘well that’s that then.’ But despite the lateness and tiredness sleep stubbornly refuses to come, and as he flings himself about in growing frustration he keeps catching glimpses of the moon and stars peering through the open window as if they’re still watching and waiting to see what he’s going to do. Defiantly Will turns his back on them, but after the village clock tower has chimed out 2am, then 3am, he’s finally forced to admit defeat and swings his feet onto the floor. He can’t remember where he left his robe and doesn’t have the patience to look for it, so in the end just pulls the sheet off the bed and wraps that round his shoulders instead before tiptoeing rather nervously towards Hannibal’s room. The open door makes knocking a bit pointless but he still hesitates anyway, suddenly overcome with self-consciousness at barging in without an invitation.

“Will?” says Hannibal’s voice straight away from the darkness. “What’s the matter?”

He sounds incredibly alert for someone who’s been disturbed at 3.00 in the morning, promptly confirming Will’s private suspicions that he doesn’t actually rest like a normal person but simply lies in the dark recharging like a giant cell phone. Hannibal now waits patiently without pushing for an explanation and Will shuffles a few steps towards him before faltering again then grinding to a halt. “Can’t sleep,” he says gruffly.

There’s a rustling sound as Hannibal sits upright and in the silvery glow of the moonlight Will can see him holding out a hand. Obligingly he shuffles a bit closer then hovers about by the side of the bed as Hannibal reaches out to lightly tug the edge of the sheet. “Look at you in your shroud,” he says with obvious fondness. “Like a little ghost. Why didn’t you just wear the robe I bought you?”

Will opens his mouth to reply then finds it turning into a yawn halfway through. “Couldn’t find it,” he says. “And I’m not little.”

“No beloved,” replies Hannibal. “You’re just not entirely large.”

Will makes a disdainful noise in response (which in theory is supposed to suggest a state of dignified resentment, but in practice is pretty hard to make convincing when you’re wearing a sheet and your hair’s sticking out at mad angles because you couldn’t be bothered to wash the gel out). Hannibal
promptly starts to smile again and Will hesitates once more time before awkwardly attempting to clamber over his legs so he can lie next to him on the other half of the bed. Hannibal puts his hands round Will’s waist to help keep his balance and then rolls onto one side and props himself up on an elbow. His eyes are gleaming in their usual intense way, shining in the moonlight like a cat’s. “So,” he says thoughtfully. “You can’t sleep?”

Will makes another huffing noise: obviously.

“Unfortunate,” says Hannibal. “Perhaps your mind’s too active from dwelling on your triumph this evening? You had a great success after all – undoubtedly the belle of the ball.”

Will emits a third variant of the snorting noise. “That’s complete bullshit and you know it.”

“It is not.”

“It is,” retorts Will. “You could even say it was balls.”

“I am showing no amusement whatsoever,” replies Hannibal’s voice in the darkness. “It will only encourage you.”

Will starts to laugh and Hannibal smiles down at him as he gently reaches out to stroke his hair: smoothing it back off his forehead, tucking it behind his ears and then, when he’s run out of pieces to tidy, beginning to wind a single strand around his finger. “It really is true,” he says eventually. “At least from my perspective: there were so many omegas there tonight and none of them could even begin to compare to you.” As he’s speaking he trails his hand downwards, just below the edge of the sheet, and strokes a single warm fingertip across Will’s collar bone. Will quivers then goes very still.

“You’re getting so thin,” adds Hannibal quietly. “You need to stop taking those tablets.”

“I know,” agrees Will, equally quietly. “I know I do.”

Hannibal doesn’t say anything else, so Will just stares back up at him equally silently as he waits to see what’s going to happen next. In fact it feels like he’s starting to shake in earnest now, although it’s not from anxiety but rather a powerful force of emotion that’s swelling up inside him in the same way the ocean did that night against the cliff. Hannibal’s eyes are still gazing into his and he can see them in the moonlight, constant and unwavering and filled with an expression of quiet yearning that’s worth a hundred words. His skin feels so warm next to Will’s. They’re not even touching but he’s still aware of it – all that warmth – and it’s impossible not to start imagining what it would feel like if the sheet was pulled away and it was pressed against his own. But even though he’s not sure if it’s him that moves forward first or whether it’s Hannibal, it doesn’t change the overwhelming relief that surges through him at the exact moment their mouths finally meet.

Hannibal tightly twines both arms round Will to pull him against his chest and then quickly searches out his mouth again to kiss him hungrily on and on and on; and in that moment it feels like less like a normal embrace and more like flaying away the last layers of concealment and secrecy as one person merges into the other. In some ways it’s so deeply familiar it’s as if they’ve never been apart; yet it’s also different in other ways too, as well as more intense than it even was the first time. Tonight it’s about pushing tightly against one another’s bodies and breathing each other’s breath, about quiet whispers, soothing touches, and silent pledges with unspoken promises which this time are going to be kept. And it’s about passion and desire but not in the usual way, because right now it feels as if things have moved beyond something as ordinary as passion. It feels essential; elemental. Somewhat mysterious.

In fact Will’s need to feel Hannibal against him is all-consuming by now and he runs his palms down his spine then roughly pulls him until they’re pressed together and he imagines he can feel
Hannibal’s heartbeat pulsing against his own: so fierce and fiery and fully alive. Hannibal sighs in response and slams his lips against Will’s again, stabbing his tongue into his mouth as if Will is necessary for him in order to breathe just as Will tangles his fingers into Hannibal’s hair then tugs. He’s aware of trembling now from the inside out and when he feels Hannibal quiver too it’s almost too much and he gives a low moan: lost in the sensation of Hannibal’s tongue pushing against his, of shared breath and warm skin and hearts that beat with the same chaotic rhythm.

As they finally break apart for air Hannibal pulls away and traces his fingers across Will’s face, light and deft as a blind person reading Braille. “Welcome back my love,” he says softly. “I missed you so much.”

Will murmurs something in response and Hannibal leans forward for another kiss before gently pinning him flat against the mattress so he can slide on top of him and bury his face in his neck. Tenderly he kisses the hollow at the base of Will’s throat then breathes along his skin, pausing occasionally to scrape his teeth across his jaw as both hands skim across his shoulders then along his waist and hips. Will sighs again then closes his eyes and Hannibal briefly pulls away to murmur a snatch of something rapturous in a foreign language before nuzzling Will’s throat with his forehead. It’s clear that he’s making sure as much of his own scent is left on Will as possible, yet while Will understands he’s being marked – and that this is a classic display of alpha possessiveness – he doesn’t have even the slightest urge to pull away. Instead he tips his head back to give Hannibal better access and Hannibal sighs again then takes hold of Will’s hand; leaning downwards as he does so to press light kisses against his cheeks and eyelids.

“Will,” he says, even quieter than before. “Beloved. Mano meilė.”

Will gives a soft moan then tips his head further back. He can hear himself starting to chant ‘please’ and he seems to be repeating it over and over as if it’s the only word he knows; the only word that means anything. “Please,” he’s saying, so breathless and intense. “Please. I need this. I need you. I need you.”

Hannibal makes another low sighing noise in return then tightens his grip on Will’s hand. “I need you too,” he says gently. “More than I can tell you mylimasis. More than I have words to express.”

It’s a simple enough statement, yet it resonates profoundly with Will because it’s Hannibal who’s the one to say it; Hannibal, who always has so many words – far more than one person could ever need. The depth of devotion implied is obvious and for a few seconds the force of it makes Will screw his eyes closed as he fights to draw in one panting gasp after another. In fact by now his craving to feel his alpha’s knot deep inside him is overwhelming, yet while there’s a part of him that wants to stretch the moment out and make it last it’s still not enough to make him want to stop…it’s nowhere near enough. His thighs are completely soaked with a glistening trail of slick and as he spreads his legs apart in silent invitation Hannibal is able to slide straight inside him with one smooth thrust: so sweetly and easily that for a few fevered seconds Will thinks he might cry at how perfect it feels.

“You’re beautiful like this,” says Hannibal, sounding slightly overawed. “Is this what you wanted beloved? Is it what you need?”

“God yeah. It’s good,” pants Will, beginning to arch his back. Hannibal’s mouth seems to be everywhere, covering whatever bits of face and hair he can reach in rapturous kisses, and Will now wraps his legs round Hannibal’s waist then hooks an arm round his neck. “Don’t move yet,” he murmurs against his throat. “Just stay still like this…exactly like this. I want it to last.”

“I can last,” replies Hannibal softly. “I can stay like this for as long as you need me to.”

Will groans again before it turns into a laugh halfway through. “Actually…forget that. I don’t think I
Hannibal smiles down at him and in that moment the angular face seems strangely softened by love. “It doesn’t matter,” he says. “We have tomorrow night, and then the one after that. We have as long as we need. We have a lifetime.”

Will gives another gasping laugh then quivers and goes completely rigid as his eyes flutter closed. “I’m really close,” he whispers and he sounds surprised, like he can’t quite believe it. “I’m so close. I’m...Oh God. Hannibal...I’m going to come.”

Hannibal sighs out Will’s name again, elegantly extending each letter as if he’s savouring the sound of them; as if it’s a sacred word – the words of a prayer. Then he wraps both arms beneath Will’s shoulders to hold him through it, murmuring how much he loves him and how beautiful he is before he finally starts to come himself. The sensation is extremely intense for both of them and seems to last a very long time; and when it’s finally over, Will doesn’t pull away but instead lies softly and peacefully in Hannibal’s arms, making tiny purring noises at the sense of being filled with a knot while Hannibal tenderly strokes his hair. Hannibal, in turn, carefully adjusts his body to make sure Will isn’t bearing his full weight and then simply gazes down at him in quiet adoration without moving or blinking as Will gazes straight back: both of them exchanging secret smiles and wonderingly touching each other’s faces as if checking that the other one is real.

It’s possibly one of the most profound moments of connection Will’s ever had in his life, yet even as he’s thinking it he knows that it doesn’t really make sense. It’s not the ‘right’ way…it’s not how these things are supposed to happen. It’s like if love was set on fire then fused together: something forged in pain and incomprehension then kindled with beauty and horror and set and sealed with a wild, wild longing. Something fervent, infernal and unknowable: something that doesn’t belong to real life. And yet, and yet…at the same time something so deeply human, the sort of thing that could happen to anybody. The sort of thing that happens everyday: just two people who needed to find each other because they couldn’t be complete in any other way. One person with no empathy and one with too much. One person who needed guidance and one who yearned for someone to guide. One volatile and unpredictable the other cold, curious, and impersonal. The destructive opposites: the empath and the sociopath, the hunter and the hunted, the unstoppable force and the immovable object. But still just two people behind it all; just two frail and fallible human beings.

Will’s head is tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin now, and from where he’s lying he can hear his heartbeat. It’s strange to think that this is the organ most closely linked to love – there must be a reason for it but Will doesn’t know what it is. It’s just a mass of tissue after all. Ingenious and tireless and perfectly constructed, but still just insensate flesh for all that. Valves and atriums, ventricles and fine blue veins; what is it about such a collection that can possibly signify love? And yet it does, even though there’s no way to make a heart give up its confidences. No way to fully understand why it yearns and pulses in the way it does. Anatomical. Metaphysical. Something material yet so intangible that even the sharpest scalpel and surest hands in all the world can’t truly prise it apart and know it. Because there isn’t, is there? No way to splice it up and examine it; even Hannibal couldn’t dissect that...The anatomy of a love story.

Chapter End Notes

Hey my darlings! I’m very happy this week because I realised how I can cut out another chapter (don’t worry, it won’t affect the Hannigram – was just a pointless subplot with Matthew Brown that wouldn’t have added anything except making this monster even
longer than it already is). That’s left me with a chapter going spare, so I’ve decided to use it for something that was suggested to me a while ago which I think is a fantastic idea: a masterpost showcasing all the amazing art people have made for Bright Hair so readers can enjoy these talented Fannibal’s work altogether in one place. Sorry btw; I know it would make more sense to do this on Tumblr, but I feel a bit weird dedicating a whole blog to my own story (and judging from my AO3 experience it’d just get trolled to death anyway XD). So now chapter 47 will be the fanart and then chapter 48 will be the ending to the fic! Woo! xox
Many thanks so the people who suggested this and apologies that it’s taken me so long to work out how to do it! Most of all, a million hugs to the magnificent artists who shared their time and talent making beautiful things for this fic; I’ve included their Tumblr/AO3 links, so if you like what you see then please stop by if you can and give them some love.

Just so you know a couple of the images embedded here are borderline NSFW, but none of them are explicit as unfortunately those that were didn’t survive Tumblrgeddon :-(

COVER ART

By CrazyInLov3
Bright Hair About The Bone

By MissDisoriental

By Patties92

Bright Hair About The Bone

By marlahanni
CHAPTER 2
Dear you, what can I even tell you anymore? What is there left to say? Because the simple truth is that you pierce my mind. You get into my head and finger there and I know I should resent you for it and try to make you stop – and yet no matter how much I try, I always find that I can’t.

By michaela19901

By sailfin

CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 14

The way I feel and think about you isn't going to expire. It's not going to die. It's not going to go away. I can club it and pound it and kick it all I want, it just limps off and lays dormant, recuperating and convalescing, then comes back twice as vital as before and wrecks me.

By twt3rfan
I've spent my whole life as the property of other people; I've always been someone else's expectation, or their problem, or their project; I've never just been myself. The only time I thought it might be possible was when I was with you.

By tw1tt3rfan

CHAPTER 16

By Nighthoxy
I want you and I'm not afraid of you. I want all your beauty, all your art and horror. The best of you, the worst of you, the wonderful and the terrible. All of you, all the time.

By tw1t3rfan

CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20

By Rimu
I see the darkness in you. But even more than that... I see the way it reflects back the darkness in me.

By tw1tt3rfan

Dear you...
I felt like the only way I could know myself was through knowing you.
The thing is, what you need to understand is that I'm used to being looked at - especially by alphas - but I'm not used to being truly seen. You see me, don't you? And I'm starting to see you.
I see the darkness in you.
But even more than that... I see the way it reflects back the darkness in me.

By marlahanni
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 27

By marlahanni
CHAPTER 29

Dear You,
"It's as if both of us have been searching for a missing part of ourselves and I found mine in you"

By marlahanni

CHAPTER 32

By RenJaegerjaques
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 43

The teacup's broken. It's never going to gather itself back together.
CHAPTER 45

By RenJaegerjaques

CHAPTER 46

By puzzleboxes
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Huge love and thanks to the incredibly talented sailfin, who’s made some beautiful art for the fic that you can feast your eyes on here.

Speaking of lovely Fannibals, I’ve had a few requests to do standalones with Emperor Hannibal/Slave Will (Ch. 21), Priest Hannibal/Sacrifice Will (Ch. 28) or Slave Hannibal/Master Will (Ch. 30)...and have to keep saying no because I can’t write PWP to save my life. But if anyone else feels inspired and wants to make some Fannibals happy, then the floor is yours lads! If so, please could you link the fics back to this one as a related work so they’re easy for people to find – thanks xox

The change doesn’t happen immediately. It doesn’t happen the next day either, or even the one after that. But after nearly a week has gone by Will grows aware of how he finally seems to have achieved the impossible by starting to relax. Admittedly it only happens slowly and in stages, like a gently blooming bud, but as his limbs unfurl and his forehead loses its creases he gradually progresses to a state that’s so unfamiliar it’s hard to recognise it for what it actually is – happiness. In fact after everything that’s happened it almost feels dangerous to let his guard down too much, as if he’s tempting fate by not being miserable and that the only way to stay safe is by keeping a constant look out for everything that could possibly go wrong.

“That makes no sense at all,” says Hannibal fondly. “Your emotional state is irrelevant to the forces of fate and context. Why should happiness be a hazard? The answer, of course, is it’s not. Just like unhappiness is no guarantee against further misfortune.”

Considering how wrong everything went the last time he did let his guard down Will’s not convinced this is entirely sensible advice. So despite his best efforts his brain continues to fidget without something to worry itself with, to the extent it’s almost a relief when a problem finally presents itself – namely the heat suppressants and what’s best to be done about them. Given Hannibal’s numerous sermons on the subject Will’s fully expecting him to mention them too, so is therefore surprised (and slightly suspicious) at how willing he seems to engage in long walks on the beach, candlelit dinners on the balcony, and an inordinate amount of sex on every available surface in the villa without ever once referring to them. He even agrees to come with Will on a visit to the quarantine centre, then stands patiently in the corner and gabbles in Italian with the officials while Will crouches down and cuddles the dogs through the bars.

“I suppose it’s not that long since you were in their position,” observes Hannibal afterwards when they’re walking back to the car. “No doubt you were able to offer them very sage advice about making prison life work to one’s advantage.”

“Hilarious aren’t you?” says Will irritably. Hannibal smirks in response as if silently agreeing that this is indeed the case. “I haven’t forgotten by the way,” adds Will. “About getting a new one.”

“No, I didn’t think you would.”

“And I’m definitely going to call him Scipio.”
“Of course you are. Although I hope that he and I can make amends for the actions of our historical namesakes and become the best of friends.”

“No you won’t,” says Will with a hint of smugness. “Not when I train him to sleep on your side of the bed. It’ll be like Carthage all over again”

This makes Hannibal laugh, which promptly makes Will laugh too because Hannibal being amused at anything always manages to be entertaining in its own right. In fact there’s also something intimate about it too, simply because it’s so rare; a sort of private indulgence that’s reserved almost entirely for Will. Hannibal smiles again, slightly Sphinxy and mischievous, so Will takes hold of his hand and then doesn’t even complain about being fussed over when Hannibal slots his own sunglasses across Will’s nose to protect him from the glare of the sun. But the amnesty is still a fairly fleeting one, and the next day the inevitable finally happens when Hannibal prowls up behind Will in the bathroom and announces: “Where are they?”

Will, who’s rummaging in the cabinet for some painkillers, now glares defiantly through the mirror in a gesture that Hannibal remembers him doing all the time when he was pretending to be a beta. Omegas generally avoid direct eye contact, especially with alphas, so there was often a sense of Will forcing himself to keep it beyond the point of comfort in an attempt to camouflage himself – exactly like he’s doing now. Hannibal raises an eyebrow in response and Will scowls even harder and snaps “Where’s what?”


Will rolls his eyes through the mirror then pretends to ignore the way Hannibal is rolling his back. In fact he’s badly tempted to start arguing out of principle – because Hannibal has gone full-on alpha and it’s annoying as hell – but finds he can’t quite summon the energy for it so eventually just shrugs his shoulders instead.

“Fine,” he says in a faintly martyred way. “But you’re not standing over me with your arms folded while I throw them out. I’m not 12 years old.” Hannibal remains exactly where he is (arms folded) while somehow managing to brandish both cheekbones in Will’s direction like offensive weapons. “I’m serious,” says Will, torn between amusement and irritation. “You’re not. It’s my decision and I’ll get rid of them myself.”

Hannibal draws himself up to his full height and says “Yes, please do” in a pointed way before turning round and swishing out the bathroom again with enough stately drama to make Scarlet O’Hara jealous. Will waits until he’s gone then slams the cabinet door closed and lets out an angry sigh, struggling with an urge to sulk over it despite knowing he’s not being entirely fair. Admittedly it’s not like Hannibal’s request is an unreasonable one; in fact considering the harm the tablets have caused it’s more than reasonable. But somehow it doesn’t matter how many times the dreary mantra of ‘it’s for your own good’ runs through his head, because all the good intentions in the world aren’t enough to suppress the queasy plunge of anxiety he feels as he watches them disappear down the sink one by one.

Afterwards Will dashes some water on his face and takes a few deep breathes. Then he forces himself to saunter downstairs like someone without a care in the world because he’s so heartily sick of the subject that pretending nothing’s wrong seems like the best way to avoid discussing it. However he’s clearly failed to account for Hannibal, who by now is so attuned to Will’s moods that he’s often able to detect them before Will can. He therefore guesses the cause of Will’s restlessness almost immediately and a few minutes later steals up behind him and wraps both arms around his chest.

“It’s for the best,” says Hannibal, straight into Will’s ear. “They’d have made you very ill eventually.
It was only a matter of time.”

Will sighs loudly at being so transparent followed by an awkward shuffle from one foot to the other. “I guess,” he says unhappily. Hannibal waits for him to continue and he sighs again then arranges his shoulders into an anxious hunch. “It’s just…I don’t know. It just feels like I’m back at square one.”

“Not at all,” says Hannibal, neatly levering Will round so he can look at him directly. “You’re infinitely better prepared than you were a few months ago. And as for the state you were in when I first met you – well, there’s virtually no comparison at all.” Will nods, briefly looking more cheerful, and Hannibal adds with a touch of firmness: “That being said, we also need to consider practicalities.”

“What do you mean?” asks Will warily.

Hannibal waits a few seconds then leisurely puts both hands on Will’s shoulders: supposedly to soothe him, but really to prevent him from darting off. “I mean that the hotel chain I mentioned to you in America has a branch close by,” he says firmly. “And that I propose booking a room there as soon as possible.”

“Ugh, no, I don’t want to,” protests Will, promptly looking gloomy again. “I can’t be bothered. Why can’t we just stay here?”

“Because we’re not adequately equipped for everything you might need,” replies Hannibal. “Particularly in terms of nesti…” Will goes rigid then emits an angry screeching sound like a kettle coming up to the boil. “In terms of pre-heat behaviours,” amends Hannibal with a faint smile. “The entire villa is open plan – there’s very limited space for you to make yourself secure in. Not to mention the fact that we don’t have an omega shelter, we don’t have easy access to medical care, we don’t have heat locks to keep out other alphas…”

“We have you,” says Will with morbid relish. “I’m sure you could do a pretty decent job.”

Hannibal catches his eye and gives the ghost of a smile. “No doubt. But my ability to fight competing alphas is hardly the point – I’d far rather devote my attention to you. Besides, you’ll be exuding heat pheromones for at least a week before it starts. Do you really want to stay inside all that time?” Will opens his mouth to protest and Hannibal adds: “You were also extremely stressed during your last heat. Exposure to dominance fights would make you feel even worse.”

Will emits another dissatisfied noise, this time sounding less like a boiling kettle and more like an angry pterodactyl. “I don’t care about fights! I’m not some feeble, fragile omega. I could help you scare them off.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that in the future,” replies Hannibal firmly. “But right now I’m not prepared to take the risk. I want everything to be as calm and secure as possible. Be reasonable Will – it was only a few months ago that you were hospitalised for heat complications.”

The mention of his seizure makes Will sigh even louder, although he’s finally forced to abandon his protests and admit that all this might just be a sensible plan. Of course sensible is not the same as being desirable; but what Will lacks in enthusiasm is more than made up for by Hannibal, who promptly takes the half-hearted nods as sign of a sealed deal and flies off to begin the necessary preparations. Will naturally assumes this is going to take some time to rearrange, but once again Hannibal manages to pre-empt him – and less than 24 hours later he finds himself being bundled into the car on their way to the most expensive suite at L’Incanto.

“That’s complete bullshit for starters,” protests Will when he hears the name. “What’s enchanting
about being in heat? They should call it L’Inferno.”

“Technically it would be Lo Inferno,” says Hannibal with a smile. “Although that’s also incorrect, because there’s nothing hellish about it either.”

“Maybe not for you,” says Will mutinously. Turning round he rests his forehead against the window, gazing out at where blonde stacks of hay are sprawling across the fields like slumbering Labrador puppies beneath the bright cornflower-blue sky. Compared to the battleship grey and blood-spatter red of Baltimore it’s almost unbearably picturesque, and for a few seconds he remembers where he might be instead and feels faintly ashamed of being so short-tempered. Wordlessly he now reaches out and rests his hand on Hannibal’s knee in silent apology and Hannibal briefly lets go of the steering wheel to place his own hand over Will’s.

“Admittedly my perspective is limited as an alpha,” adds Hannibal after a short pause. “But I do understand your concerns. Heat has very specific connotations for an omega; I can imagine the sense of isolation and powerlessness. It’s also forced you to spend most of your life stranded among people who know how to use you, but not how to value or appreciate you.”

“Right,” agrees Will, pleased to have this acknowledged. “Exactly. And even once you’ve got past that – which is bad enough on its own – there are all the physical aspects to deal with.”

“Like what, precisely? What bothers you the most?”

Will frowns for a few seconds, thoughtfully nibbling on a thumbnail as he tries to decide. “Like the aching,” he says eventually. “And the craving feeling you get. And the expectation of submissiveness – in fact it’s that more than anything. I don’t like the thought of it. I don’t even know how.”

“Mano meilė,” replies Hannibal leisurely. “I am perfectly able to teach you how to enjoy being submissive.”

Will feels himself going pink, aware of looking rather coquettish without wanting or intending to. “You will not,” he says. Hannibal merely smirks in response then leans back against the seat and adjusts his sunglasses a little further over his nose. “I’m serious,” protests Will. “Don’t you dare.”

“As always you are mistaking vulnerability with weakness,” replies Hannibal, without actually confirming whether he will or he won’t. “How many times have I explained to you that they’re not the same thing?”

“A lot,” snaps Will. “I’d go so far as to say you’ve laboured the point. In fact I’d say you’d flogged the point to death then brought it back to life just to kill it all over again. It is now a zombie point.”

“Then there you have it,” replies Hannibal, who’s beginning to smile. “You have nothing to fear by giving up control for a few days.”

“Oh give it a rest can’t you?” says Will irritably. “You’re not my psychiatrist anymore.”

Hannibal’s smile broadens like the Cheshire Cat and Will huffs with annoyance all over again then turns round to resume his silent staring out the window. But even his brewing frustration isn’t enough to make him let go of Hannibal’s hand and once they’ve arrived at the hotel he still continues clinging onto it, despite his self-consciousness at looking like a typical needy omega. Hannibal, who seems aware of this too, obligingly lets Will go first then follows behind him very quietly without ever once attempting to take the lead. It then turns out their booking’s been delayed and Will proceeds to be so assertive the concierge assumes that he’s the alpha and Hannibal is the omega, but
even as Will’s opening his mouth to correct her he finds himself shutting it again because actually…it hardly matters. They can take it in turns to be both or neither if they want to. They can be whatever they want to be.

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At the time Will thought the New Orleans hotel seemed plush. It was plush — at the time — especially for someone reared on creaking beds and stale coffee in a lifetime of Motel 6s and Best Value Inns. But L’Incanto has recalibrated his notion of what ‘extravagant’ truly means and against their room’s ludicrous luxury the New Orleans experience now looks faintly squalid in comparison. Not that ‘room’ is the right word for it. Even ‘suite’ doesn’t do it justice; it’s more like an actual honest-to-god apartment, complete with its own balcony, a kitchenette, two bathrooms and a bedroom that’s larger than Will’s own one at home. Silver trays of chocolates have been temptingly placed on every available surface and the air is filled with a delicate scent of honeysuckle and mimosa from the banks of fresh flowers in their crystal vases. Even the complimentary fruit basket looks less like a corporate hotel gift and more like something from a painting of Demeter’s harvest.

“It’ll do I suppose,” says Hannibal, who dislikes hotels on principle.

Will dumps his luggage in the bedroom then pokes around for a while before finding a breeding stool discreetly hidden in one of the cupboards which he promptly banishes to the balcony. Then he wanders back into the living area and perches gingerly on the edge of the sofa like he’s afraid he’s going to break something. Hannibal is already there on one of the armchairs, long legs folded together with typical elegance, and Will arranges his own legs in a similar way before realising the way they’re mirroring each other and feeling annoyed with himself for the mimicry.

“This is nice,” he says awkwardly. “Expensive I suppose.” Hannibal hums non-committally and Will casts around for something else nice to say about it. “I like that painting,” he says finally. “Don’t you have one similar?”

“I do,” replies Hannibal, flitting his eyes to the fireplace then back again. “It’s a Modigliani. Only that one’s a reproduction and mine is genuine. My most valuable possession in fact.” He transfers his gaze to Will then smiles very slightly. “At least it was. Now it’s the second most.”

“For God’s sake!” explodes Will. “I am not your possession.”

Yes you are, thinks Hannibal, although he doesn’t say it out loud. “Figure of speech,” he replies lightly.

Will huffs for a bit but finally relents enough to stop glowering and begins to absent-mindedly eat his way through one of the chocolate trays instead. “So?” he announces when it’s grown obvious that Hannibal isn’t going to say anything else. “What’s the plan?”

Hannibal glances up from his phone screen and raises an eyebrow. “Plan?”


“You finish consuming those truffles,” replies Hannibal, returning to the phone again. “And I continue reading the news from America and making sarcastic mental asides to myself about whatever Jack happens to be saying or doing. Then after that we improvise as we go along.”

Will rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I do not,” says Hannibal firmly. “It’s your heat, not a military campaign – what sort of planning could you possibly require? Everything you might need is already on hand. It’s why I wanted to
“arrive so early to give you time to settle in.” Will grunts in acknowledgement then inspects the tray for a few seconds before diving in to select a particularly gooey praline. “Actually, I’ll amend that in only one respect,” adds Hannibal. “I ordered a special cover for the balcony and I’d like you to assemble it in advance. You won’t be able to once your heat starts and I’d prefer not to have to do it myself.”

“Why not?” demands Will. “I thought alphas were supposed to enjoy taking charge of things like that.”

Hannibal forces himself to stop staring at the way Will is licking icing sugar off his fingers and glances up with a rather sardonic smile. “True,” he says. “And I suppose I could if I had to. But there’s no point denying that you’ll be able to build the wretched thing in half the time with a fraction of the tools.” Will makes a sceptical noise and Hannibal adds: “Construction is not my strong suit.”

“How charitable you are to mock my weaknesses,” says Hannibal, leaning over to ruffle Will’s hair. “You’ll be grateful this time next week when you can go outside with a measure of privacy.”

“Nevertheless,” says Hannibal. “My point still stands.”

“Well, yeah, I guess so…unlike the shutters will if you cobble them together.”

“Thank you, but no – you should eat them yourself. You need the sugar.”

The fondness in his tone is obvious and Will, realising that this is a reference to pre-heat hypoglycaemia, promptly feels embarrassed and starts scrambling around in an attempt to change the subject. “I surprised they let you,” he adds after an awkward pause. “I wouldn’t have thought they liked guests tampering with the fixtures.”

“Oh it’s merely a matter of money,” replies Hannibal, airily waving his hand around as if to demonstrate the total insignificance of other people’s dislikes. “I compensated them suitably for the trouble. I also made a convincing case that I was bringing an omega who was very beautiful, and very temperamental, and therefore required complete isolation from alphas for the duration of our stay.”

“I am not temperamental.”

“No, of course you’re not,” replies Hannibal with mock sincerity. “Although I’m glad you’re no longer denying that you’re beautiful.”

“Oh shut up,” says Will. Getting off the sofa he stretches his arms behind his head then strolls over to Hannibal’s chair so he can stand behind him and begin to massage his shoulders. “You’re so annoying sometimes,” he adds. “I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“Because you have exceptionally fine taste,” replies Hannibal, who’s resumed scrolling down his phone screen. “And wisdom beyond your years. Ah, look here – it says that Jack is arranging a
formal enquiry for the Sculptor investigation.”

“Where?” says Will, peering over Hannibal’s shoulder to get a better look. “Oh yeah, so he is. I bet that’s not from choice. He’ll have had pressure on him from higher up.”

“Hmm, no doubt,” agrees Hannibal with obvious relish. “Amusing isn’t it, don’t you think?”

“Amusing?”

“Yes – considering the way things have worked out.”

Will grimaces. “Not the word I would have chosen.”

“I’m sure it isn’t,” says Hannibal. “And I don’t mean to imply there’s anything particularly humorous about the situation. But despite the inconvenience he caused, you can’t deny that Adam Siemens, née Black, proved himself a useful catalyst. We have a certain cause to appreciate his actions.”

“Inconvenience,” repeats Will sceptically. “You’re a real master of the understatement aren’t you? And if you think I’m being grateful to that bastard...”

“No, naturally I don’t think that. I’m being facetious – although I still think our current state of understanding owes him a debt.” Hannibal pauses then gives a beatific smile. “Him and the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Oh God, do shut up,” says Will, giving Hannibal an affectionate swipe. “Don’t make me gag you.” Hannibal makes an amused noise but doesn’t reply. “You know I was thinking more about it last night,” adds Will, shifting his attention from Hannibal’s shoulders to the back of his neck. “The way Siemens kept asking to sit in on my lectures. He made it seem like flirting but what he really wanted was to learn how to cover his tracks. It’s one of the reasons he was so hard to profile – he knew exactly what we were looking for in advance.”

“Yes, he was extremely devious,” agrees Hannibal. “Of course his masterstroke was encouraging Mr Skinner’s obsession with you because it distracted so successfully from his own. Or at least it did for a while – he never deceived you entirely.”

“He did mostly,” says Will. “At least to begin with.”

“He deceived everyone. That was his design.”

Will nods in agreement, despite knowing Hannibal can’t see him. “So what about you?” he adds. “You obviously worked it out yourself. Judging from some of the things you said I think you knew for a while.”

“I suspected,” replies Hannibal. “But I didn’t actually know. He fitted the archetype in my mind for what an offender like the Sculptor might be, but I certainly couldn’t have proved it.”

“So why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did. You’ve just admitted as much – otherwise how could you remember my hints?”

“Yes, hints. You never mentioned him by name.”

“Very true,” says Hannibal with the hint of a smirk. “But only because it was more interesting to watch you deduce it for yourself. Which you did, I might add: much faster than anyone else could have managed.”
“Yeah, well, I wish I’d managed it sooner.”

“It’s hardly your fault Will. There were so many other problems to distract you. Besides, he was an extremely cunning adversary. Even his sister was taken in by him.”

Remembering the haunted expression on Dr Reynolds’ face Will decides he’s not so sure that this is entirely true. But of course there’s no way to ever be certain – and it’s not like Hannibal hadn’t deceived everyone too. He managed it far more successfully than Siemens ever had, even if he’d done it using a similar mask with a similar human suit to hide behind. Will now frowns for a few seconds, silently mulling this over. There’s no doubt that if Jack knew the truth he’d be very quick to pin Siemens and Hannibal to the same board: psychopath; sociopath. Yet Hannibal isn’t a true psychopath because he shows signs of remorse and sadness, and he’s not a pure sociopath because he has a clear ability to empathise. It’s not like there wasn’t always some truth in what he’d said: truth hidden within the lies, as long as Will was prepared to delve deep enough to find it. It was the truth which led them to their current situation – the harmony hewn from horror which Hannibal claims to find so amusing – even if Hannibal himself can’t take the credit for it. Of course he might like to think that he’s the architect of everything that’s happened, but Will is really the one who’s allowed them to reach this point.

Look at you, thinks Will now, slowly running his palm along Hannibal’s spine. You, you, you. Who are you, really? It’s a question he’s posed in numerous ways to the ‘Dear You’ of the journal but even now an easy answer escapes him, because Hannibal has been so many things. So much that’s peerless and flawless competing with the disturbing and degenerate: both Will biggest problem and greatest solution. Hannibal is such a human hall of mirrors. He’s malign energy with thoughtful smiles, tender touches which wound without warning, broken promises and earnest endeavours, a lover, an adversary, a fallen idol and a faithless friend who’s lethal in construction, inspirational in execution and destructive by design. He’s dreamlike grace combined with snapping intellect and haughty pragmatism who’s sadistic yet virtuosic and elevates death into art. And he’s completely lacking any normal sense of morality…yet he still brims with an intense, unbridled magnetism that burns so brightly it sometimes hurts to look at him. In a deeply mysterious way, everything is just better with Hannibal. Will is better: lives larger, thinks sharper, runs faster, loves fiercer and is more loved. It’s both as simple and as convoluted as that. Because he might not have made Will a better person but he’s inspired him to become a better version of himself. And while he hasn’t made Will feel the best, or happiest, or safest he’s still made him feel the most. He’s understood Will in a way that no one else ever has, and Will never knew himself as well as he does when they’re together.

Hannibal now stirs slightly beneath his hands and Will makes a soothing sound as he reaches down to run his fingertip across a single sharp cheekbone. You did all that, he thinks. But I finally understand it now, because once the mystery and spectacle is stripped away it’s just you behind it all. Just you – and now me. In fact things feel so different like this, which means his insights are different too: so much calmer than the blood-soaked revelations by the cliff side with its mad ecstasy and loss of control. Just here, just like this: just the two of them in the evening sun, separate consciousness and dissenting souls, yet so entirely and perfectly together. Like the two halves of the mystical yin-yang symbol that retain their own uniqueness but are still so intensely and naturally entwined that there’s no real way for one to exist except as part of the other.

You can’t take me over because I’m my own person, thinks Will now as continues the rhythm stroking across Hannibal’s shoulders. But I’d still give you everything I have. You can’t control me because I’m independent and free, but there’s still virtually nothing I wouldn’t do for you. I’m giving you the biggest thing I have to offer anyone: myself. And you’re repaying me in kind. My Self and Your Self…one self in exchange for another. Because they’re both just material beings after all – easily tattered and torn and difficult to patch back together – but just as they were ready to die for each other, Will understands that they’re finally ready to live for each other as well.
And it’s then that he realises he knows the answer to his earlier question: *You’re everything*.

“How quiet you’ve gone,” says Hannibal, reaching round to press his hand over Will’s. “What’s the matter?”

But Will doesn’t answer immediately, instead just leaning down to rest his face against Hannibal’s as he wraps both arms around his chest and holds on. “Nothing,” he says softly. “Not anymore. Everything’s fine.”

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The next few days feel more like a waiting game than anything else and Will spends them exploring the hotel’s grounds (extensive), enjoying its amenities (numerous) and suffering constant checks of his temperature and blood pressure (for which his ability to generate complaints is matched only by Hannibal’s ability to ignore them). And when he’s not doing any of that he just lies down instead, because by now his fatigue seems almost limitless and it’s getting easier to just accept it than keep pretending it’s not there. Hannibal tactfully takes the side of the bed closest to the door so his body can act as a barrier to help Will feel more protected, then lies down next to him without needing to be asked and seems content to spend all day there if required. Will, who’s found an ancient bonding textbook in the hotel library aimed at omegas, tends towards sitting up in bed with his knees pulled up to his chin as he skims though it, pausing every so often to either cackle with laughter or read some of its more lurid passages out loud to Hannibal.

“*Alphas are the essence of virility,*” says Will now in a deliberately melodramatic voice. “*Robust, resilient and courageous. Your alpha is not only your protector but also your swain and suitor. In their pursuit of you against competitors they will fight for your heat as their reward.*” He snorts contemptuously then tosses the book onto the cover. “For God’s sake.”

“It is, indeed, very stupid,” replies Hannibal smugly.

“What does ‘swain’ even mean anyway?”

“It means ‘admirer.’”

“Why not just write that then? And for the record, if you ever refer to yourself as my swain in public then I will kill you.”

“If I ever do,” replies Hannibal, “then it will not be necessary because I will kill myself first.”

Will laughs again then kicks the book away and settles down on the bed, snugly nestling himself until he’s slotted against the length of Hannibal’s body. But stereotypes aside, his last conscious thought as he falls asleep is how Hannibal’s been willing to adopt a traditional alpha role in ways that far exceed anything Will might have expected from him. In fact as the heat gets nearer Hannibal’s attention begins to border on positively *lavish*; from preparing Will’s meals to massaging him with scented oils, and even acquiring a selection of eye-wateringly expensive gifts that include a new set of omega plugs of varying sizes and an omega collar of soft black leather. Will shows a guarded interest in the plugs but completely rebels at the collar – and at one point is on the verge of having full-scale hysterics over it until Hannibal explains that its purpose isn’t to take his control away but create a chance to voluntarily give it up.

“See it as an opportunity to get out of your head for a while,” says Hannibal soothingly. “A little like we did before.” Will shrugs in a sulky way and Hannibal adds: “If memory serves you seemed to find it rather beneficial.”
Will repeats the shrugging motion and then waits until Hannibal’s not looking before stashing the collar in the back of the closet where it’ll be difficult to find. Then he sits on the edge of the bed and fretfully gnaws his thumbnail, trying to ignore how the start of his pre-heat stage makes the chances of needing some mental time-out unpleasantly likely. The most obvious sign of this is his growing need to be with Hannibal as much as possible, although there’s also the flushed skin and raised temperature, not to mention the first stirrings of an unmistakable nesting urge (cringe). Fortunately the hotel has been a bit of a godsend in this respect, because even Will finds it a waste of time getting embarrassed about clinging onto Hannibal’s hand or curling up against him in public when all the other omegas are doing the same. In fact beyond a few paternal smiles from nearby alphas it seems he’s pretty much free to do what he likes without attracting any attention. On one occasion when Hannibal is basking on one of the sun loungers Will had even gone so far as to lie next to him and allow himself to be cradled in his arms. Hannibal had pressed his lips against Will’s forehead without comment and after an initial pang of self-consciousness Will had finally settled down then clung onto Hannibal rather frantically as if he were the only thing keeping him moored to solid ground. In the end he’d even fallen asleep like that; waking up a few hours later to find that Hannibal had remained still the entire time to avoid disturbing him and was tenderly stroking his hair.

The nesting, on the other hand, will never fail to be mortifying. It doesn’t help that the memory of The Chair is still fresh in his mind (and which is always going to be The Chair, because the levels of indignity it caused are so extreme as to require capital letters). Fortunately their suite has a special nesting space specially designed for this purpose (The Room?) which is small, snug and dimly lit and which Hannibal, just like before, is forbidden from entering without permission. After a few days of increasing discomfort Will accepts the inevitable and asks for the key to it, then goes inside to build a small stack of blankets and sulks underneath them for about an hour before finally emerging again. Hannibal, as with The Chair, appears to find Will’s attachment to The Room to be completely charming and doesn’t even try to be subtle in his attempts to sneak inside at every opportunity.

“Stop it,” bellows Will from beneath the blankets each time this happens. “Go away! I want to be on my own.” He can’t actually bring himself to say that he’s nesting, despite how obvious it is, because a part of him feels like if he doesn’t say the word it’ll somehow make it easier to pretend it isn’t happening. Hannibal, in turn, always leaves immediately when asked, although is clearly leaving the door open on purpose so he can peer through when he thinks Will isn’t looking.

“God knows why,” says Will irritably that evening when they’re dining together in the hotel’s restaurant. “You must have an incredibly low boredom threshold. What’s so interesting about me lying in bed?”

Hannibal merely smirks without replying then selects a particularly succulent piece of crab from the linguine and holds it up to Will’s mouth in a silent request to hand-feed him (and who turns away in equally silent refusal, because it’s bad enough to be nesting under a pile of blankets and you have to draw the line somewhere). Not that an answer’s really required because Will already knows the reason why: it’s because Hannibal, like most alphas, is completely besotted with the idea of his omega being in heat. In fact despite his annoyance, Will can’t deny that the image of Hannibal – always so poised and glacial – falling victim to the same stupid impulses as anyone else is rather endearing. He now starts smiling to himself at the thought of it and is about to tell Hannibal about it too when a violent wave of dizziness overtakes him and he’s forced to take a quick slug of water followed by a few deep breaths.

“What’s the matter?” says Hannibal sharply. From his expression he’s obviously preparing to go full-on doctor mode: Will half expects him to whip a stethoscope out from somewhere. “Are you feeling ill?”

“It’s nothing,” protests Will. “I’m fine.” Hannibal raises a sceptical eyebrow. Oh Christ, he’s not
really going to produce a stethoscope is he? Warily Will glances down at Hannibal’s hands. “I’m just a bit light-headed is all.”

“That’ll be your blood pressure,” replies Hannibal in a brisk doctorly tone, beginning to wave his hand for the bill. A waiter appears almost straight away and Will has his usual pang of envy at Hannibal’s unerring ability to do this. Will himself could be waving like a cheerleader all night and they’d still never turn up that fast. Although it’s hard to care that much anymore because he’s started to feel seriously queasy, rather like his head is stuffed with cement and clotted cotton wool. Oh God, it’s so hot in here too. Stifling. Why can’t they open a window or something? Someone should really open a window. Pushing his chair back from the table he gets to his feet then sways for a few seconds before staggering to the side.

The waiter, who’s no doubt got ninja reflexes from years of catching drunken alphas, promptly takes Will’s arm in an attempt to steady him. But while he does it very politely (with only the briefest of contact), and is almost certainly a beta (because there’s no way a place like this wouldn’t take such a basic precaution) the sight of Will being touched has an effect on Hannibal that’s both instant and dramatic. Reaching out as he now grabs Will himself with one of his unnervingly fast movements then possessively tugs him back against his chest, glaring manically at the waiter the entire time as if he wants to kill him.

“I beg your pardon sir,” says the waiter calmly. “I’m sorry if I’ve caused offence.”

Will bets he’s not sorry – not least because he hasn’t done anything wrong – although it certainly sounds sincere enough. Not that he’s got much choice but to sound sincere, considering that Hannibal looks like he’s on the verge of ripping his head off. Secretly Will finds himself hoping that the poor bastard is at least getting a massive salary for having to tolerate this sort of alpha crap on a daily basis, because quite frankly he’d rather clean toilets than put up with it himself. The waiter now puts down his tray then takes a careful step backwards with his palms outstretched and Will is immediately beset by an awful urge to laugh because it’s so obviously the result of some kind of training course about how to stop an alpha losing their shit if you touch their omega by mistake. In fact a part of him wants to apologise, but even though Hannibal has briefly been possessed by the Spirit of Alpha Bullshit – which, like The Chair and The Room, is also deserving of capital letters – it seems disloyal to acknowledge this to a stranger. Unfortunately Will also doesn’t have the first clue about alpha appeasement (it’s a pity he can’t go on the waiter’s training course) so in the end just has to improvise by resting his weight against Hannibal’s chest then leaning up to nuzzle his jaw as a silent encouragement to calm down. It makes him feel a bit self-conscious but it seems to work, because Hannibal finally snaps out of it and stops bristling long enough to take hold of Will’s hand then whisk him towards the elevator, covering him protectively the entire time as if he thinks he’s a bodyguard.

Once they’re back in the suite Will’s expecting Hannibal to show some signs of embarrassment at going full-on alpha, because surely he’d consider it vulgar to be such a slave to biology? Barbarous. Rude, even. But Hannibal doesn’t show the faintest signs of being embarrassed and instead makes a big performance of locking the doors and windows before turning round with his arms folded and a severe expression on his face. “Enough is enough,” he says firmly. “No more going outside from now on. Not for anything. Until your heat’s over you’re staying in here with me.”

Will wants to snap something sarcastic – and probably would as well, except that an argument feels like way too much effort. So in the end he just takes his glasses off then drags a hand across his face, gloomily recounting Alex’s previous warning about alpha possessiveness. Not that possessiveness really does it justice…why did no one ever tell him that having an alpha is a bit like having a large unruly toddler who’s liable to start shrieking ‘Mine!’ at the first hint of someone else approaching their property? But he’s too tired and dazed to really complain about it so just stands there looking
mournful instead: and which promptly activates a third mode from Hannibal which seems to be a combination of the other two in terms of Doctorly Concern mixed with Alpha Bullshit and involves scooping Will up in both arms like he’s something excessively precious and fragile and ferrying him off to the bedroom.

“Where do you want to go?” asks Hannibal, who seems oblivious to how Will’s started to struggle like a cat being pushed in a carrier. “Your own room, or in here with me?”

Will, who loathes being picked up, finally succeeds in wriggling free then curls up across the bed as silent indication that he’s happy where he is. Hannibal nods approvingly then sits down next to him and presses two fingers against his throat in an attempt to take his pulse. “Stop it,” says Will, irritably jerking his head away. “I told you, I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” replies Hannibal, promptly replacing them again. “You’re heart rate is far quicker than it should be. You’re also burning up. Your temperature must be around 100 degrees – maybe a little over.”

Will sighs unhappily at this unwelcome news, so Hannibal sighs too to keep him company then goes into the kitchen to find some ice-cubes which he proceeds to rub against Will’s forehead and along the hollow of his throat. “You realise it’s going to start soon don’t you?” he adds once Will’s grown quiet and more comfortable again. “Another day or two at most.”

Will repeats the irritated huffing sound from before (and which he seems to have been practicing because it’s starting to sound operatic in how expressive it is). “Yes,” he mutters. “Of course I do. How could I not?”

“Good,” replies Hannibal crisply. Retrieving a nearby flannel he begins to dab Will’s skin dry, admiring the way the soft evening light touches the curve of his cheekbone. “Only one never knows with you – your capacity for denial is extremely impressive.”

Will grumbles something unintelligible then rolls onto his side and huddles up against the side of Hannibal’s leg. By now his eyes seem extremely dark; practically all pupil. “I’m not in denial,” he says sleepily. “Not anymore.”

Hannibal – who’s spotted the stubborn little frown line forming on Will’s forehead – strongly suspects that this isn’t the case, but he remains silent and continues to stroke Will’s hair until he’s finally fallen asleep. But his true opinion is that the biggest stressors are still to come and sure enough, when Will wakes up the next morning, it’s obvious that a physical change has come over him that he’s seriously struggling to cope with. He reminds Hannibal of someone lingering on the edge of the abyss, knowing a plunge is inevitable but trying to delay it as long as possible, and when he finally appears in the living room it’s with his arms wrapped around his chest, hugging himself protectively as if holding a shield. Hannibal observes it all with rapt fascination. In anyone else he’d find such excess emotion to be tedious; distasteful, even, signifying a regrettable lack of control. But in Will’s case it has a freshness and immediacy that he could savour like the finest of wines: a bouquet of fear and confusion, richly spiced with Will’s trademark rebelliousness, with a lingering undertone of ripening heat beneath it all which enhances a base fragrance that’s entirely Wills own. In fact Will feeling broken is always beautiful. It’s something splendid and graceful: worthy of being immortalized in oils then displayed to perfection in Hannibal’s memory palace. He looks so small and wrecked and lovely, and watching him now fills Hannibal with an urge to touch and comfort him that hits with the same emotional force as a blow to the chest.

Will, who’s getting ready to bolt, clearly doesn’t feel the same way because when he sees Hannibal staring at him he takes a sharp step backwards then glares ferociously like he’s daring him to try anything. This isn’t necessarily surprising. Un-bonded omegas are extremely skittish pre-heat so it’s
natural that Will’s ingrained distrust of alphas would make him particularly wary. He doesn’t need to worry: Hannibal will kill anyone who ever dares to so much as look at him. And as long as his heat lasts he’ll be protected, with as much space as he needs to nest in while Hannibal places dainty morsels of food between his teeth to keep him healthy and strong…all the better for bearing future offspring. Hannibal now glides forward, using his greater strength and height to box Will in, then frames his face with both hands and attempts to kiss his forehead. Will’s expression flickers between irritation and fear at being approached by an alpha, but it’s not until he’s touched that his simmering tension finally spills over into outright aggression and he actually snarls in Hannibal’s face before roughly shoving him away.

Most alphas would be driven to distraction by this. But Hannibal understands how Will uses anger to conceal his fear, so chooses not to take offence and instead bides his time with typical patience as he devises a plan to help his omega calm down. In this respect Will looks faintly agonised, as if his slim body is struggling to cope with the rush of so many heat hormones, and after a few hours have passed Hannibal prowls up behind him once more then wraps an arm round his chest. He does it very guardedly, the same way you might approach a wild animal, then gently nuzzles Will’s hair in what appears like an attempt to soothe but is actually a secret ploy to scent-mark him. The room is cool but Will’s skin is radiating warmth through the fabric of his shirt and at Hannibal’s touch he goes rigid, clearly poised to start struggling. Hannibal, completely undeterred, murmurs his name then kisses the bonding spot in a way that’s designed to comfort as much as to arouse. Gently but firmly he then tilts Will’s head back until he’s resting in the curve of Hannibal’s shoulder and has no choice except to breathe in the strong scent of alpha pheromones.

Will’s pulse is flickering beneath his fingers, frantic as a bird against the bars of a cage. Slowly Hannibal now skims his lips across his forehead, inhaling deeply as he goes, then lifts Will’s hand to his mouth and licks along his palm where he alternates the tender nip of teeth with a swirling tongue across the delicate tips of Will’s fingers. Will quivers slightly and when Hannibal tightens his grip on him he finally lets his head tip backwards, deliberately bearing his throat in an exquisite little show of submission. Hannibal murmurs his name then begins to stroke his face again – brushing against his lower lip, caressing his jaw – before sliding a warm hand down his throat, along his ribs, then finally slipping beneath Will’s shirt to rub feathery circles against his hipbones. Will’s breath promptly hitches and Hannibal eases his mouth open with his tongue, gently inhaling his breath and tracing a finger along his cheek until Will shivers and gives a small moan.

“Good boy,” says Hannibal quietly. By now Will is pliant in his arms, his whole body growing soft and receptive in response to Hannibal’s own. His eyes have fallen closed and Hannibal continues to hold him, murmuring words against his hair in a foreign language while all the time reaching down towards his pocket with his other hand. He does it very slowly and carefully – like someone with all the time in the world – and it’s only when Will is completely still and peaceful that he finally produces the collar and fastens it round his throat.

Will’s eyes snap straight open as his breath comes fluttering out his mouth in a surprised little ‘oh’ sound. “Just try it,” says Hannibal, cradling Will’s face to stop him pulling away. “Just for a while. And if it doesn’t help we can stop.”

Will sucks the breath back in then shifts unhappily from one foot to the other, the softness of his skin beneath Hannibal’s fingers accentuated by the rigid tension in his jaw. In fact the stress is almost radiating off him and it makes the doctor in Hannibal sufficiently concerned to want to wait a little longer and give Will a chance to leave if he wants to. But it seems as if he doesn’t want to, so after pressing a few more kisses to his bonding spot Hannibal finally scoops him up in his arms and carries him into the living room. Even now he’s still bracing himself for a struggle, but this time Will seems too overwhelmed to argue and simply hooks both arms round Hannibal’s neck and buries his face in his shoulder. He’s grown rather wan and pale – fragile in an uncharacteristic way – and when he’s
asked to undress seems completely scandalised, quickly followed by a look of confusion as if he can’t quite understand his own reaction. Hannibal, on the other hand, knows it’s common for omegas to grow shy and avoidant just before their heats start as a way to signal sexual unavailability to anyone except their bonded alpha. The lack of a bite mark means Will’s body hasn’t yet realised that this is Hannibal...although at least it’s going to be learning it very soon. Of course the sight of Will looking painfully timid and self-conscious because he doesn’t want to take his clothes off in front of an alpha shouldn’t be so captivating. It shouldn’t even be particularly interesting. Yet somehow it still is, and Hannibal’s face arranges itself into an unusually gentle expression before stepping forward to peel them off himself: doing it slowly with enormous relish, then swiping his tongue against each piece of newly exposed skin to taste salt and sweat and the heady underlying tang of heat that’s only just below the surface.

Will’s mood might be erratic but his arousal is obvious, and by the time the last piece of clothing falls to the floor his cock has grown hard and straining as it glistens wetly at the tip. He’s perfect, thinks Hannibal with something close to awe: the black leather profanely beautiful against the porcelain-pale throat with a cluster of small bruises, dark as violets, dotted across his thighs like motifs of ownership to show where Hannibal’s fingertips have been. It’s impossible not to admire them, although admittedly they can’t compete with teeth sinking into fragile skin when Will finally bares his neck to be marked in a much more permanent way. Soon, promises Hannibal to himself as he catches Will’s eye – defiantly lovely and, for a few fleeting seconds, more like his usual self – until the moment passes and his expression clouds over again in an obvious fog of heat and hormones. He has all the divine grace and stoic sadness of a young martyr decides Hannibal: St Sebastian, lovingly painted by Dolci. Forgetting his earlier pledge to be gentle he roughly tugs Will forward for a hungry kiss, frenzied and urgent like he wants to steal the breath from his body. Will makes some small, choked-back noises and Hannibal swallows them whole before he finally manages to gain control of himself and takes hold of Will’s waist instead so he can manoeuvre him over the back of the chair.

Will catches his breath when he lands and for a few seconds Hannibal simply falls silent again as he admires how ravishing his omega actually is. Deceptively delicate, like silk over steel, yet still so soft and inviting with sleek curves, luscious angles and fragile bones beneath pale skin – all beneath a scent so vivid and vital it might as well be a trail of blood. Briefly Hannibal closes his eyes and just breathes Will in. It’s actually rather fascinating: the unbelievable force of his own craving. Will, unsettled by the silence, shifts uneasily and Hannibal opens his eyes then runs a soothing hand down his spine.

“Be still,” he says softly. “You don’t have to do anything now mylimasis. Just focus on the sensation.”

Will nods rather warily and Hannibal murmurs some more words of praise and encouragement while secretly planning his next move. In fact it would be a great pleasure to force Will’s legs open by tying them to the chair, but he knows it would unsettle him past the point of enjoyment so has to be content with just fastening his wrists together instead. Will trembles with anticipation then lets out a low moan as Hannibal spits onto his thumb and uses it to caress his nipples, teasing them into stiffness before sliding down to stroke along his thighs and hipbones. Although he’s clearly still on edge he’s not attempting to struggle and Hannibal hums approvingly then kneels down to spread him wide open with both hands, trying not to let out a primal growl when he sees the small ring of muscle. For an alpha the sight is pretty much incomparable: this most private of places that’s so small and perfect and (at least for the next few hours) the delicate pale pink of an unbonded omega. Hannibal sighs with pleasure then gives into temptation and growls against Will’s skin. His thumb is still slippery with saliva so he now massages the rim for a few seconds, enjoying how the muscle clenches beneath his touch, before lowering his head to lap at it hungrily with his tongue. Will rewards him with an ecstatic moan so Hannibal growls again and promptly increases the pressure,
alternating slow licks with feathery kisses then narrowing down to a hard enough point to work his tongue inside his boy’s tight trembling body. By now Will’s so over-sensitized that something so thick and wet sliding into his ass is almost too much for him and Hannibal can feel the way he’s shaking with the strain: clenching and growing tighter as his body approaches orgasm while urgently rocking his hips to try and get Hannibal’s mouth where he wants it.

Hannibal growls once more then briefly pulls away to lay a kiss on Will’s thigh. His cock has grown so hot and heavy by now, swaying between his legs as he soaks the chair in pre-come. “Beautiful,” says Hannibal softly, leaning down a bit further to get a better view. “You really like that don’t you?”

“Oh,” gasps Will, his voice breathy and high from how dry his throat is. “Oh God…oh God…” Hannibal’s thumb is now skimming the edge of his hole and as it starts to push inside he gives a helpless wail then buries his face in his arm.

Hannibal immediately darts out a hand, possessively grabbing Will’s neck so he can pull his head back. “No,” he says. “Don’t hide it. I want to hear you.” Will obediently moans again then claws against the fabric of the chair, by now looking almost shattered with coiled-up energy and dishevelled passion. “Good boy,” adds Hannibal with delight. “That’s it; that’s perfect. This isn’t about you staying in control. It’s about you letting go of it.”

For a few moments he goes totally still, relishing the soft warmth beneath his hands and the beautiful sound of Will fighting to catch his breath, before using a fingertip to stroke his hole and tease it into opening up a little more. But despite the constant pressure he never actually pushes in and above him Will gives a sharp cry of frustration, a tremor running through his entire body as he another trickle of pre-come leaks from his neglected cock.

“Do you want more?” asks Hannibal softly. The question is unnecessary – he knows Will needs more – but he still wants to hear him ask for it. “You’re desperate for something to fill you up aren’t you? To stretch you open...” Will moans in loud agreement and is promptly rewarded by two fingers sliding deep inside him to stoke and probe. “That’s it,” says Hannibal with obvious tenderness. “I have you. Now move your hips so you can really feel it.”

The encouragement is more than enough for Will who pushes down almost wildly, ass clenching round Hannibal’s fingers with urgent tightness as he lets out little broken-off moans. “Do you want me to fetch that plug beloved?” purrs Hannibal, beginning to thumb the tight slippery skin where his fingers are stretching Will open. “I’lluntie you if you do so you can push it in yourself. I’ll warn you though: I’m going to make you do it slowly. Very slowly. Just an inch at a time.”

Will moans again, wantonly spreading his wider apart, but as enticing the sight is it promptly fills Hannibal with a sharp stab of envy. It’s an irrational response of course; of course it is. But even though he was the one to suggest it, Will’s enthusiasm makes him realise how much he dislikes the idea of his boy wanting pleasure from anything except himself. Hannibal now delivers a neat little bite to Will’s shoulder as punishment for showing sexual interest in something that’s not his alpha then kneels down again to roughly spread him open before lapping hungrily at his loosened hole. Will makes a wailing noise, high and uncontrollable, then frantically thrusts backwards in a way that’s assertive even as it’s desperate and needy. But Hannibal ignores him and just licks over him in slow circles, probing and exploring until the muscle starts to flutter against his mouth. Will feels luscious: so tight, yet so slippery smooth and responsive, with his slim trembling legs soaking wet from a combination of slick and saliva. It’s enough to seriously test Hannibal’s self-control and he has to take a few breaths himself, struggling with the urge to abandon the whole experiment and simply fuck Will senseless over the chair. In fact by now he’d normally be reaching round to where Will’s cock is swaying between his legs, getting harder and heavier with each flick of Hannibal’s
tongue, and stroke him to desperation until he comes all over himself. But he’s not going to do it this
time. This time when Will comes, he’s going to have to do it round his alpha’s cock. Hannibal now
growls against Will’s skin then grips onto his thighs, hard enough to bruise. There’s already an
exquisite anticipation for it in the way Will’s clenching round his tongue like he thinks it’s a knot,
and if Hannibal didn’t possess such formidable willpower he could probably come himself just from
the thought of it.

Above him Will gives an unhappy wail and Hannibal finally submits to temptation and sits upright,
briefly burying his face in Will’s hair to savour the smell and feel of him. “What is it mano melé?” he
says softly. “What are you begging for?”

Will repeats the noise – not entirely speech, and not entirely moaning, but rather an intoxicating
mixture of the two – so Hannibal sighs with pleasure at how sweet it sounds then quickly unfastens
his belt so he take out his cock and rub the thick leaking head against Will’s hole. As he watches the
small muscle seems to clench in preparation, so slick and velvety smooth. So receptive…Hannibal’s
precious omega and perfect mate. He’s so loose and slippery by now that his body will be incredibly
easy to breech, allowing Hannibal to slide deep inside him with no resistance at all. The sense of
anticipation is delicious and he now waits a few more seconds before pushing forward with a
slowness that’s designed to be deliberately tormenting: just a centimetre at a time – less than that. Just
enough to feel the tight rim give way as the tip of his cock penetrates Will’s trembling body. Then he
goes completely still again, listening to Will’s staccato breaths as he grips onto his neck to stop him
pushing backwards and getting what he wants.

“Hannibal,” mutters Will, his voice husky from all the panting. “Please.”

His desperation is obvious and this time it’s enough to touch something in Hannibal and make him
realise that seeing Will frantic and pleading, while delicious, isn’t quite as lovely as Will sensuous
and blissful. Leaning down he lays a soft kiss on Will’s neck in apology then leans further back to
watch the muscle quivering round his tight wet hole before it relaxes enough to let his cock slide
deep inside. Will takes it so smoothly and easily and once the full length is buried inside him he
reacts even better than hoped for: shuddering, tensing, then giving a long low moan as he
immediately starts to come.

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal. His voice is rough with desire – almost a growl – and he gathers Will up
against his chest, nosing his throat to take in the rich heat scent of him before covering his face and
hair with rapturous kisses. “Look at you. You’re perfect; you take it so well. You can’t help it can
you? You can’t stop yourself responding to your alpha.”

Will makes a contented noise but doesn’t actually reply. His previous tension has completely seeped
away by now and left him soft and boneless, so Hannibal unties his wrists then protectively drapes
himself across his back until the knot has subsided enough for them to move. Then he picks Will up
and carries him into the shower where he makes him come again by fucking him up against the tiles,
one arm wrapped round Will’s waist to help keep him upright. Afterwards Will dozes contentedly
across the sofa with his head on Hannibal’s knee, letting out the occasional purr-like sound as
Hannibal strokes his hair and face. It’s striking how much calmer he is than before; rather like he’s
surprised himself with the realisation that he trusts Hannibal enough not to exploit him – and likewise
trusts himself enough not to be exploited.

“That collar,” says Will eventually. His voice sounds very soft and rumbling from tiredness, a little
like a teddy bear’s growl. “We can do that again sometime if you want.”

He obviously intends to be casual, but it still makes Hannibal smile because one of the many things
he relishes about Will is how his voice often gives him away him. The words themselves don’t
matter, and nor do the emotions – defiance, anger, affection – it’s all the same: all enough to allow Hannibal to look beyond whatever wall Will’s constructed round himself and glimpse the truth behind it. He now trails his finger across the bridge of Will’s nose, admiring how pale, perfect and ferociously adorable he looks when illuminated by the blanched evening sun. So beautifully sensual. One might even say carnal. My exquisite little whore, thinks Hannibal rapturously, even though it’s not something he’d ever call Will out loud. It’s not remotely intended as an insult though; on the contrary. In fact in Hannibal’s construction of the word it’s high praise indeed, in the sense that Will is sufficiently spirited and audacious to place the pursuit of pleasure and natural human need over society’s pointlessly confining, fastidious rules about what’s appropriate for omegas.

Hannibal now gives a small sigh at the tiresome constraints of language, which as far as he’s concerned is simply a philosophy of mind where simple concepts combine in systematic ways to create all manner of ludicrous representations. Then he turns this train of thought over several times in his mind before completely losing interest in it (premised, as it is, on how annoyingly dull-witted and unimaginative most people tend to be) and runs his eyes over Will again instead. Privately he’s hoping to get to the point where Will can fetch the collar himself when he feels he needs it, although knows that realistically this is unlikely to happen straight away. Nevertheless the possibilities for physical exploration are extensive and intriguing, because Will clearly finds comfort in throwing off restraint and self-control and losing himself in sensation. It’s something that’ll require careful guidance and management (at least initially, although he’s confident Will can soon learn to master his own needs) and might usefully involve a level of devolution in order for Will to push past his boundaries and emerge even more daring and uninhibited as a result. A process of physical abandonment to complement the extending mental horizons: dissemble down to the essentials; deconstruct; review; reconstruct…Hannibal now closes his eyes and permits himself some brief yet appealing fantasies about what very interesting things might be attempted as part of this endeavour, all starring Will flushed, desperate and begging to be debauched. Then he opens his eyes again and stares very intensely into Will’s for a few seconds.

“Only if I want to?” is all he says.

Will makes a huffing noise and Hannibal smiles again then slides a finger beneath his chin so he can tilt his face upright. Will promptly arches himself against Hannibal’s chest like someone seeking closeness and reassurance and Hannibal watches, almost unbearably charmed, as he’s filled with a wave of tenderness which even now still feels slightly unfamiliar for him.

“There’s nothing wrong with asking for help if you need it,” he adds in a gentler voice. “Especially just before your heat starts. You’ve been misusing suppressants for so long it could take years before you establish a natural cycle. It makes sense you’d feel vulnerable as a result.”

Will huffs even louder, briefly sounding more like his usual self. “I don’t like being vulnerable.”

“I know you don’t,” replies Hannibal wryly. “But only because you’ve never allowed yourself to try. I suppose you’re going to have to use me to practice on in the meantime.”

Will barks out a laugh then reaches up to tug Hannibal’s hair. His smile is somewhat crooked: a wisp of bitterness and showing rather too many teeth. “Oh really?” he says. “You think you’re a safe person to practice being vulnerable with?”

“Maybe not in the past,” admits Hannibal. “But things are different now.”

Will opens his mouth, clearly prepared to start huffing for a third time, and Hannibal’s smile broadens a little further before he gently presses a finger across Will’s lips to keep him quiet. “How often have I told you that your vulnerability makes you strong?” he adds. “Strength without vulnerability stifles development. It destroys progress. If we remain in the boundary of our perceived
strengths then how do we ever venture beyond them and experience new possibility? Accept and embrace your vulnerabilities and you can learn from them. After that you can transcend them. And after that you can learn to know yourself, profoundly and truthfully – and then appreciate yourself for yourself, exactly the way that you are.”

Will sighs then stretches his arms behind his head so Hannibal can tangle their fingers together. “Yes…I know,” he says finally. “But it just makes me feel so exposed.”

“Of course it does. It also requires the courage to be honest about your emotions instead of concealing or denying them. But the more you can do it the more you can learn to be comfortable with who you are.”

Will falls quiet for a few moments then twists his head round to look at Hannibal directly. “So what about you then? What about your vulnerability?”

Hannibal waits a few seconds then gives a small smile as he brushes a stray strand of hair off Will’s forehead. “I’ve been practicing too of course.”

“When?”

“From the day I first laid eyes on you,” says Hannibal in an unusually gentle way. “And not always entirely from choice.”

Will, who understands what a huge admission this is, nods without replying then tightens his grip on Hannibal’s hand. It’s a bit like receiving a gift that he’s unsure how to open – the permission to see Hannibal as he really is – yet while he seems able to accept it in the moment, it’s not until much later in the evening that he appears fully ready to take the advice. Not until the sun is setting to paint the sky in buttery gold and pomegranate pink before he slips out the bedroom towards the balcony; and where, after months of pretending, he finally lets his guard down as he climbs onto Hannibal’s knee and quivers uncontrollably.

“It’s all right Will,” says Hannibal softly. As he’s speaking he gently cradles Will’s head with one hand then strokes up and down his back with the other, the same way you might try to soothe a wary animal. “I know you’re nervous, but I promise I’m not going to hurt you. It’s a natural process – the most natural in the world. I’m going to lay you down and make love to you; and then, when you show me you want it, I’ll finally bite you.” Will quivers even harder and Hannibal protectively tightens his grip. “You won’t even have to think about it,” he adds, laying a kiss on the back of Will’s neck. “Your body will know exactly what to do. And if it’s too overwhelming I can stop.”

In fact he seriously doubts it would be possible to stop, even if he wanted to, but at this point is prepared to say anything that might help Will calm down. Will, in turn, doesn’t answer straight away and slowly shifts his head round instead until they’re looking at one another. By now the sun has almost fully set and his skin gleams as pale as ivory in the darkness. “What if I lose myself again?” he says quietly. “Like I did last time. It was like I just…like I just left. Like I wasn’t there anymore and someone else arrived to take me over.”

Hannibal raises a hand and runs it across Will’s face, skimming across his cheekbones and forehead with the same deftness as a blind person reading Braille. “Perhaps you will,” he says. “It’s very new for you to be in heat; you need time to adjust to it. But even if you do lose yourself you still don’t need to worry – because I’ll always know how to find you again.”

Will’s mournful expression finally lifts into a smile and he raises his own hand so he can search out Hannibal’s face in the darkness. “Yes,” is all he says.
“You’re so close now,” adds Hannibal in the same gentle voice. “It’ll only be a few more hours. Do you want to go back inside or wait here with me?”

“I want to wait with you,” says Will, who’s now clutching Hannibal’s hand like a life raft. “I don’t mind where.” For a few seconds he falls quiet then gives a small laugh. “You know it’s weird, but I feel like I need to say goodbye. It’s as if I won’t see you again until the heat’s over – until I come back.”

“You still don’t know that you’re going to leave,” replies Hannibal, tenderly cupping Will’s face in his palm. “I doubt it’ll be as intense as it was the last time. But even if it is, you know I’ll be waiting for you. And then when you see me again…we’ll be bonded.”

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As expected Will’s heat starts in full the next morning. It’s also clear from the outset that he won’t be as aggressive as he was during the last one – although he’s also not exactly peaceful either, and before an hour’s passed has already pounced on Hannibal several times because he wants to climb on top of him. Admittedly this is the sort of unruly behaviour most alphas would never tolerate in an omega, but Hannibal stares up at his boy’s beautiful fierce face and decides that it’s always going to be impossible to deny him anything. After all, Will’s intensity is part of his uniqueness and the day he stops being wild is the day he stops being interesting. Fortunately that day is never going to arrive, so Hannibal finds himself completely content to be scratched, leapt upon and, on more than one occasion, actually bitten (seeing how Will seems to have forgotten that he’s not an alpha and marking Hannibal’s neck is completely pointless). In fact while he’d never admit it, Hannibal can’t help feeling relieved that he maintained his usual exercise routine since leaving America, because Will is so passionate and demanding he might have otherwise struggled to keep up with him.

“What a terrible hazard you are my love,” says Hannibal in amusement when Will has ambushed him for the sixth time. “A true tsunami. You should have been sent to me with a safety warning and a set of instructions.”

Will, who’s lying on Hannibal’s chest and alternately biting and nuzzling his throat, gives no indication he’s heard any of this. It’s still not clear how much he’s fallen into the same trance-like state he did last time, although Hannibal’s own suspicion is that he’s drifting in and out of it, with moments of relative clarity interspersed with total oblivion. Reaching up he now cradles Will’s cheek with his hand to keep his face still, tenderly examining it from several angles to check for signs of heat stress until Will makes an impatient noise and twists himself free. He obviously feels like he’s not getting enough attention, so Hannibal smiles again then pulls him down for a messy kiss just before Will flips over to pin Hannibal to the floor and straddle his hips. He looks beautifully wild with damp tangling into his eyelashes and Hannibal gazes up at him in silent admiration, completely powerless to hide how mesmerized he feels.

Will’s muscles shift beneath his skin as he moves, lithe and sinuous as a cat, and so youthful, strong and fully alive. He’s shuddering now, his breath jagged and rough as Hannibal’s cock thrusts deeper inside him each time. As usual he’s sets the pace he wants: beginning fairly slowly before settling into a hungry rhythm, hips snapping and muscles clenching tightly round Hannibal’s cock as he rides him. His own cock is swaying against his abdomen so Hannibal lets go of his waist to take hold of it, stroking the head with his thumb as Will moans then leans down to scrape his teeth against Hannibal’s throat. He looks so savage and debauched yet still strangely delicate, and it arouses a familiar contradiction in Hannibal where he can’t decide if he prefers to shelter and protect Will or fuck him so fiercely he’s left bruised and exhausted. Reaching up he strokes a stray curl of hair from Will’s forehead, marvelling at the fragile shell of bone beneath which houses the pitch-black beauty at the heart of him.
Another striking change from last time is that Will is showing active signs of wanting to nest during the heat itself. In fact his protectiveness of his space exceeds anything he’s ever shown before, and while Hannibal might have been able to get away with entering his room in the past few days there’s no chance of doing it now without being physically attacked. Hannibal knows this is because omegas are fiercely defensive of newborn offspring and dislike alphas being near them, so therefore do their best to create a clear boundary from the point of conception. Admittedly most omegas do this verbally whereas Will, unsurprisingly, has taken it to its absolute extreme in being so aggressive. Nevertheless there’s still something touching about seeing him fully embrace his omega instincts, despite his overwhelming dislike of children in general. In fact Hannibal’s one real regret is that it’s going to be impossible to breed him as long as he’s accessing his apparently endless supply of contraceptives – although he equally knows that there’s nothing he can do about this without resorting to the type of deception that would completely destroy Will’s trust in him.

Hannibal likewise knows that bonding is traditionally the time for alphas to dominate their omega and establish a sense of authority. At least that’s the way it’s supposed to go; and there’s little doubt his greater physical strength could let him subdue Will fairly easily if he wanted to. Only he finds he doesn’t want to, not least because Will has been so traumatised by numerous alphas that excessive force would almost certainly rupture their growing sense of intimacy. There’s also the fact that persuasion is always more appealing than coercion where Will’s concerned, so forcing him to accept a bite could never be as gratifying as having him choose it for himself. Besides, Hannibal is a hunter by instinct and long experience has shown him that patience is what’s best guaranteed to obtain one’s prey. He therefore waits and bides his time until a few more days have passed and Will has finally started to calm down and grow a bit more peaceful and omega-like. Admittedly this only occurs slowly and in stages: first with Will becoming less aggressive, followed by actively affectionate, until the fourth day of the heat arrives and Hannibal’s patience is finally rewarded in the most perfect way imaginable.

It happens when Will is lying in his arms, very soft and still, before suddenly going rigid for no obvious reason then pulling away. As usual Hannibal doesn’t attempt to restrain him, but it’s not until he glances up that he sees how Will has knelt across the bed, legs spread and spine arched in a truly breath-taking display of desire and vulnerability. It’s clear he’s presenting himself to his alpha in a way that showcases his body to full advantage, but it’s also much more than just that. Because this is a classic breeding position – the strongest possible invitation to be mated – and at the sight of it Hannibal’s iron willpower completely caves in on itself as he’s overcome with an urgent, primal need to simply possess. In fact his surge of longing is scorching. It’s like fire. Like a bloodlust…a volcanic surge of passion that’s elementally raw and burns brightly enough to devour whatever falls in its path. It’s overpowering and lethal: the extent to how much he wants to make Will his own. And it means that Hannibal’s usual value for rationality and reason get totally undermined as in those few moments his every sense is overwhelmed by Will’s presence. The mere fact that Will exists, and is here; yet at the same time is so insanely perfect that by rights he shouldn’t be real at all and only occur as a figment of imagination.

As he inhales a heady lungful of Will’s heat scent Hannibal springs forward with a low growl, only forcing himself to be quiet when he sees the way it makes Will flinch. Then he waits a few seconds, trying to snatch back his remaining shards of self-control, before leaning across to tenderly nuzzle Will’s bonding spot in an attempt to calm them both down. He can feel Will’s skin against his chest: how warm and fervid it is, as if the heat has subsumed the whole of his body. In fact it’s a real shame he can’t have him on his back to stare into his eyes and enjoy all the little variations of expression as his omega is bitten and bonded for the first time. But of course there’s no other way available, so he reaches round to stoke two fingers against Will’s lips, encouraging him to open his mouth to suck them, and then kisses the bonding spot even harder than before.

“Ready?” he says quietly.
Will nods and arches his back, muscles curving elegantly with an invitation that remains very obvious despite his nerves. Hannibal bites back another growl at the sight of it then licks a bead of sweat from Will’s shoulder as he tries and fails to steady himself. It’s an intricate balance between rough and gentle, and he bears down hard so he can relish having Will safely trapped beneath him before twisting round to trace the outline of Will’s mouth with his tongue and thrust it inside. The kiss is fiercely passionate, pulling away only to breathe before smashing together again; and for Hannibal there’s a sense of carefully controlled ferocity with a hint of danger hidden just below the surface. In fact the alpha in him wants to pin Will down with a searing touch and possessive hold: to fuck him and knot him and make him feel Hannibal’s greater strength and power. Yet if Will is aware of this he clearly doesn’t care and when Hannibal’s arms bracket each side of his face he reaches out to entwine their fingers together, his breath hot on Hannibal’s skin as he moulds himself against his alpha’s body. Hannibal can feel him shuddering with anticipation, restless and hungry with the flex of muscle in each lithe limb signalling his desire for what’s about to happen. He smells divine, there’s no other word for it – the rich, scalding scent of an omega in the heights of heat and arousal – and Hannibal wants to devour him. It’s an aching, craving need that punches him just behind the ribcage and below the heart: the urge to hold Will close and never let him go. And it’s also a reminder that while Will is his omega is to rut and fuck, he’s also his responsibility to protect and cherish. His obsession and redemption. His perfect mate. Just his.

Without wasting another second Hannibal bears down to push the head of his cock against Will’s hole, gasping as he feels the muscles flutter beneath the pressure. Considering how much Will needs to take he’s much tighter than he should be; a clear sign of his anxiety at being mounted by an alpha. But Hannibal can’t wait any longer – couldn’t wait, even if he had to. Then Will gives a beautifully breathy gasp and at the sound of it Hannibal loses control completely. A noise escapes from him that’s close to a snarl and he thrusts forward, hungry and possessive, until all resistance gives way and he’s buried deep inside Will’s body. Will cries out ecstatically and Hannibal seizes hold of his hips then pulls his cock nearly all the way out before plunging the full length back in again; rocking Will towards him so he can take the full force of each thrust and jerking his head back by the hair to savage his throat with kisses.

Will has started to make the sweetest noises: low moans, breathy cries and deep sighs of desire. Hannibal is pounding into him with a punishing level of force, yet he grinds backwards to get the penetration deep where he needs it most, taking every inch of Hannibal’s cock so well. By now his body is like a riot of motion and sound: a stunning blend of submission spiced with a predatory confidence that’s almost unimaginable for an omega. He’s ferocious and feverish – unashamed in his craving need for an alpha – yet still exudes strength and a raw sensuality, despite being completely pinned down and powerless beneath Hannibal’s weight. But while he’s not attempting to fight there’s also no sense of him passively taking what he’s been given. Instead he’s demanding it: snapping his hips in urgent thrusts then rocking upwards as Hannibal slams down until they hit a perfect rhythm. His skin is glossy with a pearly covering of sweat and when Hannibal wraps an arm round him the muscles of his chest feel smooth and taut with a heart-rate so frantic Hannibal is convinced he can sense it pounding against his own. Hungrily he now glides his palm across Will’s abdomen, pressing down to feel the vibrations from where he’s being fucked so hard, then licks a hot stripe across his neck as he grips his fist round Will’s cock. Will’s breath promptly stutters in a desperate keening noise, hot and throbbing as he jerks his hips to push Hannibal further inside him. He’s getting tighter now. So tight: clenching down as if his body is determined to pump every drop of his alpha’s come as deep inside him as possible. It’s enough to finally push Hannibal over the edge and as he plunges forward he finally does what he feels like he’s waited a lifetime for as he sinks his teeth deep into the back of Will’s neck.

Will’s skin feels incredible – soft yet firm, so warmly yielding – and once he’s started biting it feels like it might be impossible to ever stop. But beyond a small whine Will doesn’t show any signs of
pain. Instead he arches upwards, desperately trying to push Hannibal even deeper inside him before tensing and crying out as his whole body clenches down on Hannibal’s cock and he starts to come. Hannibal has gently wrapped his fingers round his throat to stop him pulling away, but it soon becomes obvious that the restraint is unnecessary because even when the hand’s removed he keeps his head in place. His muscles are gripping urgently round Hannibal’s knot in a way that feels electrifying and it’s then that Hannibal finally surrenders to the tight, slippery warmth of Will’s body and simply lets himself go. On a savage, primal level it’s unbelievably gratifying. Not just his own orgasm, which seems to be pounding through every part of his frame, but the bliss of having a lusciously responsive omega lying underneath him, speared with a knot as he’s flooded with his alpha’s come. It’s hard and forceful yet Will takes it all, frenziedly working his hips to feel Hannibal’s cock filling him from every possible angle. Then he gracefully tilts his spine, letting instinct take over as he clutches at where his rim is stretched taut around Hannibal’s knot. It’s as if he’s lost in sensation: surrendering thought or reason and content to let himself be guided by the movement of his alpha’s body pressed against his own.

Afterwards Will is very soft and peaceful, dark eyelashes sweeping halfway down his cheeks and making soft little noises into Hannibal’s mouth when he kisses him. Hannibal is still buried deep inside his body and he now reaches down between Will’s legs to stroke the slippery skin and increase the pressure of his knot against Will’s hole. Will quivers violently, his hips giving helpless little jerks of pleasure beneath the probing fingers until he gives a low moan as his cock spasms again and spatters the mattress with another thick streak of come.

“Beautiful,” murmurs Hannibal. “So beautiful Will.”

Carefully he cradles the back of his neck, gentle yet possessive as his fingers tangle through the curls, then lightly rubs their noses together as he runs his tongue against Will’s lower lip. It’s only then that he sees the smear of blood, black in the moonlight against Will’s pale white skin, so tenderly lowers his head to lick the bite clean before draping himself across Will’s back. The force of their bonding has left him exhausted in a way that’s entirely unfamiliar yet even now, sated and almost fully overwhelmed, it’s still impossible to focus on anything except Will. Slumping forward Hannibal slides his fingers through Will’s damp hair then pulls his face close to his own. They’re twined together like vine leaves – about as close as it’s possible for two people to be – yet in that moment it still doesn’t feel enough. He wants to breathe Will in: savour him. But he can detect a trace of his own scent against Will’s skin and this at least is a source of consolation. In fact now the bite mark exists perhaps Will’s scent will always be different? Even after the heat has over and Hannibal’s sweat has been washed off his body he’ll still retain a permanent trace of his alpha.

“You’re mine now,” murmurs Hannibal, very low and intense. “Mine.” It’s an effort to get the words out; impossible almost. Yet it needs to be said. “Do you understand Will? Mano meilė. Beloved. You belong entirely to me.”

Will whimpers slightly then nuzzles against Hannibal’s body, sweetly and softly yielding as Hannibal scatters kisses across his neck and shoulders. He shows no signs of having heard, but even if he has Hannibal isn’t really expecting a reply. After all, Will’s barely spoken at all in the last few days beyond an occasional ‘yes’ or ‘no’ so there’s no real reason for him to start now. Yet once again Will exceeds Hannibal’s expectations as he turns his head and finally manages something else. Admittedly it’s only a few words, uttered in a voice that’s faint and hoarse from lack of use. But the force of emotion behind them show they’re the only words that matter as he searches out Hannibal’s mouth with his own then kisses him – softly sweet and languid without any of the turmoil of heat – and murmurs: “I love you.”

For a few seconds Hannibal is too moved to summon a reply. In fact the swell of emotion is deeply unknown and somewhat extraordinary. It’s also difficult to explain and, in a life so impeccably
ordered and nuanced as his has been, unsettling in its utter uncontrollability. There’s only the sense that if Hannibal has always celebrated his mind as the most finely-tuned and impeccably nuanced instrument then this strikingly singular being, this Will Graham – his every thought, mood, action and idea; every expression he has, every time he looks at Hannibal – are like hands that dart across the keys and show neither mercy nor restraint in it.

“This is a rare instance of my ability to empathise rivalling yours,” says Hannibal eventually in a voice that’s almost as quiet as Will’s. “If I know what it means to learn to love someone, it’s only because of you.” For a few seconds he falls silent again then pulls Will very close and places a kiss against his temple. “And because I loved you when I thought you were perfect – and when I realised you weren’t, then I loved you even more.”

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Ironically, given all his concerns about Will’s wellbeing, it’s Hannibal who struggles the most to adjust post-bonding. Will, on the other hand, is surprisingly peaceful and for someone with such an affinity for dogs spends most of his time in a way that’s vaguely cat-like: basking in the sun, falling asleep in Hannibal’s arms, and bossily demanding affection when it suits him followed by flashes of irritation if he feels it’s gone on for too long. But Hannibal feels almost no peace at all as he gets consumed by an agitation that’s almost physically uncomfortable from how unfamiliar it is. Mostly this is based on a gnawing sense of protection to ensure his omega is completely safe and cared for, although is also combined with a restlessness that makes it unbearable to let Will out his sight for more than a few seconds at a time – at one point even following him the bathroom to wait outside until he’s safely back in view.

“I know you’re there,” yells Will through the door once he’s nearing the end of his heat and is growing more like himself again. “You’re being ridiculous. Go away!”

But Hannibal can’t go away. So he maintains the same patient vigil in the corridor until Will’s finally emerged from the shower and can be shepherded back to the bedroom to be stroked and fussed over until he finally falls asleep mid-protest. Hannibal arches his body over Will’s then watches over him with tender devotion until there’s a knock on the door to indicate the room service has arrived; and which elicits a loud aggressive sigh, despite the fact he placed the order himself. Hannibal now slings a towel round his hips and prowls into the living room, where he proceeds to stand guard by the bedroom door and beam menacing glares at the waiter the entire time (who in turn is extremely used to the way alphas behave when their omegas are in heat and politely ignores it).

The other thing concerning Hannibal is a need to re-open the bite mark to ensure it stays as deep and livid as possible – and therefore deter any future alphas who might be tempted to look at his omega the wrong way. Regretfully this involves a certain amount of pain and stress for Will but Hannibal remains determined; and at the same time every morning presses him against the bed then strokes his hair out the way before leaning down to sink his teeth into the delicate skin. After inspecting the wound from several angles he now decides that this morning’s bite should probably be the last. The incision has thoroughly marked the dermal level – even flirting with the subcutaneous tissue in places – and is no doubt sufficiently large to act as a huge red flag to all but the most determined competition. Even so, there’s probably no harm in doing it one more time…just to be sure. The whole world needs to see Will’s mark after all, then know that Hannibal was the one who did it to him. He lowers his head and Will makes a small gasping sound, his slim body briefly feeling frail and vulnerable beneath Hannibal’s in its submission to alpha dominance.

“I’m sorry my love,” says Hannibal gently. “I know it hurts. But it needs to be clear who you really belong to.” He gives the scar a tender lick of apology then takes hold of Will’s hand and grips onto it before slowly biting down again. Will gasps and grits his teeth in an attempt to ride out the pain, but
just like all the times before he makes no attempt to pull away.

Afterwards Hannibal adorns Will’s face in lavish kisses then watches over him until he’s fallen asleep, ensuring Will’s body remains completely secured and sheltered beneath his own. When Will’s in heat he seems to like this (when not in heat he complains endlessly about being smothered) but Hannibal is always more than happy to indulge any opportunity to soothe his omega. It’s only when Will’s breath has grown slow and regular that he finally goes onto the balcony for a bit of fresh air, although still leaves the door wide open in case Will wakes up and needs anything. He then finds himself casting anxious glances towards it the entire until Will finally appears in person about 10 minutes later, wearing one of Hannibal’s shirts above bare legs (with most of the buttons in the wrong holes) and looking rather exhausted and glassy-eyed. From the way he smells the main phase of his heat is clearly over, although he’s not fully back to normal either seeing how the first thing he does is climb onto Hannibal’s knee and bury his face in his neck like a child – the type of thing he’d rather be flogged than do voluntarily when he’s feeling more like himself. Hannibal smiles contentedly at having his arms deliciously full of Will then rests his face against his hair as he’s hit all over again with a wave of possessiveness. Will is so aloof much of the time – so fiercely self-sufficient – that the novelty of him letting his guard down and accepting Hannibal’s protection is never going to lose its appeal. Will now shifts slightly in his arms then nuzzles Hannibal’s throat a few times before ducking down and muttering something indecipherable against his skin.

“I beg your pardon?” says Hannibal fondly. “You’re going to have to translate yourself for me.”

Will shifts round until his mouth is no longer covered then gives Hannibal a rather withering look. “I said I feel like crap.”

“You don’t look it,” replies Hannibal, admiring how bright Will’s eyes are and the healthy touch of colour on his cheekbones. “You look extremely well – better than I’ve seen you for a while.” Will huffs a bit at being contradicted but doesn’t reply. “Although I’d rather you went back to bed,” adds Hannibal with a touch of firmness. “It’s only been a few days. You should still be resting.”

“Then you shouldn’t have woken me up should you?” says Will triumphantly. “You were crashing about with the shutters.”

“Did I? In that case I apologise. I was trying to be as quiet as possible.”

Will repeats the huffing noise then settles and re-settles himself in Hannibal’s arms. “I’m afraid you’re rather too large to fit,” says Hannibal, who’s just narrowly avoided an elbow in the face. “I suppose this is some form of karmic punishment for me for having always called you small.”

Will gives another determined wriggle. “It’s not my fault. I can’t get comfortable.”

“Why not?”


“Not your jaw though, beloved,” says Hannibal serenely. “From the amount of complaining you’re able to do I assume that’s working just fine.”

“Plus you’ve ruined my neck,” adds Will, clearly aggrieved.

“Ruined it have I?” Hannibal smiles affectionately then presses his finger into the small hollow at the base of Will’s throat (which he’s always found appealing without ever being able to explain why). “For what though exactly? What were you planning to use it for?”
“Oh shut up. That’s not the point.”

“No, I suppose not,” says Hannibal, who’s now begun to twine a strand of Will’s hair round his finger. “No doubt you had great ambitions for its future. To make it a personality in its own right perhaps – a star of stage and screen?”

“You’re not funny,” says Will grumpily. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like you ever were. But recently you’ve got even worse.”

“Well, I apologise for ruining your neck’s aesthetic career….”

“Good.”

“…But try to consider it from my point of view.” Hannibal leans down to smooth away an errant curl to stop it tangling in the wound then pauses once more to admire it. It’s glorious: his teeth rendered eternally in Will’s soft skin, vibrant with shades of crimson and pink. “It’s as if you’ve forgotten that in the last few months three separate alphas tried to abduct you.”

“Yes. And it’s as if you’ve forgotten that I dealt with them all myself.”

“Indeed you did,” agrees Hannibal in amusement. “Rather beautifully too if I might say so.”

“You may,” replies Will. “Not that you care about permission – you’re clearly going to say it anyway.”

Hannibal smirks again then takes hold of Will’s wrists and gently but firmly pins them behind his back because he’s interested to see how long Will can tolerate it before tugging away (around four seconds; three seconds longer than anticipated). “Stop it,” says Will plaintively. “Stop pushing me about.” Hoisting himself up he hooks both arms round Hannibal’s neck then rests his head against his shoulder. “And stop lecturing me. You’re always lecturing.” Hannibal makes an amused noise and Will snuggles a bit further against him and grips on. “Your voice can get really annoying,” he adds. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“No, but I’m sure you intend to make up for lost time.”

“Well it is. Sorry to have to break it to you.”

“What a little liar you are,” says Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s face. “You’re not sorry at all.”

Will smirks too then pretends to tug Hannibal’s ear with his teeth before taking hold of his hand. “You seem better anyway,” he says. “You’ve calmed down a bit. You went full-on alpha a few days ago.”

“Hmm, yes, I suppose I did.”

“I’m going to remind you about that,” adds Will smugly. “When we’re old and grey and you try to pretend you’ve always been superior. I’m going to remind you about the time you spent an entire two days following me round a hotel room.”

“Thank you in advance,” says Hannibal. “I’m sure I’ll be very much obliged to you.”

Will grins, suddenly looking young and high-spirited in a way that he hasn’t for some time. “So when are we leaving then?” he says. “My heat’s nearly over now. We can go home.”

“By home I assume you mean the villa,” replies Hannibal. “Although it’s not really home; at least
not in the way I’d like it to be. At some point I want us to arrange something more permanent.”

Will smiles then starts to tap an absent-minded rhythm onto Hannibal’s shoulder blade with his finger, enjoying how natural and comfortable everything feels. “Yes,” he says eventually. “I’d like that too. I’d like it a lot.”

“I often thought that when you were living with me in America,” continues Hannibal rather dreamily. “It always gave me huge satisfaction having you in the house. I liked being in the study and knowing you were upstairs asleep in my bed. Sometimes I’d even conjure up future versions of you: I’d drive home and find myself imagining what it would be like to have you there waiting for me, serene and beautiful and surrounded by children.”

“You’re doing a terrible job of selling me that image,” says Will. “I mean seriously: surrounded? You’re making them sound like an army. Exactly how many children did you imagine I’d have?”

“However many you wanted.”

“What about none?” says Will, resettling himself until his head is tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin. “I don’t like children. Plus they’d all be alphas and omegas, which means they’d be impossible to manage.”

“On the contrary: they’d be immensely intelligent and beautiful, just like you. Although I appreciate your concern about them being obstinate.” Hannibal pauses and nudges Will’s forehead. “One might even say they’d have willpower.”

Will rolls his eyes at the word ‘willpower’ then extends a leg to kick at the breeding stool (still in exile on the balcony and which Hannibal is currently using as a footrest). “At least you kept your promise about that I suppose,” he says.

“Of course; I told you I would.”

“Although I bet you would have done if you thought you could get away with it,” adds Will. “It was only because you know I’d have given you hell afterwards.”

“Very true,” agrees Hannibal serenely. “As I’ve had previous cause to observe, it’s better to face the wrath of The Almighty than the wrath of The Will.”

Will rolls his eyes again then falls quiet for a few moments, wriggling around self-consciously in Hannibal’s arms before he finally clears his throat and announces that if they ever did have children he’d expect them to get his surname on the grounds that he’d have done all the hard work. “I mean what would you have done?” adds Will pointedly. “Nothing – just climbed on top of me and thrust your hips for a couple of minutes.”

“It would have been for considerably longer than a couple of minutes,” says Hannibal with a faint smirk. “Nevertheless, I take your point.” Leaning over he brushes a few strands of hair out Will’s eyes then cradles his face in his hand. “You know that’s the first time I’ve heard you mention children as a serious possibility.”

Will’s shoulders promptly arrange themselves into a defensive hunch. “Yeah, well…I’m not saying yes. I’m not saying I definitely want to. I’m just saying…”

“That you one day might consider it.”

“Yeah,” says Will slowly. “I guess. Maybe.” He frowns a bit then starts to chew on the edge of his thumbnail. “You’d have to help you know – you do know that don’t you? You couldn’t expect me
to do it all myself.”

“Of course not.”

“I’d still want a life of my own.”

“Naturally you would. I’d want that for you too.”

“And you couldn’t start getting over-protective of me. You’d have to promise you wouldn’t turn into a possessive alpha nightmare.”

“I’m afraid I can’t guarantee that,” says Hannibal. “There are limits to what I’m prepared to pledge myself to.” Will makes a disdainful snorting noise and Hannibal smiles then adds in a more serious tone: “Do you want to know what I find most heartening about this conversation?”

“What?”

“It’s what you didn’t say. In all those objections you never once mentioned the fear that was consuming you for so long.”

At the reference to this Will goes very still, briefly closing his eyes as he remembers the conversation in Hannibal’s house the night he’d been released from prison. I know it’s not only the responsibility, Hannibal had said. I think what you’re truly afraid of are the traits you believe a child of yours could inherit from you.

“Your concerns about the kind of legacy you might leave,” confirms Hannibal out loud. “That was what really bothered you: what you saw when you looked in the mirror. You were so disgusted with yourself weren’t you Will? So afraid of unleashing another Dark Reflection into the world.” Slowly he his finger along Will’s cheekbone, a sudden gentleness in his expression which isn’t usually there. “That’s why I’m so happy with this conversation. Perhaps you’ll never change your mind about not wanting the responsibility, but the fact you can value and respect yourself enough to even contemplate being a parent gives me enormous satisfaction.”

Will swallows audibly, silently struggling with several competing emotions as he carries on gazing at Hannibal without once breaking eye contact. “I was thinking…” he says finally.

Hannibal smiles again. “What were you thinking?”

“Do you remember what you once said to me?” replies Will in the same soft voice. “About fate and circumstance…?” He hesitates slightly then leans forward to gently nudge his forehead against Hannibal’s. “I was thinking that if we had an omega girl then we could name her after your sister.”

For a few seconds a flicker of genuine emotion runs across Hannibal’s face before he takes hold of Will’s hand and presses his lips to the back of it. “She would have loved the idea of that,” he says, equally softly. “And if we had a female alpha we should name her after your mother.”

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Dear Will,

Okay, so...yeah. This already feels weird: I’m sitting down and writing a letter to myself. I mean it is isn’t it? It’s weird. It’s probably a bit unbalanced as well, because they always say that talking to yourself is the first sign of madness...I’m sure they say something like that. But I don’t really care anymore because this is the last entry I’ll write for a long time – possibly ever – and it feels like the most fitting way to go. Although, having said all that, I guess I could still have addressed myself as
‘Dear You’ and it would have made sense because dear means something valued and cherished; it means ‘beloved.’ And you is the pronoun of possession. It means identity, nature and character and it’s the meeting place where the fragments finally merge together and Become.

So, this morning I caught myself in a strange memory. I was just there making a coffee and I wound up thinking about the children’s book I found that time in my old house. Of course so much has happened since then it feels like it was a different person, but I still remember it so clearly. I remember that other person finding it, and his sense of sadness; and I remember him reading the moral about being authentic and whole and the way it filled him with despair. So that’s the real reason I’m writing this – my final letter – because I want to copy those lines out to make sure that I don’t forget them a second time:

‘Real isn’t how you are made. It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Sometimes. When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.’

‘Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?’

‘It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.’

I guess it’s another thing that’s weird, because I always thought it applied to being loved by someone else – that that was the most I could hope for, even if it wasn’t especially likely. I never once thought of applying it to myself. But the thing is, when you finally feel love then you’re no longer afraid because love is courage. And genuine vulnerability is an act of love.

Of course I have no idea what’s going to happen in the future, but it’s actually kind of exciting – to fling myself into the freedom to Not Know. Only in the midst of it all there are still a few things I do know for certain and I want to tell them to you now. So, Will: I know I gave up on you at several points, then lost you and found you, then threw you away all over again. I know I hated you at some times and was afraid of you at others. I know I thought you were different and damaged and irreparably broken.

I won’t think that anymore.

From me to you: I want you to know that you’re good enough just as you are, and you always have been. And I want you to know that while you’re also a good person, you’re not only that. You’re a collection of layers containing far more grey and cryptic sides than simple black and white ones. Because the truth is that your real self isn’t what you believed it to be – or even what you wished you were – but what you’ve spent your whole life trying to hide from yourself and conceal from the world. Yet you still defy a simple, binary division between good and bad. They’re entangled in you, interconnected and interdependent, but harmonious because of it. You’re both guilty and not guilty, both right and wrong; you’re shifting, indeterminate and constantly altering according to the context. You’re from the Old Germanic Willelm meaning ‘bold warrior.’ You have dark impulses and a killer instinct with autonomy, empathy and an inspired imagination. You’re sovereign and self-commanding, relentless and resolute. And you defy simple categorization: you’re self-sustained and self-conceived and you always have been. Your mind’s been broken and your soul’s been starving your entire life, yet you’ve still clawed your way through the misery and horror and
emerged from it all unbowed and unbroken. You’ve steered your own course, made your own rules and conceded to no one. And you belong to yourself – you will never give up your identity to anyone else. You’ll retain your own moral code and refuse to see human life as eternally and pointlessly disposable, even if you have a predator’s instinct when the situation demands it and can revel in the dark beauty of death.

So in the future, if things get tough again, I want you to take out this letter and read it and remember. I’m the voice of your future self, telling you to hold on; telling you that I’m waiting for you, and I believe in you.

I’m going to finish this soon and close the book but before I do there are a few more things I want to say. The pages are nearly full now, yet one thing I’ve realised is that the whole time I was writing it I got the genre wrong. I thought it was a horror story and it’s not. Because everyone’s life is a narrative and an exercise in reconstruction, where the beginning exists the conclusion is waiting, and in between are all the fragments of all the stories. And this one was a love story from the very beginning: the power to love, and to accept love in return, because you finally feel you deserve it.

So from now on I want you to know that my plan for you is to be happy, healthy, safe and sane – and loved. I intend for you to live your life fully and completely and learn to rediscover yourself: who you are and what you stand for, the things you no longer be, how far you’ll go, how much is enough, and what you will allow yourself to Become. You’ll live in a world of endless possibilities and countless realities and you’ll become a great version of yourself rather than a mediocre version of someone else. And you won’t have to do it alone, because in Hannibal you’ve finally found your missing half to help you.

You are centre stage and you are curtain up. You are a phoenix emerging from your own ashes and you will raze the old to raise the new.

All of this has been your design.

From me to you –

With love.

Chapter End Notes

WOO! So pleased to finally get this one finished my lovelies! I’m still cackling at the way I got to the end of This Dangerous Game and was all “Right then, no more novel-length Hannibal fics for me” *half a million words of Murder Porn later…*

Just to say as well that I’d be incredibly grateful if people don’t download Bright Hair now it’s finished. Thb I’m not totally happy with how it turned out and the idea of it being available anywhere except AO3 makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. Don’t worry – even if I deleted my account in the future I’d be sure to orphan the works so that people who want to will ALWAYS be able to find them online. However, I’d really appreciate it if people could respect my wishes and not save personal copies. Thank you so much <3

As some of you know I’m going to be leaving the fandom for a while (although definitely hope to be back in my Hannigram zone at some point) so in the meantime am sending huge love and thanks to everyone, current and future, who’s had the patience to
stick with this rambling beast to the end! I’m really sorry it ended up annoying so many people, and am likewise incredibly touched and grateful to everyone who left comments offering support and encouragement. I’m not the most disciplined person in the world, and without you cheering me on I honestly don’t think I would have kept the motivation to nudge it over the finishing line.

From me to you – with love xox

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Works inspired by this one

- A Murder of Crows by jgrante
- Dear You by michaela19901
- Beloved (fanart for 'Bright Hair About the Bone' by MissDisoriental) by puzzleboxes
- This Dark Heart by Damonfreak89
- The Sassy Will Gallery by MrsSteampunk
- Cover Art for 'Bright Hair about The Bone' by MissDisoriental by CrazyInL0v3
- "Bright Hair About The Bone" FanArt by marlahanni
- Fanmix for Bright Hair About The Bone by creativelivings
- Bright Hair About The Bone (fanart for chapter 21) by elephane
- Cover for MissDisoriental's "Bright Hair About The Bone" by Patties92
- "Bright Hair About The Bone" - Cover Art by Lowrie
- Fanart for MissDisoriental's 'Bright Hair About the Bone' by silverharts
- crime scene by eraserfeet
- FanArt for Bright Hair About The Bone by MissDisoriental by tw1t3rfan
- "Destined To Be My Greatest Masterpiece" [Fanart for MissDisoriental's 'Bright Hair About the Bone'] by greendaygirl
- Fused together by RenJaegerjaques
- Imago by RenJaegerjaques
- Dark Reflection by RenJaegerjaques
- "Bright Hair About The Bone" by MissDisoriental - Cover by Lyceiad
- Fanart for MissDisoriental's 'Bright Hair About the Bone' by karaokefiend
- Dear You (Fanart for Bright Hair about the Bone) by sailfin
- [PODFIC] Bright Hair About The Bone by PippasJourney

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