Eve of Dreams (Le Réveillon des Rêves)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11906748.

| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warning: | Graphic Depictions Of Violence |
| Category: | F/M, M/M |
| Fandom: | Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types |
| Character: | Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham, Barney Matthews, Molly Graham, Walter Graham, Chiyoh (Hannibal), Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom, Bedelia Du Maurier, Will Graham's Dogs, Clarice Starling, Multiple Miggs, Emperor Hadrian, Antinous (c. 111-130 CE), Original Characters |
| Additional Tags: | time did reverse... or did it?, Inception meets Angel Heart (kind of), with a heavy dose of hellinism, pining murder husbands, apex assholes, the space-time continuum is overrated, will graham makes questionable choices, even murderific-er, don't piss off the mob, international adventures, multiversal mindfuckery, Poetry nerd!Will, lovesick cannibae, these murder husbands are going to kill me, crescent city love, dat ass x 2, they flip (thank u bryan), no one is drunk enough for this shit, except maybe will, Murder Tableaus, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Smut, Slow Burn, Post-Episode: s03e13 The Wrath of the Lamb, Post-Season/Series 03 |
| Series: | Part 3 of A Thousand Savage Futures |
| Collections: | ItsStillBeautiful, Fresh Meat Friday |
| Stats: | Published: 2017-08-25 Completed: 2017-10-20 Chapters: 9/9 Words: 197335 |

Eve of Dreams (Le Réveillon des Rêves)

by inter_spem_et_metum

Summary

A different kind of post-S3 story, wherein Hannibal and Will are thrown back into their respective pre-fall nightmares through chance and circumstance. A little bit Inception meets Angel Heart.

Severely injured and once again a resident of the BSHCI, Hannibal believes his worst fear has come true. Will, back home with Molly and Walt, finds himself torn in more directions than his loosening grip on reality can accommodate.

As their lives begin to unravel and the lines between memory, dream, and reality start to blur, both men must face the inevitable pull of their connection. Will they survive separation in this
world—in *any* world? Or are they destined to be forever conjoined?

**Notes**

**Warnings:** Violence and gore, minor character death, substance abuse, reference/implied childhood sexual trauma, reference/implied suicide, mild homophobia

**Notes:** A few small canon differences (e.g., Will and Molly's house is located in Virginia, not Maine). Please note the warnings, as this story contains subject material that may disturb some readers.

If you haven't read the prequel fics, *Of Putrefaction, Saccharine* and *Interlude: Diary of an Incubus*, have no fear: *Eve of Dreams* can be read as a standalone. However, summaries of the prequel stories can be found on this post, if you'd prefer the CliffsNotes versions. **Musical accompaniment** for each chapter of the three-part series *A Thousand Savage Futures* can be enjoyed on YouTube [here](#). Also, the header arts for *Eve of Dreams* contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!
All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full. Unto the place from whence the rivers come, there they return again. —Ecclesiastes 1:7

The increase of disorder, or entropy, is what distinguishes the past from the future, giving a direction to time. —Stephen Hawking

One sensation, and one only: a sound—a quiet, steady beeping. What had happened to the roar of wind in his ears and the cold air, tinged with the promise of snow? His sight had gone dark, but he still could feel his body falling.

Falling. Hannibal's hands jerked instinctively. Will. They groped for something solid. Will's arms, pulling close. No, not here. His knuckles collided with two metal rails, spaced a foot to either side of his body. Cold to the touch. Plastic threads dragged from his flesh with the movement. A flicker of soreness. Tubes in his nose, his throat. He gagged. A panicked staccato of sound: beep beep Beep BEEP.

Where am I? The two of them had fallen, over and over, it seemed. Midnight to morning. His head hurt, and everything was red.

Hannibal opened his eyes. His sleep-crusted eyelids smarted and stung, and the side of his head ached as though he'd been kicked. The world was grayish-white. He blinked; the light throbbed. So much pain for such a small movement.

Then the sound of shattering ceramic ripped his ears.

"Oh shit—Kat, your tea!"

"Hell, he woke up! Get Barney!"

A scuttle of movement. The squeak of soles on laminate. Rapid-fire voices, like rifle bullets; harsh syllables, bodies thudding to the floor. He looked to the broken window. Smiled, knowing she was there above him. Steel eyes; steady hands on a steel barrel. His guardian angel.

He blinked again. Shook his head. The world swirled and ran like a watercolor. He couldn't smell
anything except the chemical staleness of plastic. His head was spinning; his limbs felt disconnected from his body. Numb.

He ran his hands along the rails, found them attached to a bed. A blanket was pulled up to his waist. He should've been able to feel the fabric draped over his legs. He wondered absently if his back was broken.

Fretful digital blips, sounding in time to his elevated heart rate. *Breathe in deep: disinfectant and stiff cotton and unwashed skin and the rank, earthy odor of bodily waste. Ah—a medical facility, then.* Polyurethane tubing grated against his parched tongue. *Not the Verger medical ward. Mason's dead.* Alana and Margot had made sure of that.

Hannibal grasped the top of the right-hand rail as a figure rounded the doorway, just beyond the reach of his blurred vision. Tubes and steel threads dangled from his forearm, tugging at his skin like Lilliputian ropes. He was trapped.

"So. Your brain's finally decided it wants to be awake."

The voice was familiar, but distorted. Strained. His eyes were beginning to water. His body felt warm—too warm. The heart monitor blipped ceaselessly beside him, less frantic now but still arrhythmic.

He lifted his head and focused on the figure in the doorway. He locked on a pair of piercing blue eyes. Soft, dark waves of hair against pale skin, bathed in fluorescence and weak daylight. It was longer than he remembered. She had let it grow out.

Alana leaned against the doorframe, arms folded across the front of her pearl-colored suit jacket. The blue silk blouse underneath matched the color of her eyes exactly. *An angel in costume only.* The picture jarred him, but he couldn't say why.

"And where have I awakened?" he asked, with calm effort, even though he already knew the answer and wasn't holding out hope for a different one. His voice came out slurred. The nasogastric tube in his throat battered his words, giving them a nasal quality. *Better than a PEG,* he thought hazily. His shredded intestines wouldn't have been able to take an enterostomy.

Alana didn't smile. *Surprising,* he thought, *all things considered.*

"Come on, Hannibal. You know where you are." She paused. Ran her fingertip along the sleeve of her jacket. "You're not dead. Or dreaming. This isn't hell." A beat. "Well, not *mine,* anyway."

A man appeared in the doorway beside her, seemingly materializing out of the ether. Tall, physically imposing, mid-thirties. Skin the color of midnight that contrasted sharply with his white uniform. The machine beside him continued to bleat unsteadily, betraying the turmoil of his waking. *Beep. Will? Beeeep. Will! BEEP.*

"We're picking back up where we left off," Alana declared. "This time, you're not getting out."

The orderly moved to silence the audio on the monitor. Quick and quiet. The man could tell it was aggravating Hannibal. *Perceptive,* Hannibal turned his head to study him. The man's eyes scanned the room like a periscope, assessing the walls, the floors, the barred block windows, the bed, and the body in it, before meeting Hannibal's gaze. *All secure,* the orderly's mind seemed to conclude. It was a familiar process; one Hannibal had witnessed countless times over the past three years. They hadn't put him back in a straightjacket, it seemed. Not yet.

"This is Barney Matthews. He's in charge of you, and everything that happens to you," Alana said,
her voice casual. As if they were having a conversation over coffee. "Well, everything I don't oversee directly."

Now she was smiling. Good for her, Hannibal thought. She's earned that one.

"Hello, Doctor Lecter. Good to see you awake," Barney Matthews said. Long on the A's. Midwestern accent. "I'll be takin' care'a you from now on."

Hannibal stared, blinking against the fluorescence and fighting the urge to remind the orderly that Alana had already informed him of this fact. The lights were blinding. His eye sockets felt like they were buzzing.

"We can get along fine if you listen to me and I listen to you. Communication is key. With that, everything'll go real smooth between us." Eyes polite, watchful. Mouth a small, hung line, like the curve of a lime.

Alana butted in before Hannibal could respond. "Let me emphasize that he'll pin you in less than a second if you try anything. Not that you'll be up and moving around anytime soon."

"Where is Will?" Hannibal ignored the bait, focusing instead on keeping the panic out of his voice.

Barney rolled his dark eyes to Alana, but didn't speak.

"You should be interested to know that you suffered an acute brain trauma and a spinal injury, in addition to your gunshot wound." Alana's voice was flat. "You've been in a coma for the past ten days. The steroid shots reduced the swelling in your spinal cord, but there's still some nerve compression. You won't have any feeling in your lower body."

She licked her lips, eyes flickering briefly away. Evasive. "The specialists aren't sure how much sensation you'll get back, or when—or even if. You can talk to Doctor Schneider about your condition later. You'll remain in the medical ward for now, until you're well enough to be transferred back to your unit."

"I see. And where is Will Graham?" A strain on the word. Desperate now. He didn't care if she heard it.

Alana pursed her lips, considering. She looked away.

"They haven't found him. Not yet. Some of his blood and clothing washed up, but not his…"

Body. The word hung on the edge of Alana's lips. Poisonous. Ruinous.

She shifted in the doorway, leaning back on her heel. Something crunched under her shoe. She tipped her head in surprise.

"Who the hell brought glass in here?" Irritation usurping her discomfort. She shifted the ceramic shards with a pointed toe, revealing the fragile curve of a handle. "The nurses know better than that."

"I'll clean it up," Barney offered. "And I'll make sure they remember, Doctor Bloom." His voice was serious.

Hannibal closed his eyes as a hot pressure welled behind them. A laugh choked in his throat, sore and acrid. Will was gone. The beauty of their simultaneous rise and fall shattered, like the nurse's teacup.
Fortune and chance had deserted them both.

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—Six days after the fall—

Will sniffed against the cold and his running nose. He clipped the length of hog wire that crisscrossed the hole in the mesh four feet high on the fence, squinting in the murky midday sunlight. The stitches in his shoulder stung with the movement. He ignored the pain.

He pulled off his right-hand glove with his teeth. Wrapped the end of the wire around with his thumb, six times. Then grabbed the needle-nose pliers from his jacket pocket and bent the sharp edge inward. The dogs couldn’t get up this high, but the deer on the other side could. Will didn’t want to risk the delicate creatures getting torn up on the fence—even if it was only there to keep them out.

On spring mornings in the past, Will had found scraps of hide and fur stuck to the wire’s split edges from where the deer had rubbed themselves raw against it, trying to get to Molly’s cauliflower and radishes. In a few short months, it would be planting season. A half-dozen weeks after that, the deer would be back, and the cycle would start again.

Since Will’s discharge from UMMC two days ago, Molly had been giving him projects. Trying to keep him busy. Or close. Or maybe just coax him back into some kind of rhythm, after having narrowly survived being stabbed to death and drowned, and then spending the holiday weekend in the hospital.

Molly had offered to stay overnight the first night, insisting that Joanna—Walt's friend's mother, Will had recalled after some mental dredging—could take the boys trick-or-treating. Will had immediately refused. I'll be fine. Just send me some pictures of his costume. He'd avoided mentioning what Walt was planning to dress up as, because he couldn't remember. In truth, he wasn't even sure he'd known.

Some of Molly’s home improvement projects had been on their to-do list for a long time; others were new. However, neither of them knew what kind of animal had torn the hole in the fence. It had happened while he'd been away, hunting Dolarhyde and baiting Hannibal. Or maybe it was the other way around. He'd lost track of who was hunting whom, and who was being used as bait.

He hadn’t slept for more than three hours at a time since the Atlantic had spit him and Hannibal out onto the small rocky beach to die. The moonlight reflecting off the clouds had brightened Will's sight and the side of the cliff, revealing the unthinkable: a precarious, but scalable, pathway upward.

His waterlogged lungs had hitched as he'd laughed. Divine intervention. Could it raise them up as well as he'd brought them down? He was still bleeding—too much—and Hannibal was out cold with a dark, V-shaped gouge in his temple. His back was bent at a sharp angle against the gravel, his breathing shallow. Will knew that hypovolemic shock and hypothermia were both strong contenders for what might finally kill them. So he did the only thing he could do: he climbed. Then he called for help.

Jack’s voice had been soft on the other end of the line. You did the right thing, Will.

A dry sob had lodged in Will’s throat. Tears squeezed and mixed with the blood and salt smeared across his face. Please just get here fast.
The phone had slid from his hand as he'd staggered from the kitchen. He'd collapsed on the floor by the piano, curling in on himself, the wounds from Dolarhyde's knife heaving with every breath. The paramedics had found him like that thirty minutes later.

He hadn't seen Hannibal again.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Sleeping in three-hour increments left him, on average, with two rounds of vivid nightmares from which he awoke in a panicking sweat—the first two nights in a hospital bed, alone; the next two in his own bed, next to Molly. Hannibal appeared in every one. Features smooth, composed; then suddenly clouded in anger; now softened in affection. The gentleman devil. He lingered upon Will's awakening, honeyed eyes framed by smoke.

Will could taste sweetness and sweat on his tongue. Salt and skin. So different from Molly, from anyone else.

It felt strange to know that Hannibal was still asleep every time he opened his eyes.

The visions that caught and pinned him during the night were scalding in their intensity; more like recollections than inventions of the brain. None of them made sense. The glow of moonlight on the terrace where they'd killed the Dragon, reflecting pink on freshly-scrubbed stone. The lingering scent of aftershave—not his own—imprinted on an empty pillow. The curved blade of a linoleum knife glinting in his hand. The tremor of organ music surrounding him, suffocating him, with a melody too somber to be holy. The hot pump of a heart spilling over his hands, and the heated press of Hannibal's skin... His own heart, swelling larger than his ribcage could contain.

Then shards of glass raining down on them like bullets. Voices shouting. Arms reaching out. A cold breeze, tinged with the promise of snow. Oblivion.

Waking again, to Jack's soft voice and the linoleum floor, cold beneath his side. Mingled blood and wine soaked into his already-drenched clothing—Hannibal's blood. There was so much of it. Was he dreaming? The sharp beam of a flashlight pierced his vision. Hands cut the shirt away from his chest. **This is going to hurt.** Echoes of words once spoken to him in pain—in another place, another time. Jack's words, stuck on a loop inside his mind. **You did the right thing.** Meaning, of course, that Jack knew Will might've wanted to do the **wrong** thing.

But Jack was still a friend. A friend who'd accepted Will's ironed retelling of what had happened with the police convoy and with Dolarhyde. He'd helped him smooth out the wrinkles. And then warned him that while he couldn't fend off an internal investigation, he'd do everything he could to help. Will had nodded stiffly, his bandaged cheek smarting, keeping his eyes fixed on Jack's diplomas on the wall of his home office. **It's okay. I know you have to.**

Will would've said the visions felt more like memories from another life, if he'd thought that was a possibility. He didn't. Some of them he could place, but others were vague—the smeared afterimages of some bizarre fever dream-blood opera hybrid. He'd learned a long time ago not to trust what he saw when he was asleep.

In the waking world, however, he was virtually housebound and temporarily suspended from teaching, pending the FBI's investigation into Hannibal's short-lived escape. The Bureau was also incredibly curious about the deaths of four police officers, two BSHCI employees, and one FBI agent—and, of course, Dolarhyde himself. Despite the way everything had ended, Will knew **this** was still his best possible world.

The thought calmed him only slightly less than it frightened him.
He tied off another square of hog wire, huffing at the sting the movement caused in his shoulder. Randy trotted up to inspect Will's work, balls swinging proudly between his hind legs. Molly hadn't been kidding when she'd said they were huge. The bullmastiff licked his teeth and whined sleepily.

"Hey, boy," he said, turning his head but stopping short of leaning down to pet him. "Who let you out, huh?"

Randy didn't answer. Will clenched the pliers in his gloved fingers as he unspooled another length of wire, shivering. It was getting chillier outside. He was ready to be done with the fence. The day was quickly turning dark with an approaching snowstorm, and he had the unsettling feeling that he was dreaming even now.

Boots crunched atop the dead grass and melting snow behind him. Then stopped. Will's hand flinched on the wire. The sound resumed, lighter this time. He shifted the cutters in his palm and snipped the sharp end.

Molly joined him silently, pulling up the cable of wire that lay unspooled on the ground. She threaded the strand through his last loop, completing the square. He tied it off and clipped it. They didn't speak. Together they started a new square, this one lower down. Their breath misted in the clear, cold air. She should be wearing gloves, he thought to himself. He didn't say it aloud.

They'd had sex exactly once in the two days since Will had been discharged from the hospital. He'd embraced her in the kitchen after dinner, the first night after they'd scrounged up a passable beef-and-vegetable stew. He'd wanted to say, I'm sorry, but didn't know whether to finish with because things are different now or because I don't know how to fix it.

Molly had stared back at his bandaged face, her alert, gray-green gaze searching for… something. Something that had been there before, but wasn't anymore. Will had seen only Hannibal's brown eyes reflected back at him, their pupils dark with exhaustion and blood loss and desire—and underneath it all, a blush of fragility, raw and rising. Something deep inside Will had quaked when he'd seen it. The devil unspooled, unriddled. Undone.

He'd closed his eyes then, sliding his last vision of Hannibal into darkness, and kissed Molly on the mouth, full and open. Tightened his hands around her waist and pushed her up against the counter. A cry rose in the back of his throat and stuck there. He'd laid a palm on her hip and turned her around. Molly's body had jerked in silent surprise, but she'd moved with him against the countertop, a little out of rhythm. She'd joked afterward about cooking together more often. Her smile hadn't reached her eyes.

"If you need to talk about anything, I'm here. It's important you know that." Will was jerked from his reverie as her words came to him on a puff of frosty air. She pushed down on a bare strip of wire with her thumb, attempting to curl it around the mesh. She, too, wanted to protect the deer.

The reassurance fluttered inside Will's ears, warm—then slipped away.

"I know," he said.

"Shit!"

A bright bead of blood welled on the pad of Molly's thumb. She sucked it, then turned her face to Will. Her eyes were the color of storm clouds over the ocean. Small crinkles of worry dotted the corners. They hadn't been there before.

"Here," he said, pulling off his gloves. "Wear these. And use the pliers to wrap the wire."
Molly pulled on the gloves but didn't take the tool. The mesh curved where she rested her palm against it. Her eyes followed the perimeter of the yard to the tree line—the place where their landscaped life met the dense and uncertain wild. What did she see there? Will wondered. Was it Dolarhyde, emerging from the woods with his Beretta trained on her forehead? Or was it Will himself, disappearing into the darkness of the trees like some fading fata morgana?

"You did the right thing, you know." She shifted, squaring her body to face him. Jack's words, Molly's voice. Her eyes the color of the sea now, still searching. They lingered over the stitches in his cheek before meeting his gaze. "Whatever doubts you might have about everything that happened, just know that. You, me, Walt, back here together—that's good. That's the right thing."

Before Will could reply, Randy bumped against his leg and nosed his bare palm. Will smiled, seizing the opportunity.

"Hey boy!" he said, glancing down. Selfish, said the voice in the back of his head.

Molly's eyes dropped to the dog, whose tail was wagging furiously at being shown attention by both of them at once. The corner of her mouth twisted in an expression Will recognized as disappointment. She squatted and ran her gloved hands under the wide chain around Randy's neck, rubbing vigorously.


Will transferred the forgotten pliers to his other hand. Shifted his feet. He tried to remember to stand straight instead of slouching. It was difficult, feeling so awkward in his own backyard. In front of his own wife.

Hannibal had taken notice of his poor posture in Panama, when they'd been waiting at the airport for their flight. Cold coffee with too much cream. The memory of the taste still made him gag.

Except that wasn't a memory. Because he and Hannibal had never traveled outside of the country together. Had they? Maybe not. He couldn't remember now.

Molly's voice reached inside of him, groping for whatever it could hold. "I see your forehead wrinkling, mister."

Randy turned in a circle at her feet, seemingly eager to go back inside. It took Will a second to realize that she was addressing him and not the dog.

"Listen, why don't you take a break? I'll make some cocoa and toast."

Will flashed a lopsided smile. "That sounds great." His appetite had dwindled over the past few days, but he could do toast. He could definitely use a break from the fence and the early-November chill. His shoulder was starting to feel weak again.

He holstered the pliers in his tool belt and followed Molly toward the house, eyes fixed on the ground. Then a balled-up pair of gloves—his own—bounced off his chest. They fell to the ground with a plop. Will looked up to see a playful grimace on Molly's face. He stooped to pick up the gloves, his fingertips leaving small holes in the ice-crusted snow.

She stopped, waiting for him as Randy bounded across the yard ahead of them. She looped her arm around Will's own as he joined her.

"You're somewhere else today, huh?" she said, soft. Her wispy blonde bangs hung in her eyes,
partially obscuring their scrutiny.

*I'm not sure I was ever really all here.* He bit his tongue before the thought could form into words. Instead, he jerked his head in a nod that was neither a *yes* nor a *no*, and slowed his steps to match her shorter stride.

Inside, Dolly Parton's voice floated into the dining area from the old radio on the kitchen workbench. Will unwound his scarf and plunked down into one of the mismatched dining chairs, glad for the cozy warmth of the house.

*Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-leeene*
*I'm begging of you, please don't take my man…*

"When does Walt get off school?" he asked, raising his voice over the song.

Molly laughed as she stirred the cocoa mix into mugs of warm whole milk. "*Will*—three-thirty. Same time as every day."

Will scrubbed his hand across his face. "Sorry, I—yeah. I'll pick him up." What he didn't say was: *I forgot.* The whisper of a thought followed on its heels, sharp and secret: *I made myself forget because I didn't know if I'd be back.*

He could hear Hannibal's voice in the black well of his mind, low and menacingly reassuring. *You can go home again, if there's any point. Is there any point?*

"Oh. Well, you can if you want." Molly's voice slid to a normal volume as she walked in from the kitchen. She handed him a mug—steaming, but not too hot to hold. Molly knew how to make good cocoa.

"I figured you might wanna finish fixing the fence first, though." Syllables thinning as she walked back into the kitchen and popped two slices of bread into the toaster. She turned to look at him. "And you're still not supposed to drive on your pain meds, right?"

Will winced at the mention of his abandoned narcotics. "I, uh. I'm not taking them anymore."

Molly's eyebrow lifted. "That's… *good?* Right?"

"Yeah. I mean… I don't want to be…"

He scratched the back of his head. Sifted his fingers through his hair. It was getting long and needed to be cut. Molly liked his hair neat.

"They *cloud* me. I don't like it."

It was the simplest explanation, and mostly the truth. What he didn't tell Molly was how much more vivid and *aching* his dreams had been in the hospital, when he'd been doped up on oxycodone and zolpidem, and even the soft whir of the nurses' footsteps had sounded to him like the roar of the ocean—reaching out for his and Hannibal's mortality with each hungry thrust.

*He talks about you in his sleep*
*And there's nothing I can do to keep*
*From crying when he calls your name, Jolene…*

Dolly's voice wailed across the radio waves in Molly's silence, almost saccharine in its lamenting.
"Well, okay," she said after a minute, looking away. "That's... I mean, I guess you know your own limits."

The toast popped up with a click. Molly plated the two slices, and then drizzled a thick stream of wildflower honey across Will's from the bear-shaped plastic bottle. She balanced the plate and a knife on a container of butter spread and brought everything to the table.

"Thanks," Will said. Molly slid into the seat catty-corner to him and rested her fingers lightly atop his wrist before taking her own slice in her hand.

They chewed in silence for a few moments. A grin curled onto Molly's lips as she lifted her mug and sipped at her hot chocolate.

"I remember how you used to spike your cocoa with that terrible cinnamon-flavored whiskey, back when we first started dating. Why that stuff?"

A thin line of chocolate foam dotted Molly's upper lip. Will reached out to wipe it away with his thumb and licked it.

"Bad habit. Picked it up from my dad." The corner of his lip tugged at the memory. "He used to mix it in with his coffee and drink it on the boats. Sometimes he'd share it. Being a twelve-year-old kid, I thought it was great." He chuckled. "Neither of us had any taste back then."

"Who's to say you do now?" Molly grinned, elbowing him—a little too hard. Glad to have something to smile about.

"It's okay," she continued. "I forgive you for occasionally indulging in cheap liquor. As long as it's only for sentimental reasons."

Sentimental reasons. Like remembering how your dad drank himself to liver failure before he could watch his grandson turn eleven. Before he could see what kind of father his son could be.

Are you a good father, Will? Hannibal's voice, creeping in like a shadow. Would you have been a father to Abigail? To Margot's child? Ghosts of unspoken questions, lingering on the stale prison air between them.

Will's smile slipped. He picked it back up before Molly noticed.

"Yeah," he chuckled, and swallowed a sip of his cocoa.

They both fell silent. Will put down his mug, stared at his own hands wrapped around the smooth ceramic. Fingers slender and straight, with thicker middle joints—just like his father's. He could imagine them now, streaked with engine oil, the corners of the nails tinged yellow with tobacco stains.

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-leeene
Please don't take him just because you can...

From the kitchen, the imploring last notes of the song faded out as the harsh trill of the landline rose above the radio.

"I'll get it." Molly sprang up without waiting for Will to offer.

He munched at his toast, letting the honey roll on his tongue. The sweetness was oddly familiar, though he couldn't remember the last time he'd had any. Maybe in the hospital. Who knows what they
feed you in there.

"Uh, it's for you." Molly's hand covered the receiver as she turned, her face inscrutable. That meant she didn't know the voice on the other end.

Will pushed up and strode into the kitchen. He took the phone from her hand. Their fingers brushed briefly. Molly slid back into the dining room and perched in her chair like a sparrow on its nest, watching him from underneath her bangs.

"Will Graham speaking."

"Hello, Mister Graham. My name is Vadim Stonys. I'm Hannibal Lecter's attorney."

Will's throat constricted. He turned his back toward the dining room, away from Molly.

"I hope I'm not calling you at a bad hour. I know this may be a sensitive topic, but there's a few matters I'm required to discuss with you pertaining to Doctor Lecter's condition."

Will swallowed and squared his jaw. "I'm listening."

Molly cleared out of the dining room upon hearing the wooden edge come into Will's voice. She could sense when he wanted privacy.

Nearly forty-five minutes later, Will hung up the receiver with a soft click. He barely registered the sound of the screen door crashing behind Walt, as the boy bounded into the house and was immediately assailed by the dogs.

Molly followed her son inside a few moments later, tossing her keys into her purse and her purse onto the couch. She shrugged out of her navy pea coat, eyeing Will from the foyer.

A twinge of guilt stabbed him. Will's mouth opened. It took him a second to find his voice.

"Sorry I didn't pick up Walt."

Molly hung her coat on the peg next to the door. "That's okay." A beat. "I put some gas in the truck."

She stepped into the kitchen. Hovered in the doorway at the other end of the room, like a bee studying a flower. Her eyes were soft. Watchful. "Everything okay?"

"Hannibal Lecter's lawyer called me." The words didn't sound real, didn't sound like his own. "He, uh—Hannibal updated his living will a few weeks ago. Right after Jack asked me to come back."

Molly crossed her arms over her chest, then uncrossed them. "Okay," she said, her voice lingering on the last syllable. "So what's that got to do with you? With us?"

Will swallowed. "Hannibal's given me durable power of attorney on his advance directive. It's a deliberately open-ended directive. He's still comatose."

Molly's face was blank. The softness in her eyes sharpened to concern. Behind her, Walt laughed as he was knocked over by a pile of furry, wriggling bodies.

"And?" she asked.

Will's heart pounded dull and hard inside his ribcage. He was glad Molly wasn't standing next to him. She probably would've been able to hear it.
"He wants me to choose whether he lives or dies."

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–Twelve days after the fall–

The tip of Hannibal's charcoal pencil scratched across the surface of the drawing pad. Gray daylight, heavy with snowfall, slid in through the barred block windows and fell across the paper. It glinted silver against the fine powder lines. He carefully outlined the shining tendrils of hair beneath the crown of ivy and grapes, reproducing the Carrara marble curls from memory.

He was drawing the sculpture of Antinous from the Museo Pio Clementino at the Vatican. The deified Bithynian companion of the Roman Emperor Hadrian had been commemorated in stone, ink, and on temple walls across the Roman and Egyptian empires. Thousands of the works had survived to the present day; the world's art galleries held more sculptures of Antinous than nearly any other figure in classical antiquity. Some historians had praised the young man's likeness as the final great creation of classical art.

In the eight years between the emperor's own death and that of his erômenos, Hadrian had commissioned a multitude of statues of Antinous as Dionysus and Osiris—had even named a constellation in the night sky after him. All of the works shared similar attributes: the tousled curls of a boy; the broad, finely muscled chest of a young man; and the downcast eyes of one haunted by an untimely death. Hannibal preferred Giovanni Pierantoni's restored sculpture above all others. His was a victorious Antinous, robes draped regally around his slender frame and staff in hand—yet possessed of a troubled, trembling beauty. The last pagan god of ancient Rome.

Hannibal didn't look up when Barney shuffled through the doorway. It was time for his routine check-in—sedatives administration, and the redundancies of bed-bound patient care. He looked forward to his assigned nurse-cum-sentry's appearance mainly as an interruption from his thoughts—which were failing, for the first time in a very long time, to either comfort or amuse him.

The swelling in his brain and spinal cord had not impacted his upper body dexterity, however, and so he could still draw. Hold a book. Feed himself from the horrid menu of pre-packaged, preservative-infused products the BSHCI deemed "food." He was marginally grateful for the lack of nerve damage, but he'd found his appetite alarmingly diminished.

He watched from the corner of his eye as the head orderly conducted his usual scan of the room and of Hannibal in his electric bed. All of the machines were behaving as they'd been programmed to, silently delivering and removing fluids to and from the room's sole occupant. At Hannibal's request, all of the equipment that made noise had been silenced. He appreciated this. He also appreciated the way Barney didn't let down his guard around him. Smart boy.

Silently assessing the drawing pencil as his charge's only potential weapon, Barney slid into the plastic chair at Hannibal's bedside.

"How do, Doctor Lecter?" he sighed, not unhappily.

Hannibal glanced up, then back at his sketch pad. "Reasonably well, Barney. Thank you."

He was surprised at how softened his own voice sounded. Or maybe not surprised. Just tired. He was being fed a steady cocktail of opiates and benzodiazepines to keep him docile—and pain-free. It
was working. Alana had deemed full restraints an unnecessary hindrance for the time being; the myriad of tubes and monitoring apparatus connecting his arms and face and genitals to various machines and bags left little room for additional straps. Instead, he’d been anchored to the guard rails with soft-looking ankle belts he couldn’t feel.

With the elaborate web of medical apparatus stretching out around him, he imagined he must look like a connect-the-dots puzzle some child had forgotten to finish. Pale streaks of charcoal, fading to white.

Barney was silent for a moment. He tipped his head at the page in Hannibal's lap. "Who's that?"

Hannibal licked his lips. He feathered the side of the pencil against the figure's chest, over the heart, shading the skin. "A young Greek hunter who drowned in the Nile, nearly nineteen centuries ago."

"Huh." A tentative pause. "Looks kinda like a prince."

A muscle twitched under Hannibal's eye. "He was that, too."

Antinous had perished at the height of the festival of Osiris. Hannibal thought it intriguing how many celebrations of death and the underworld collided in late October—the time when the veil between worlds was at its most opaque. In the present, that time had already passed; it would be nearly a year before the living could again commune with their beloved dead.

In 130 A.D., however, Hadrian's convoy had assembled downriver at Heliopolis—city of the sun, birthplace of the mythical Bennu bird (or phoenix, as the Greeks had dubbed it), and the spot where the emperor was said to have been seduced by the dark arts.

According to historical record, Pachrates the magician had performed a human sacrifice for Hadrian there, in an attempt to restore his declining health. After a short stop in Hermopolis Magna to honor the god Thoth, the flotilla resumed its southward journey. It was at Besa—the village founded in honor of the Egyptian god of fortune, household, and protection—where Antinous was believed to have fallen into the river and drowned.

Some said the youth's death was another kind of sacrifice. Not misadventure, but a bid to restore Hadrian's vitality via devotio, the transference of one life to another—a popular religious superstition at the time. However, the devastated emperor insisted that the boy’s death was an accident. He remained in Egypt for six months while his young lover's body was embalmed and mummified, according to local custom.

It was always easy to trace the convergence of fate and tragedy in hindsight, Hannibal mused. For Hadrian and Antinous, the rules of disorder had been set into motion in Heliopolis. The elder had tried to sail away from death, and so death had chased after the younger. Fortune and chance had abandoned them, too.

Hannibal's fingers tightened around the pencil. Barney noticed.

"Do you want anything? Jell-O? I can move you around, if you need it."

"No, thank you, Barney. I'm fine right here."

True to Alana's proclamation, he had little to no use of his legs and pelvis. The corticosteroids had not proven as effective as hoped, according to Doctor Schneider—the hospital's tedious resident physician—and the consulting neurospinal specialist. The swelling in his lumbar sacral region was taking its time to dissolve. He was well aware of having passed the one-week mark for paralysis recovery. Occasionally, a small, bright tingle of pain would flare down the peroneal nerve in his left
Hope, Hannibal mused, was truly the most dangerous of human emotions. Its absence invited more disruption than its presence could ever inspire. And indignity—the state of existence Alana had so often threatened him with—had found him on its own.

With partial immobility came the inevitable host of assisted procedures and equipment needed to maintain his body's more basic needs. Barney was a clean, responsible nurse when it came to this, his thick hands making gentle work of changing dressings and catheters, bathing, rearranging limbs, and anything else that needed doing. Hannibal never would have imagined being cared for so diligently or so intimately, so few decades into his body's aging. Alana was forced to let him keep his toilet seat for the time being. It was a small victory.

He remembered how Will had told him on the beach that whole wasn't something he was used to feeling. For Hannibal, fragility was just as uncomfortable and foreign a concept.

The beach. Had there been a beach? He'd slammed his head; his sight had left him. He'd lost his shoes at some point, too... but he hadn't woken there, no. Hadn't seen Will there. His only awakening had been two days ago, to the news that Will was dead and that he might as well be, too.

And yet, Hannibal could see Will clearly in his mind's eye. Trembling, exhausted, smeared from head to toe in blood black as ink. Gasping for breath. *It's beautiful,* he'd whispered. *Will you forgive me?* He'd stretched out his arm. In his right hand was clenched a small, black pistol. Wind like ice caressed them from the broken window. And all Hannibal could do in that moment was clutch Will tighter, grasping his bloodstained shirt like an anchor.

He remembered an acute rush of dizziness, an explosion of light and pain, and Will's arms around him as they toppled over the edge... *You know I will always forgive you,* he'd thought, as the earth flew past them wrong-side-up. *Even to a fault.* There'd been no more words. No more conversation. In his last breath, Will had spoken to him of beauty, and then asked for his forgiveness.

A different memory, then. Another embrace. He saw both clearly, intertwined. They had woken on the beach together, but now Will was gone. Would Antinous have forgiven Hadrian for sailing on without him?

"Doctor Lecter?" Barney's voice pierced the skein of reverie swaddling Hannibal's thoughts.

He blinked. The pencil tipped loose in his fingers. A wayward streak of charcoal stared up at him from Antinous' smooth abdomen. He smiled. *Sweetly ironic.*

"You're somewhere else today, huh?" The orderly's tone was light. Matter-of-fact. *Just making conversation.* At the same time, though, Hannibal could tell that Barney had acquired a personal interest. Not out of fear—though there was some of that, too, hovering beneath the surface of the orderly's calm demeanor, like a smell waiting to be aired. No, it seemed, than any adverse compulsion. *Concern—or some kind of covert knowledge? Curious.*

Hannibal cleared his throat. He felt a fluttering low in his chest. Something elusive and unseen, hovering just below the ribs. How many times had he and Will fallen? He could almost feel the rush of frigid air, the press of hands stretching out to him in the dark—cold beneath the icy waves of the Atlantic, trembling in the high wind from the window.

*Where does the difference between dreams and memories come from?*

"*You can't answer that question on your own, Doctor Lecter.*" Will's voice in his head, chiding him.
Glass between them again. Fingertips pressed against it, fragile outlines of loops and whorls, and reluctant warmth—Will's warmth—lingering long after he'd gone.

Hannibal blinked. He needed to know if he'd missed something in his opioid haze. If, by some unthinkable margin, there was more to the truth than Alana was letting on. He sniffed, and there it was—the plasticine taint of a stale lie, still lingering in the doorway of his room. Luckily, his sense of smell had returned to him along with the other four, to varying degrees.

His eyes narrowed as he recalled Alana lounging in the doorway, a patronizing smile to match the shifting blue of her eyes. The sound of a ceramic handle crushed beneath the toe of a high heel. Her unceremonious dismissal. Alana had never proven herself to be a convincing liar. Hannibal doubted that she'd mastered the skill in the twelve days between his escape and his reawakening.

He'd spoken to his attorney on the phone the evening he'd regained consciousness, but the conversation had been brief and disappointingly uninformative. After congratulating him on dodging brain death but not waking up in a more comfortable position (Vadim Stonys' idea of humor, and one that Hannibal appreciated, despite being the butt of it this time), he'd rattled off the things Hannibal wanted to know in rapid-fire Lithuanian.

Chiyoh, the only other appointed agent in his living will, had been handling his legal affairs from Lithuania during his incapacitation, or so Vadim had implied. When Hannibal had asked about Will, the man had paused—perhaps a fraction of a second too long.

"There's no news, he'd said."

"You mean his body hasn't been found, Hannibal had pressed.

Mister Graham's family requested that I don't speak about it to you, Vadim had sighed, somewhat impatiently. I'm sorry, Hannibal, but I have to respect the wishes of a family in mourning. I have to run—it's another one of Madeleine's charity things—but I'll let you know if anything important develops. Is that agreeable?"

It wasn't, particularly; but nothing much was, at the moment. The idea of Will Graham, and the tantalizing knowledge that he still existed in the world, had been a silent but steady anchor for Hannibal over the past three years. Now, that weight had vanished. Atropos, the deadly one, had snipped their line and turned back to her loom.

Unless.

Unless his nose was telling him the truth, and his anchor was not lost; merely stowed. Sisters Clotho and Lachesis would expose the lie, if there was one. And Hannibal would cheerfully kill whoever was responsible for it.

He wasn't going to press Alana for additional details, of course; and he knew Jack would be paying him a visit soon, now that he was awake. But for the time being, he thought Barney might prove a useful ally. The orderly could feed him perspective more valuable than Piedmont truffles. Idle conversation, if nothing else.

"You were here during the ten days I was unconscious, Barney," Hannibal said, dragging himself from the watery fathoms of his own thoughts. "Will you tell me about them? I don't remember anything, but I'm sure you saw everything."

Barney sat back, releasing a long breath through his nostrils. He crossed one arm over his chest and perched his elbow atop it, index finger curled against his lower lip.

"Well, nothing much to say about those days. You were out—that's all. Paramedics brought you here
just before dawn. Doctor Bloom said you'd need to be watched if you came to. They almost put you on a G-tube." He gestured at Hannibal's face, which had been stripped of its nasogastric feeding apparatus. "A few more days, and they would'a figured—"

"—I wouldn't be waking up."

"Yeah. That's usually how they think."

"And how do you think, Barney? I imagine you've worked in other hospitals. Attended to people in similar situations. How do you explain it when a comatose patient suddenly reawakens after weeks or months? How does he manage to stay alive in the first place, with no one to till his thoughts?"

Barney chewed his lip, thinking. Deciding. After a moment, he spoke. "Some people say it's a miracle."

"Do you?"

He laughed. "No, doctor, I don't. Don't have much use for miracles. Not in here." Barney tipped his head toward the doorway, indicating the hospital corridors and its inmates beyond. "But sometimes there's things that get stuck in your head and pushed around, until the pieces come back together. And then somethin' gets unstuck. Sometimes it takes another person to make that happen. Someone to talk to. Make sense of things. Maybe that's what it is."

"What you're describing sounds more akin to enlightenment. The most accurate measure of which usually comes from the self. Not the prodding of others."

Hannibal watched the orderly's face closely. Barney's brow crinkled. The acne scars dotting his wide forehead puckered. He seemed to be deliberating. Picking his words from among many—the ripest, most edible fruit. He would feed them to Hannibal now.

"I guess we're the only ones who can really tell when we're awake, though, right? Everyone else could be dreaming, for all we know. Nobody else can help with that."

"Morpheus might like to argue that fact with you." The corner of Hannibal's mouth twitched in an almost-smile.

Barney's face lit up. "Morpheus! I remember that guy. Crazy movie!"

Hannibal mirrored his grin. He didn't have the answers he wanted—not definitive ones, not yet—but after the heaviness of the past two days, it was pleasant to see someone so delighted over something.

"Dreams can be weird, though," the orderly continued, his features sliding into a conspiratorial expression as he nudged closer. Caught up in the spirit of the moment, Barney had forgotten himself. He was close enough. If Hannibal had felt like it, he could've stabbed the drawing pencil through his carotid artery with a single sweep of his wrist. It would've ruined the charcoal, of course; but it was his only weapon. The tiny blade inside the plastic sharpener they'd provided him with was hardly worth the effort of detaching. He found himself missing his scalpel. Alana had never allowed him to have one, despite his promise not to use it for nefarious purposes.

As it was, though, he didn't feel much like killing. And he was admittedly curious to follow Barney's engine of thought. The younger man's casual, self-possessed air was quickly becoming endearing.

"Whenever I'm asleep, I can feel what's going on," Barney continued. "In a physical way, I mean. They say you're not supposed to feel the pinch. But I always do."
Hannibal's eyebrow lifted. "Experiencing sensatory phenomena while asleep is often associated with lucid dreaming. Nightmares, too."

"I haven't had a nightmare in six years. Not since I started workin' psych wards."

"Your nightmares exist in the waking world. They stare back at you from the shadows of the halls."

Barney chuckled. "Prob'ly so. When I dream, it's never about this place, though. Or the place before that. Wherever I am, it's like I'm actually there. I can feel sand under my toes and see the waves crashing up. Feel raindrops on my face. I can smell the air. Salt and fish guts and hand-rolled cigarettes. Sometimes I lose track of where I've actually been, and where I'm going."

Hannibal tipped his pencil upside-down. He tapped the flat end of it against Antinous' two-dimensional chest. "We can find ourselves in dreams just as easily as we can lose ourselves in them. They show us other worlds. Unconsidered possibilities. Like shards of light from a prism, scattered by the sun. Tell me, Barney, are you always yourself in your dreams, or do you long to experience the world through another set of eyes?"

Barney leaned back, crossing his elbow over his other arm. "Nah. Everything's familiar. It's just different places, different memories. But no matter where I go or what I do, I'm always me." He paused, mouth lifting in half a grin. His eyes were even as they met Hannibal's. "Wouldn't wanna be anybody else, to be honest."

Hannibal flicked his pencil up and pushed the tip to the paper. He scratched a small, smile-shaped scar over the errant shading on the stomach.

"Good man, Barney. Don't ever think otherwise. Dreams prepare us for waking life. And what we desire in our dreams always bleeds through into reality, one way or another."

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--Nine days after the fall--

Snowflakes the size and color of cotton balls drifted through the sharpening dusk outside Alana's wide office windows. Will watched them through the aluminum blinds. His mind felt as blank as the whiteness outside. It felt good to not think.

The windows were framed by the same heavy green curtains that had been there when he'd posed with Frederick for Freddie's camera, more than three years ago. The sight jarred loose the crisp odor of charred flesh from his olfactory memory, and he had to swallow the sudden tinge of bile that rose in the back of his throat. So much for not thinking.

The snowfall had started in Baltimore that afternoon—a weak imitation of the storm that had struck northern Virginia two days before, shutting in a large portion of Fairfax County. Will had gotten Walt off to school the morning after it started; it was only a dusting then. By the time Will had returned to the house, their footprints to the driveway were completely covered in white. Then Great Falls Elementary decided to send the students home at midday, since the forecast was calling for as much as a foot of snow over the next forty-eight hours. Molly had picked up Walt on her way back from work, having decided to call it an early day herself.
The three of them had spent the next couple of days holed up in the house, Walt delighting in the prospect of no homework and a long weekend, and Will and Molly quietly fishing for normalcy. They were choosing to pretend that the call hadn't happened. That Hannibal's lawyer hadn't thrown an impossible burden into Will's lap—one that had dropped like a deadweight anchor when he'd tried to catch it.

Stonys had suggested a meeting at the end of the week with Alana and Doctor Schneider, who was serving as Hannibal's attending physician. Weather permitting, of course, he'd assured in his angular East European accent. Will had numbly agreed to the proposition. A tingle of something—Irritation? Anticipation? Fear?—danced along his nerves as he'd hung up the phone. And then Walt had come romping in the screen door, followed by Molly, who'd glanced at him under her bangs with an expression that offered more questions than assurances.

The storm had clobbered Great Falls with the fury of a Norse god, as promised. The hole in the fence had gone unrepaired, and a half-inch of snow was now balanced precariously atop the twisted edges of the wire. One brush of a fingertip, and the whole frozen latticework would go crumbling to the ground.

By the time the weather had started to subside, Will was almost looking forward to getting out of the house—until he remembered where he needed to go. Now, he found himself slumped in one of the tufted leather chairs in Alana's office, feeling wholly unprepared for whatever conversation was about to take place between himself, Hannibal's lawyer, Doctor Schneider, Alana, and Jack Crawford.

Jack was seated next to him in an identical chair as they waited for Alana, who'd gone to retrieve Vadim Stonys from reception. They'd both fallen momentarily silent, watching the snowfall. The deceptive fragility of the soft flakes was fading as the storm gathered strength.

Alana had called in Jack to corroborate Will's details on Hannibal's escape and recapture—Only if necessary, she'd said. Will thought it more likely that Alana had asked Jack to come for his sake. She didn't require a mediator; she never had. But she was probably still under the notion that Will needed a mentor. Or possibly a friend. Which was ironic, considering how frayed most of Will's friendships had become in Hannibal's wake. Old ropes that could no longer hold a knot. Alana had been one of those. Her new life held no ties to him.

Better that way, he thought. Safer.

Jack broke the silence. "Well, your mug looks a hell of a lot better than when we found you. And how's that healing up?" He nodded at Will's shoulder.

Will touched his hand absently to his cheek, having forgotten that his stitches were showing. The movement knocked his glasses askew. He'd forgotten he was wearing those, too.

The cut was nearly fused—no more need for bandages. Beneath his coat and pullover, however, an awkward lump of gauze and wrap still covered the deep gash below his collarbone, making his shoulders look uneven.

"Oh. It's… getting there. It's better."

Jack's face was serious. "Will. I know you didn't want to be dragged into this. And I know the plan went wrong, and we all suffered for that. We lost some good people. Good agents. What Hannibal did to Dolarhyde wasn't your call, even if it did put an end to the Dragon's killing spree. But you
 bringing us in afterward prevented Hannibal from taking Dolarhyde's place in the food chain. The Bureau considers that a favor."

Will shrugged, tracing his eyes over the dark vine pattern in the medallion of the Persian carpet. "It was preferable to bleeding out on the floor."

"That's on us, too." Jack sighed. "Don't think I've forgotten. Or that I don't wish like hell it hadn't turned out this way. The Bureau's covering all your medical expenses, so you and Molly don't need to worry about the hospital bills. Just focus on your recovery."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Didn't Alana fill you in? Thought I was here to focus on Hannibal's medical bills and recovery. Or lack thereof." He didn't bother disguising his sarcasm.

"Yes, she did. And we know this wasn't your call, either. Everyone knows that." Jack exhaled loudly. "Look. I'll be blunt with you. Between the legal loopholes Hannibal worked into his directive, and the Maryland taxpayers shelling out thousands of dollars a week to keep him alive in his current state, you might want to ask yourself which choice is really the lesser evil." He leaned forward, pressing his palms together and fixing Will with a crucial look. "Listen to your cop's brain. You know it's true."

Will barked out a laugh. "And if the greater evil's too great? If it puts me right back in Garret Jacob Hobbs' kitchen?"

"Will." Jack caught and held his gaze. "I can try to help you out of this. But—"

"By advising me to take out Hannibal the way Hannibal took out Dolarhyde?" Will cut in, his voice rising. "I wouldn't call that a lesser evil. I'd call that making good use of your resources, Jack."

His brain felt like it was on fire. Their dialogue was a dance; an echo. They'd done it before. You did the right thing. He could feel the convergence of a thousand possible savage futures inside his subconscious—choices reopened from the past, choices already decided in the future. The warm press of a trigger against his index finger. Hannibal's lips opening to speak; to crush against his mouth. A burst of plum-colored blood splattering across an empty windowsill. Cold, black waves rushing up to meet them. Oblivion.

The visions swirled together inside his mind, whole and incomplete; simultaneously foreign and familiar. It had been happening more and more lately. He hadn't told Molly. Hadn't told anyone. He was surprised at how much the dreams—déjà vus, hallucinations, whatever they were—entranced him instead of unsettling him.

Jack pressed his lips together and leaned back in his chair. For once, it seemed, he wasn't going to try to punch through the barrier Will had slid up between them. In his mind, Will shifted the pistol to the side, away from Jack. He wasn't a target anymore.

"Will Graham," a smooth voice greeted him from the doorway. "Nice to see you on this side of the wall."

Will looked up as Doctor Garret Schneider strode into the room, followed by Alana in her clicking heels. The doctor's first name was purely a coincidence, albeit a strange one. Naturally, Will couldn't help but think of Abigail and the bloodstained nightmare that was her family legacy. He imagined it was fate's way of tickling him.

"The sane side, you mean?" Will didn't smile.

"The free side," Schneider quipped, his eyes lingering over the scar on Will's cheek. The words were
neither suave nor polite, but somehow his smile was both.

Will didn’t have a retort, so he sank further back in his chair and pushed his glasses higher on his nose. He wondered absently if everyone besides himself and Hannibal had viewed Will’s brief incarceration as a comedic folly—a foolish footnote in the history of the BSHCI registrar, too short-lived to warrant its own chapter. The months still weighed on Will's mind like a tome; each minute buried under the crush of a thousand words.

"And Jack Crawford. Always a pleasure." The doctor and Jack exchanged a handshake as Alana half-closed the door to her office and joined them. Will watched as she swapped pleasantries with the two men, fulfilling her duties in the social contract of greeting.

She turned to smile at Will. Doing all right? her eyes seemed to ask. Will stared back at her through his lenses in reply, unblinking.

Alana moved to the wingback chair behind her desk and sat, inviting Jack and Doctor Schneider to do the same. Four identical brown leather chairs had been arranged in a semicircle on the rug in front of the desk. It reminded Will of a jury assembly, and he wondered briefly if Alana imagined herself a judge—and, if so, whether she'd be sentencing him or Hannibal. Wouldn't advise it, Alana. You know what happened to Judge Davies.

"I know it's hard to coordinate schedules during the work week, so thanks to everyone for coming in on a Saturday," she said, folding her hands and looking at each of them in turn. The desk was neater than it had been when Chilton had sat behind it, and now scattered with family photos. "Mister Stonys is right behind us. He's just in the restroom."

Will knew that if the subject of the meeting had been anything other than Hannibal, Alana would've joined them in a more casual capacity. Leaning against her desk, or perhaps sitting on the edge of it—arms crossed, slightly slouched, as was her usual posture. But with these artificially orchestrated seating arrangements, Alana was leaving no doubt as to the deadly seriousness with which she regarded her prize tiger, and his place within her hospital.

Will suspected that Alana wasn't going to like any of the options Hannibal's attorney presented to them. He knew she wasn't fond of the scenario in the first place. Nobody was—except Hannibal, of course, unaware though he was of it being set into motion. This was his design, after all. Manipulation via contingency. No surprises there.

He'd probably smirked as he'd signed over the paperwork to Stonys. He'd certainly be smiling if he could see them now, Will knew. Somewhere within the labyrinthine maze of corridors and cells, Hannibal was ensconced in the blank gray sleep of the traumatically injured, unaware of their gathering. Will could feel his presence like a shadow behind glass. A flickering of shade, ghosting along his skin, behind his eyelids.

As if on cue, Vadim Stonys squeezed through the door and bumped it shut with his elbow. He was middle aged—mid-fifties, Will guessed—with dark, close-set features that stopped just short of handsome. The pronounced frown lines between his thick gray eyebrows deepened as he fumbled with his BSHCI visitor's pass, trying to clip it to his suit jacket while simultaneously juggling a stack of legal folders in the crook of his arm.

Will's own badge was clipped to his front pocket. He remembered, with perfect clarity, when a row of block letters and numbers had been displayed there instead. As far as Will knew, he and Hannibal were the only people to have ever worn both a visitor's badge and a hospital-issued jumpsuit within the BSHCI's walls.
"I almost dropped this thing in the urinal." Stonys laughed with a crisp, stilted sound. His accent was less pronounced in person than on the phone, but the rolled R's and the dull elongation of the U confirmed Will's suspicion. The same sounds had floated softly through his ears, like dandelion seeds, on the streets of Vilnius and Panevėžys years ago. Stonys, like Hannibal, was Lithuanian.

"May I see your passport, sir?"

"What?" Will looked up, startled. Hannibal's attorney threw a muddled glance in his direction.

"Never mind," Stonys said, brushing off the interjection. "I see we have Will Graham with us in the flesh. Appreciate you coming, Mister Graham." He nodded in acknowledgment.

"I'm—" Will started, but then the vision—memory, delusion, whatever it was—engulfed him.

"Your passport, sir. Identification documents."

"Oh. Right. Sorry." He could feel beads of sweat gathering under the collar of his sweater. You might try looking a little less surprised, Will, Hannibal's voice chastised inside his head. Hannibal himself was right behind him, of course, pretending not to notice Will's discomfort, in an effort to preserve their cover.

Will handed the customs agent his blue booklet and mentally prepared to bolt. His heart had hopped into his throat and was beating against his airway. It was now, or never.

"Bryan Harris-Ressler—that is you?"

"Yes."

"And you are at Vilnius for... ah, two weeks?"

"Yes."

"On holidays or business?"

"Just sightseeing."

The agent scanned and stamped the book, and handed it back to him with a blasé but cordial smile. "Good. Lots of things to see in beautiful Vilnius. Enjoy your stay."

"Will? You okay?"

He looked up at the sound of Alana's voice. The office swam back into focus as the round, ruddy face of the customs agent vanished into the recesses of his mind.

Alana and Doctor Schneider were staring at him with a mixture of puzzlement and concern. Jack, however, had graciously averted his eyes. He was used to Will retreating into his imagination.

However, Will could tell by the way his head was cocked that Jack was listening. Feeling around Will's lapse for something to grab hold of. I can try to help you out of this... but you've got to lower that thing first. A silent appeal. Jack was well aware of how easily his imagination could take on the shape of a weapon.

The problem was, he couldn't remember when or where Jack had said that to him. Or if he'd actually said it at all.

"I, uh." Will swallowed, a vague sense of unease sifting into his gut. "Yeah. Just remembered
something important I forgot to do at home."

*Home. Not to Virginia. To where you were made, and where I made myself.*

"Oh. Is it something urgent?" Alana's voice, dismayed.

"No, it's okay. It can wait."

The sound of the sea, pounding relentlessly against the bluff. He could hear it. He looked over the edge, to what could've been their end. The ocean, too, would wait. He didn't know where *home* was supposed to be, not anymore. But when he closed his eyes, he could picture lush swatches of evergreen trees sweeping across the night; shadows on the painted frescoes of a brightly lit church. Fingertips brushing against his back, soft in the autumn night. Then the sound of his cell phone rattling against the library's hardwood floor, stirring him from sleep.

"*Hello?*"

"Will? I thought you were dead. I can't feed you if I can't find you... Join me for dinner?"

"Is it really necessary to wear this inside your office?" Stonys huffed, as he dumped his stack of folders onto a side table. He tossed the visitor's badge on top of them with a clatter.

The sound was jolting. Will glanced surreptitiously at the others, but it appeared no one had noticed him drift away again. They were all focused on the unfolding spectacle that was Vadim Stonys—who appeared to be woefully disorganized, for a lawyer. Jack raised an eyebrow, while Doctor Schneider simply observed with amusement. A faint grimace tugged at Alana's mouth. Clearly, she hadn't expected Hannibal's attorney to be so disruptive to her meeting.

Will was grateful for the interruption. His mind was blinking faster than he could keep up, pushing him backward and forward along a timeline he knew didn't exist. He focused on mentally wiping the inner walls of his skull.

It's sometime after 3 p.m. I'm in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. My name is Will Graham. And I know who I am.

Alana flashed a serene smile at Hannibal's attorney. "Yes, please do wear your pass. All visitors are required to. It's protocol. We'll start when you're ready."

"I'm ready." Stonys plopped into the empty chair with a grunt and affixed the badge to his lapel. "Please go on."

"Thank you." Alana paused, sparing a brief glance at Will. "So. To maximize our understanding of the situation and minimize the amount of time this will take, I'm going to ask Doctor Schneider to explain Hannibal Lecter's current condition. Then I'll invite Mister Stonys to clarify his legal documentation so that everyone understands what choices need to be made. Doctor, please go ahead."

The physician stood. He looked shorter than Will remembered, and there were white streaks in his slicked-back, silver hair. They echoed the spotless white of his lab coat, which was longer than the ones the orderlies wore and more authoritative-looking. Authority was something Doctor Schneider deeply valued, Will knew. He'd always worn his prestige like a badge in the halls of the BSHCI—just as Alana now did.

"All right. So, as Doctor Bloom said, I'm monitoring Doctor Lecter's general medical care. We also have a couple of specialists from Johns Hopkins' neurology who've agreed to consult on his case. I'm assuming most of you have very basic medical knowledge, so I'll use layman's terms and provide definition where necessary. Stop me if you need me to explain anything."
Jack looked up over his steepled fingers. "Question, doctor."

"Jack. That was fast."

Jack ignored Schneider's gibe. "Can the relevant parties get this information in writing? In case they need to review anything later. As I understand, the decisions that need to be made on Doctor Lecter's behalf should be closely tied to his prognosis."

Will cut in before Schneider could reply. "No, don't bother. I don't want that, Jack."

A small, hurt expression flitted across Jack's face and Will looked away, feeling disgusted with himself. He knew Jack was trying to help. But Will didn't need help. He needed this to be over.

"I mean—I don't need that," he said, softer. "This is getting settled here. Today."

Stonys looked slightly alarmed at that, Will noticed. The lawyer shifted in his seat, tapping the folder in his lap with his thumbs. Probably thinks I've already made up my mind. The truth was, he hadn't. He couldn't. There was too much he didn't understand, too much he was afraid to conceive. Dark thoughts licked at his waking dreams—visions of Hannibal slack and lifeless in his arms; and then flushed and sweat-slick against his skin. Flesh to flesh. Mind to mind.

Will had kept telling himself that he'd know what to do the moment he stepped inside the BSHCI's doors. It hadn't happened yet.

"That's fine," Doctor Schneider was saying. "Whatever Mister Graham wants." He paused—too briefly—and then pulled back the reins of the conversation before anyone else could interrupt.

"So, I'll go ahead and explain Doctor Lecter's overall condition. As a result of the fall he and Mister Graham sustained, Doctor Lecter suffered a traumatic brain injury—a TBI, as we call it—as well as a spinal cord injury. That's in addition to the abdominal wound from the thirty-eight-caliber bullet. The gunshot wound responded well to surgery. But it appears that the patient struck something during the course of the fall. Probably a rock protrusion, given the topography of the area. The force of the water likely exacerbated his injuries. I'll go through everything point by point, to give you a picture of what we're looking at in terms of plausible recovery."

He paused. Raked a hand through his hair. The motion displaced a small, greasy glob of gel onto the side of his palm. The sight made Will flinch. Doctors' hands were supposed to be clean. Hannibal's had always been immaculate, even in prison. Even after murder.

"Now, this type of brain trauma we categorize as a diffuse axonal injury, or DAI. It causes lesions in the white matter, and often a temporary coma that may or may not transition to a persistent vegetative state. In Lecter's case, emergency response personnel reported that he was unconscious at the time of recapture. He's remained that way the past ten days. His MRIs show some response to steroids and anti-inflammatory medications, and his intracranial pressure has been relatively stable. But we haven't seen any verbal response or eyelid movement, and only a slight upper body motor response to pain."

Schneider paused again, expecting a bid for clarification and looking disappointed when he received none.

"Anyway, that puts him at around a six on the Glasgow Coma Scale, which is pretty dismal."

"Dismal?" Will cut in. Annoyance nipped at the edges of his patience. "Is that your opinion, or the neurologists?"
Schneider smirked. "Let me put it this way, Mister Graham. More than ninety percent of patients with this type of brain injury who remain in a coma for this long and have diminished response to stimulation, don’t transition to a conscious state. Meaning, they don’t ever really recover. There’s no specific course of treatment for these kinds of lesions, other than to alleviate the resultant swelling. Now, with DAI's, you could theoretically see a complete reversal of the unconscious condition days, or even weeks, after the injury. But it's rare."

Stonys coughed. "I was informed that your consulting neurologists suggested a Functional MRI to determine Doctor Lecter's neural activity. Those results seem more relevant than a scale rating. I think everyone—especially Mister Graham—should hear them."

"I was about to get to that," Schneider said coolly. "I understand this is a lot of information to take in at once."

He paused, looking at the three men seated in front of him with a vaguely patronizing stare. Alana toyed with a gold fountain pen on her desk, watching Will from the corner of her eye.

"One thing I didn't talk about yet is Doctor Lecter's spinal injury," Schneider continued, not looking at Stonys. "We've registered no pain response from the waist down, due to compressed nerves in the lumbar sacral area of the spinal cord. Corticosteroids appear to have minimal effect. With the patient being unconscious, it's difficult to predict if the paralysis will be temporary or permanent. If he were to wake up, we'd have a better idea of what's going on down there—but not before."

Schneider's green eyes sharpened as he turned his gaze back on the attorney. "Now, as to your request, Mister Stonys."

Stonys lifted an eyebrow in response.

"Doctors Accorsi and Sasaki were brought in from Johns Hopkins to consult, as I mentioned," Schneider continued. "They believe the likelihood of Hannibal Lecter regaining either full or partial consciousness is around ten to twenty percent, at this point. Maybe less. That percentage will continue to drop as time goes on. Now, the fMRI tests taken yesterday did show some brain activity between the posterior cingulate cortex—which is a region of the brain involved in consciousness—and the medial prefrontal cortex. It's not a definite indicator of anything, but some coma patients with recorded neural activity in these areas have experienced varying degrees of recovery."

"But even with that activity, he could still remain in an unconscious state for a long time," Jack said, his voice steady. "Months. Years. With no further indication of awareness. Isn't that true, doctor?"

The uneasy feeling in Will's gut twisted, bordering on nausea. He knew Jack was baiting him. And trying to coax Schneider into painting a hopeless picture of Hannibal's condition, so that Will would see the senselessness of keeping him plugged in. Alive. He could almost hear Jack's voice in his head: Life support's expensive, Will. Is that really where you want Maryland taxpayers' dollars to go?

"For the rest of his life, even, yes," Schneider answered. "After transitioning out of coma, some TBI patients remain in a vegetative state for decades. Or his brain could give up, and he could die in his sleep. There's just no way to tell. The state corrections department isn't going to spend much money on diagnostics for something like this. Not for someone like Hannibal Lecter." He paused, smoothing his fingertips through his sparse goatee and allowing the words to sink into his audience's ears.

Will had harbored a moderate dislike for Doctor Schneider during his time as an inmate. Now, he found his disgust was becoming exponentially magnified.
"If by some miracle he does regain consciousness, he still may be unable to speak, smell, or taste. He may have impaired memory and cognitive function. And he might never regain the ability to walk, due to the damage to his spinal cord. That's the reality of Doctor Lecter's medical situation."

Schneider slipped his hands into the front pockets of his lab coat. He flexed his fingers, jangling the keyring on the inner pocket through the fabric. All the doctors and orderlies wore them there, Will knew; it made them harder for the patients to grab.

"Basically, he's about as likely to make a full recovery as he is to weasel his way out of here a second time," the doctor finished, smirking. Behind her desk, Alana echoed the doctor's expression.

"He won't be leaving this hospital again," she said. "You can count on that."

Will noticed how Alana avoided looking at him.

"That prognosis doesn't sound terribly promising." She tapped the point of her pen against her desk, as if to underline her appraisal.

Will peered through his glasses at the others, and saw the same sentiment echoed on their faces—except for Stonys, who maintained a carefully neutral expression. As Hannibal's lawyer, Stonys would try to present his client's case in the best light possible, Will knew. However, he also sensed that Stonys wasn't going to try to influence him. If what Will understood about Hannibal's legal directive was true, then the decision on Hannibal's life rested with him, and him alone. No one—not even Hannibal's attorney—could share that burden.

It was the kind of personal touch that Hannibal delighted in imposing—more for the amount of torment it caused his recipient than for any apparent logical reason.

Stonys cleared his throat. "May I remind everyone that it's up to Mister Graham to decide that." The comment wasn't precisely aimed at Alana, though her mouth tightened at the words. Papers rustled as Stonys thumbed open the folder on the top of his stack.

"Now, if Doctor Schneider's finished explaining, I'd like to review Doctor Lecter's directive, for those who aren't familiar with it. He eyed Alana and Schneider over the stack of documents, then glanced at Jack as though noticing him for the first time. He turned back to Alana. "Doctor Bloom, I don't believe Mister Crawford has any legal responsibility to be here."

"He led the team that apprehended Doctor Lecter—both times," Alana retorted. "He was also one of the first responders after the incident with Francis Dolarhyde. I asked him to be here. He can stay."

Stonys glanced at Will. "Are you all right with this, Mister Graham?"

"It's fine. Jack can—yeah." Will was surprised at how weary his own voice sounded. He felt like a chewed-up piece of rawhide one of the dogs had forgotten in the backyard.

"Thank you, Will." Jack's voice beside him again, calm.

Stonys shuffled his stack of papers—slowly—until he found the one he wanted. Doctor Schneider took the opportunity to settle himself in his chair, looking disgruntled that no one had commended him on his speech. Will felt a small sting of satisfaction.

"Ah. Here. All right, I'll just read through the relevant parts of Doctor Lecter's advance directive. It states: I, Hannibal Lecter, appoint Will Graham—um, address, phone number, et cetera—as my agent to make health care decisions for me if I become unable to make such decisions for myself, except to the extent I state otherwise in this document. That's standard language. You've all seen
these forms. However, there are a couple of addendums. One is that in the case of Mister Graham's death preceding Doctor Lecter's own, the power of attorney would then be transferred to Miss Chiyoh Fukami. But since we have Mister Graham here, we don't need to worry about that."

Stonys scratched his ear and flipped the page. Scanned it. The room waited, its occupants teeming with varying levels of impatience.

"All right. Here's the important part. Doctor Lecter states here, under any and all circumstances that may leave me incapacitated or in a vegetative state, the decision on whether or not to continue with life support rests with Will Graham, regardless of prognosis or likelihood of recovery. This decision should be made in a timely manner, not to exceed two weeks from the time of incapacitation, as established by a board-certified neurologist. If, by the end of that period, no decision has been made regarding my medical care—either due to negligence or to the unavailability of either agent named in this directive—then all means of life support shall be terminated."

The attorney paused. He looked up at Will. "So, as I explained to you on the phone, what that basically means is that Doctor Lecter's given you full command of his medical decisions and—ah, his life. As long as he remains incapacitated, that is."

"Not much leeway there, I'm afraid, Mister Stonys. There's a time limit to take into consideration. I'm surprised Doctor Lecter went with the minimum." All heads turned toward Doctor Schneider, who was sitting with legs crossed and a smug expression on his face.

"Minimum of what?" Will asked, his voice flat.

"Comas associated with this type of brain injury can last up to four weeks. Usually no longer. But a patient may still transition to wakefulness after that time. Surprising for a doctor to have placed such a strict limit on his own death sentence. Or life sentence, as it were."

It was a bad joke. Everyone knew it, even Alana. In the back of Will's mind, something stirred. It buzzed against the inside of his skull, clamoring to get out. He opened his mouth, but Stonys cut him off.

"Will doesn't need to speak to that until he's ready." Stonys threw a disapproving glance at Hannibal's physician. "And Doctor Lecter's wishes on the administration of his medical care—including the timeline of that administration—are his own. There's no need to speculate on the reasoning behind them. That's not why we're here."

"Still," Schneider purred. "Seems a bit hasty, don't you think? Doctor Lecter's tangled Will up in this awfully quickly. For his own reasons, I'm sure. As you noted."

Prickles of heat rose along Will's body. The buzzing in his brain amplified to a frenzied drone. He could feel the shape of something materializing in his hand—a handle. A knife. Serrated. Full tang. He clenched his fingers around it, felt its grip in his hand as though it were real. A roar was hovering on the tip of his tongue. He could easily do to the doctor what he'd done to Dolarhyde. One swift move—one hard swipe of the wrist...

He could envision the blood spray hitting the windowsill behind them. He imagined it dripping down in heavy, liquid knots—not black, but bright scarlet this time.

"Will?" There was Jack, registering his distress. Probing. Worried.

Will exhaled, stifling a growl. He didn't need Jack's concern. He didn't need anyone's concern.

"Can everyone stop talking about me like I'm not sitting right here!" He glared at Schneider and
Stonys in turn, and then at Alana, whose eyes had shifted to his hands. He looked down to see his fingertips digging into the arms of his chair, the nails pressed to white. They’d left small dents in the soft leather. He uncurled his hands, forcing his fingers to relax. He could still feel the itch of the steak knife in his right hand, invisible. *Almost real.*

Alana cast a disapproving look at the doctor and the attorney, both of whom had fallen silent at Will's outburst. A constipated-looking frown tugged at Schneider's mouth, but surprise glinted in his eyes, Will saw.

*Used to seeing me caged,* Will thought to himself. *Trapped, tied, sedated, like a wounded animal—* not biting back. Heat rose along the back of his skull at the memory. In his mind's eye, Will could see Doctor Schneider smiling at him through the bars. Then Hannibal, doing the same. Doctor Schneider had kept smiling; Hannibal, however, had killed Judge Davies and put his brain and heart on display in his own courtroom—and then plucked Will out of prison by proxy, and turned his cheek when Will had shoved a gun in his face.

Years and lives later, Hannibal had stretched out his hand and lifted him up at the cliff's edge—and then held on tighter as he'd felt Will's body start to sway.

Would Hannibal reach for him again, if he awoke?

Through the thin veil of horror and beauty that separated himself and Hannibal from each other—separated them from the clash and clamor of the dark Atlantic, and from the black river of blood that had bound them together—Will could feel the shape of the word pulsing, pushing, calling out to him.

*If.*

A hand—Hannibal's hand—pulling Will up to stand beside him, to stand and not to fall—at least, for a moment.

*Stay with me, Will.*

*Where else would I go?*

The knowledge entered him silently, and sharp as a blade: *I owe him an if.*

They'd both been dizzy with pain and elation, struggling to catch their breath. Will had reached out for Hannibal, seeking anchor; and Hannibal had surrounded him like a wave. In a blinding rush of singularity, he'd felt—for the first time in his life—an infinite, insatiable sense of *wholeness.* Will knew he would never survive the loss of it. So he'd allowed himself to fall, and he'd taken Hannibal with him.

*A life for a life.* He owed Hannibal another chance—if only for that stolen, primal, *perfect* moment before they'd plunged into the sea.

The thought filled him with a quiet sense of power. Inside his mind, Will lowered his arm, moving the pistol away from Hannibal. He didn't take his finger off the trigger.

"Well then," Alana said, louder than necessary. "Now that the medical and legal considerations are on the table, I think this is a good time to ask Will what *he* wants to do."

Four pairs of eyes turned on him simultaneously. It was the kind of scrutiny Will hated. He tucked his hands into the bunchy pockets of his wool coat and stared back at them from behind the clear barriers of his lenses.
"Nothing," he said. "That's my answer."

Alana's lips parted. No sound came. Jack's head tipped, doubtful.

"Will, you might want to elaborate a little." Alana's voice was gentle in contrast to her eyes, which shimmered like crystals of ice. Outside the windows, the sky was robed in a thick gray blanket of dusk. The snow was falling faster now—thick enough to obscure the view of the Capitol's dome.

Will swallowed. "Nothing. That's what I want to do. That's my decision." He paused, steadying himself for the next words. "I'm not asking for Hannibal to be taken off life support. I'm not suggesting a different course of treatment. Doctor Schneider and the specialists can keep monitoring his condition. I don't need to be involved in that."

Beside him, Jack let out a harsh sigh. His forearms fell against the arms of his chair with a smack. "Okay, back up. Let's think this through clearly. As long as Hannibal's alive and in a state facility, the state of Maryland is obligated to pay to keep him that way. He's basically a vegetable at this point, Will. The chances of that changing are slim. The neurologists have said so. Doctor Schneider agrees."

Will could feel Jack's eyes on him, searching for confirmation. He didn't look over.

The next words were gentler. "You know what the right thing is to do here, Will. It's for the better." Jack's voice in his ear, impossibly soft beneath the din of the sea.

Stonys shot a sharp look in Jack's direction. "Unless you are serving as Mister Graham's legal counsel, Mister Crawford, I advise you not to advise him on the matter."

A lock of hair had fallen down over the attorney's forehead, salty gray against tawny skin. It made him look a little untamed, similar to the way Hannibal did when his hair fell out of its neatly swept part. The few times Will had walked in on the sight—after Tobias Budge's murder, and before Abigail's—his first thought had been: Animal. And then: Mine.

He'd never known how to process the second part.

"I get it, Jack," Will said, keeping his voice steady. He knew he needed to sound strong. "Hannibal isn't useful anymore. Not from a utilitarian perspective, anyway." He stared at a paperweight on Alana's desk. Some kind of geode. The crystals glittered when he tilted his head. "But this is my choice. My call... This is how I'm calling it."

You did the right thing, you know. You, me, Walt, back here together—that's good. Molly's four-day-old words echoed back to him. He could see her face clearly in his mind, as though she were right in front of him. The ocean ebbed and swirled in her eyes, a silent, gray-green symphony of disquietude.

"Will, look at me. You can end this right now."

Will flinched. He'd heard the words from Jack's mouth before, spoken in exactly the same way. Where, when, why, he didn't know; couldn't begin to understand. But he knew Jack had leveled his Glock at his shoulder—the good one—and threatened him. Threatened him and Hannibal.

Put. Down. The gun!

Will looked at Jack. Saw the disappointed furrow of his brow and the tense poise of his body. Felt his own lip twitch in something that was neither a smile nor a grimace, but somewhere in between. The roar hovering on his tongue broke loose.
Glass shattering; cold air rushing in. The teacup had broken, and so had the window. But there was no shock of gunfire, no bodies falling to the floor, no windowsill splattered with red and purple gore. Time had not reversed—but it had shifted.

"It's not going to end that way. Not this time." Will paused. His heart was racing. The fever visions shrank back into his imagination, retreating faster with every word. "If Hannibal wakes up, he wakes up. If not, then he'll stay unconscious. I'm not pulling the plug on him. Or anyone, for that matter."

Alana sighed. "For the record, I agree with Jack's sentiment." Irritation was thick in her voice, despite her placid expression. "But as this is Will's decision, legally, we have to abide by it."

Stonys' face was carefully jubilant. "Well. Now that that's settled—and thank you for doing so, Mister Graham—there are some additional legal procedures to be followed in terms of maintaining life support for Doctor Lecter. I trust that—"

"You will be fully invited to oversee those procedures, Mister Stonys," Alana interjected. She smiled, her lips curving in a scarlet slash. "From a purely legal standpoint, of course. You and Doctor Schneider can discuss what you need to, before you leave."

Alana eyed Will. "Since you've decided to keep Hannibal alive, that brings up another issue. What do you want me to tell him if he does wake up?" She quirked an eyebrow. "Assuming you wouldn't want to tell him yourself, of course."

It was more of a challenge than a clarification. Will searched her face for a spark of belief, of confidence. He found none. Nothing new there.

Will licked his lips uneasily. He hadn't envisioned what might happen if Hannibal came out of his coma. He'd been too preoccupied by the impossible choice forced upon him to think that far. But if Hannibal knew he was alive, and knew he'd called Jack for help after what they'd done to Dolarhyde… what had happened between them on the clifftop…

Will swallowed. If you play, you pay.

Hannibal's vengeance had a wide reach, even from behind glass. Molly and Walt had almost become victims of it. In his mind, Will could see Molly's bruised face, her eyes ringed with yellow and blue, puffy with worry. Hell, I got mad there for a second. She'd laughed. He hadn't.

A cold flare of protective instinct rose in his breast. He was a good father. And a good husband—or trying to be, anyway. If he wanted a way out for himself and Molly and Walt, this was it. They could drop off Hannibal's radar before he realized they were there. Cover their tracks and slip away for good—no apologies, no guilt, no blame. Almost polite.

"If you need to tell him something, just say I…" Will's voice softened on the words, against his will, then trailed off. What did he want to say? Jack was looking at him again; he could feel the other man's eyes combing his face. "Um. Just say…"

I don't want to think about you anymore. He'd said the words to Hannibal once before. He'd meant them then. That afternoon when he'd awoken in his own bed in Wolf Trap, having somehow survived Mason Verger's surgeons and Hannibal's ensuing bloodbath, his mind and body had stung everywhere Hannibal had ever touched him. The sentiment, however, didn't feel quite true anymore. He couldn't stop thinking about Hannibal. Couldn't push the memories away—or the nightmares.

In both worlds, Hannibal was sometimes cruel and often kind; eyes brightening with anger or
softening with desire as Will pulled away or drew closer; and each look held more understanding and adoration than anyone else ever had shown him, even Molly. It was leading Will away from her, he knew—even as he was struggling to find his way back home.

"Tell him… tell him I didn't make it. Hannibal doesn't need to know I'm alive."

Both of Alana's eyebrows shot up this time. So did Jack's—and Stonys', too, Will saw.

Alana nodded. "If it comes to that, I'll lie to Hannibal for you—if that's what you want." Doubt clouded her face as she searched for words. "But I can't promise that he won't somehow discover the truth, if he's able to. You know what he's capable of."

Molly's tired face, softened by painkillers and sedatives, as she studied Will's eyes. "We'll be back home, won't we?" Even the words, coming from her mouth, had sounded bruised.

"Yeah, I know," Will said. He did.

"It's a smart call, Will," Jack agreed, leaning forward. Trying to be encouraging—like a good mentor. The thought conjured an acrid taste in Will's mouth. He swallowed it, grimacing.

"Minimize your involvement as much as you can," Jack continued. "You and Molly can sleep better at night that way."

Will cleared his throat, but he didn't respond. He wanted to shrug, to feign indifference at his own decision, but he didn't have the energy. He felt vaguely ill. His stomach buzzed with distant nausea. This time, you're not going to find me. You're not going to look for me. You won't know where I am or what I'm doing... And maybe someday, you won't think about me anymore.

The knot in Will's gut clenched tighter. Funny how finality never feels too clean or comfortable. Or final. It scraped at his insides, leaving him raw and sore where no one could see.

Stonys gave a curt nod. "Very well. In return for keeping my client alive, I'll also honor your wish to remain anonymous in the matter. If Hannibal awakens and enquires about your agency, I'll try to deflect his interest. But I'm afraid I can't promise my indefinite silence."

"Thank you," Will said. He meant it.

"I'll be happy to lie also, if need be," Doctor Schneider spoke up, not wanting to be left out. A smile snaked across his face as he eyed Will from across the room. "The way I see it, the staff here owes you a favor—not only for bringing Hannibal back in, but also for the terrible mistake made on your behalf years ago. I don't think a formal apology was ever issued, was it?"

Will's fingers tightened at his sides. He envisioned lunging from his chair and breaking Doctor Schneider's artificially whitened teeth with a swing of his knuckles. Words—not his—echoed in his mind, warring and deadly: If you'd like to keep your mandible in working order, I advise you shut it.

"I sincerely appreciate that, doctor," he said, not bothering to disguise his sarcasm. "I'm sure lying won't be a problem for you."

Stonys coughed, loud and deliberate. The sound did nothing to lessen the heat creeping up the sides of Will's neck.

"Well, it seems we're finished for the time being," the attorney said, his tone carefully neutral. "I have an appointment across town in an hour, so I've got to get moving." He turned to Will. "Would you like to see him before you go?"
"That won't be necessary," Alana broke in, swiveling in her chair to face Stonys. Her blood-red lips were pursed tight in her pale face—rose petals crushed by snow.

The lawyer arched a wiry eyebrow. "This may be your hospital, Doctor Bloom, but I must remind you that Will Graham is Doctor Lecter's appointed agent in all of his medical matters. Given Doctor Lecter's situation and the specifics outlined in his directive, Mister Graham has more reason than anyone to assess his physical state in person."


Alana's jaw flexed. Her eyes were cold. She wanted to protect Will; she always had. "I really don't think it's—"

"No, Alana."

The words—Will's—swiftly cut off Alana's protest. A startled look flashed in her sky-blue eyes.

Will swallowed. "I don't need to see him. It wouldn't make a difference." He dropped his gaze to the floor, where the Persian rug presented a tangled red-and-olive vision, split by the frames of his glasses. He was feeling very done with this meeting.

Alana threw a chiding glance at Stonys, who remained placid. Will caught it from the corner of his eye. Can't help herself, he thought. After almost dying at Hannibal's hands, Alana rarely missed an opportunity to gloat at the victories she wrangled from him, however small. Will could see her point of view with stark and singular clarity. But he no longer shared it.

"Thank you for coming, Mister Stonys." She stood up from her desk, but didn't offer a parting handshake. Stonys seemed to have anticipated this and was gathering his files together, seemingly unconcerned with his dismissal.

"Doctor Schneider, you and Mister Stonys can wrap up the legal paperwork for Hannibal's medical care in your office, if you don't mind."

The physician nodded at Alana, with a grimace that suggested he wasn't especially looking forward to a one-on-one with Stonys.

"Jack, if you'll stay a moment?"

Jack nodded, shifting sideways in his chair. Alana turned to Will.

"I'll call Barney to take you downstairs. He's our new head orderly."

Will sat back, nodding vaguely, as Alana punched a sequence of buttons on her phone and muttered something into the receiver. Stonys trailed Schneider out the door, rearranging his briefcase as he went.

"Will."

Will turned his head at the sound of Jack's voice. The other man's eyes were dark and cautious.

"I know this was a tough call for you. I know that what you experienced in that house—on that terrace—wasn't easy. And because I know you, I know that I probably still don't know the entire story."

Will opened his mouth to protest, but Jack held up his hand. "It's all right. I don't need to. What I
Will's brow furrowed. *Of course I will.* The automatic response—the right response—rose to his tongue and lingered there, unspoken. While he hadn't condemned Hannibal to death, that didn't mean he'd decided to forsake his family. Was Jack insinuating, or only fishing? It was hard to tell.

Will settled for a rough nod. *I'm still safe for them, Jack,* he thought, reassuring himself. *It's the world we walk in—you and I—that isn't safe.*

The door to Alana's office opened abruptly and a tall, thick-bodied man in a white orderly's uniform strode in. Will guessed him to be in his mid-thirties. He could tell by the way the man's eyes brightened when they fell on him that he knew exactly who he was.

Will told himself it wasn't that surprising; his and Hannibal's faces had appeared together on the front pages of a number of publication and news sites—not just *TattleCrime*—over the past several years. They were mostly speculative, sensationalist articles that tried to play up the "murder husbands" angle Freddie had set in motion, or to resurrect the convoluted chain of events surrounding the Chesapeake Ripper trials as a disparaging comment on the criminal justice system. Will wasn't particularly interested in either exploit. But the orderly seemed interested in him.

"Hi, Barney." Alana greeted him with a smile, and gestured at Will. "This is Will Graham, Doctor Lecter's—um, legal agent." Will noted the slight pause between Hannibal's name and his own, newly imposed title. The words sounded strange coming from Alana's mouth. They sounded strange in general.

"Will, this is Barney Matthews, hospital head of staff. He's been serving as Doctor Lecter's caretaker since we took him back into custody."

Will stood. Barney flashed a polite smile, but he didn't stick out his hand. He seemed to sense that Will wasn't keen on shaking.

"Good t'meet you, Mister Graham," he boomed, his voice buoyant and full, like a beach ball. "I heard some things about you. One'a the FBI's rock stars, to be sure. I'll take you back downstairs."

"Thanks," Will said, unsure of how to follow up the odd greeting. The words *some things* hovered uncomfortably in his mind, like an unwanted pair of eyes peeping through a window.

He shuffled after the head orderly, who'd already started toward the door—efficient, no time wasted on pleasantries, Will noted—and remembered just in time to mumble a goodbye to Alana and Jack. They returned his parting words with twin smiles and then turned back to each other, clearly eager to dive into their own discussion. He didn't know when he'd see either of them again. The half-hearted exchange left him feeling opaque, and more than a little socially awkward. *Nothing new there, either.*

Barney didn't talk as they made their way down the maze of corridors. His stride was light and purposeful, but he slowed it to match Will's tired gait. Will was grateful for the lack of conversation. When he got home, he planned to burrow into bed and nap for as long as his mind and body would let him. Truthfully, he could probably go to sleep and not wake up until the next morning, although he knew his brain would never allow such a luxury. If he was lucky, his nightmares—which so often followed him into sleep, like a pack of rabid dogs—would remain at bay for a few hours. Hopefully they wouldn't wake Molly in the middle of the night again, like they had all this week.

*Will? Will—I'm here. It's okay. You're okay. What did you see? What did you dream?*
Sweat-drenched sheets bunched around his waist, Molly's cool hand on his back.

*It's too dark to see—I, I can't remember.*

Molly's soothing reassurance, his shaky response; forever the endless question and reply. It was their nightly ritual, this dance of nightmares. Will knew that Molly would never really get used to it. She didn't want to. If she did, it would mean she'd accepted the idea that he would always be broken.

Deep in her heart, in the place where she hid her most selfish desires, Will knew Molly yearned for an undamaged partner. Almost everyone he'd been intimately involved with had; he could sense it. Only Hannibal had ever admired his brokenness more than his potential for wholeness.

*When we fell together, did it wound you further? Or do you feel whole now?*

A ripple of moonlight, reflecting off the blood and saltwater that covered them both and giving shine to their skin, their faces. Two demons, disguised in robes of light.

*Whole isn't—it's not something I'm used to feeling.*

Words they'd never spoken. Truths they'd never shared. Yet still present, still echoing in his mind more than a week after he'd hauled the two of them out of the ocean and onto the beach, bloody and broken and exhausted. Hannibal, unconscious and hanging onto life by a thread—a wet scrawl of blood oozing from his temple and splattering the gravel. Eyelids closed, mind dark.


Barney stopped, throwing a quizzical look over his shoulder. The whites of his eyes appeared yellow in the glare from the fluorescent lights.

"Forget somethin'?'"

"I—" Will's jaw was working, but he couldn't form the words. He swallowed. "I. I want to see him. I need to."

Barney turned to face him, full on. He lowered his voice to the equivalent of a whisper. "You mean Doctor Lecter."

"Will you take me?"

Barney glanced down the hall from which they'd come. He jerked his thumb in the direction of Alana's office. "Doctor Bloom said it's okay?"

"It was—ah, tentatively agreed to."

Barney was quiet. He seemed to be debating. "Don't see why not," he said, finally, his voice returning to its usual fullness. "He's not conscious, anyway. Sure, I'll take you. Follow me."

"Thank you." A sigh escaped Will's throat as a distant, humming sensation replaced the gray-green nausea inside his gut. He followed Barney, feeling lighter with each step. Deliciously on edge. It was the same feeling he'd had the last time he'd spoken alone with Alana in her office. *I'm not letting him in. Don't worry about me.*

The words rang truer now than they had then. He couldn't let Hannibal in this time, even if he wanted to. Hannibal's mind had gone dark; the beast inside him was drowsing. There was no telling if, or when, it would wake again.
Barney backtracked down several halls and through the double doors that led to the medical ward. Will held his breath as the orderly took him down a hallway with two rooms isolated at either end. Two guards in plain navy uniforms were posted at either side of the steel-reinforced door on the left. Both had Colt nineteen-elevens clipped to their belts. They eyed Will warily, assessing his visitor’s badge and his face, until Barney spoke.

"We're good," Barney assured them. "This is Will Graham, Doctor Lecter's legal agent. Doctor Bloom said he could stop by."

The guards nodded, and shifted their eyes back to the wall opposite the doors. Barney withdrew a set of keys with colorful plastic toppers from the pocket of his lab coat. He flipped through neatly with his thumb until he hit on the one he wanted. It was covered with a red topper and marked with the characters ICU-1 in black Sharpie.

"The door's locked from the outside an' inside," he explained, as he turned the key in the lock. "Doctor Bloom says we can't be too careful. Even if—well, you know."

The door swung open, and Barney moved aside to let Will through.

He stepped inside the room, which was small and stale-smelling and contained no "get-well" bouquet, no greeting cards, nor any other sign of personalization or comfort. Will inhaled as a stab of indefinable emotion ripped through him at the if that greeted his eyes.

Hannibal lay supine against the faded hospital sheets. A blanket was drawn up to his waist. He was covered with a thin green cotton gown—too thin for the chill of the room. His prominent cheekbones appeared more gaunt than usual, and his head was wrapped with thick cloth bandages. His eyelids, fragile as rice paper, remained closed. All the color seemed to have been drained from his body.

Will pulled off his glasses and crammed them into his pocket. He stepped toward the bed, unaware that his feet were moving, unaware of Barney quietly shutting the door behind them. His heart batted against his ribcage like a moth caught in a jar.

Hannibal wasn't wearing an oxygen mask, Will noted with provisional relief. Breathing on his own—that was good. His mouth, it seemed, was the only part of his body not connected to a machine. An enteral feeding tube extended from the right side of Hannibal's nose, where it was taped. Will followed the curving line to the syringe that hung from the stainless steel stand bolted to the wall. Another IV pole held fluid and medication drips, more coils of tubing, and other equipment he couldn't name. It, too, was bolted to the concrete wall. It appeared the BSHCI staff had learned a thing or two from Abel Gideon. The pumps towered in back of everything with their square analog faces, beeping steadily.

Will knew that such a sight made most people feel apprehensive or uncomfortable. When he'd raced to the hospital after Molly's attack, he'd felt only a cold numbness that diluted everything else—every other feeling he might've had, even tears. Typical panic response, he'd told himself at the time. Now, in the solid center of his breast, Will felt only a hot, slow anger beginning to broil. The heat simmered behind his eyes, stinging them to tears.

The rhythmic bleeping of the heart monitor pierced his consciousness. Underneath it, he could hear the sound of Hannibal's breathing, slow and deep. Soft restraints anchored his wrists to the guard rails, to prevent him from tearing out his tubing if he seized.

A flash of memory seared across Will's mind, suddenly blinding him: Hannibal's eyes rolling back into his head; a violent spasm seizing his limbs, snapping them like rubber bands. Will frowned. Shook his head. No. He hadn't seen that; it had been only a dream. Hadn't it?
He reached for the guard rail. Felt cold aluminum under his palms; Hannibal's cold, sea-drenched body in his hands. But Hannibal had been unconscious when Will had dragged them both out of the ocean—he was sure of that.

He looked down into the other man's pale face. His eyes opened, unfocused as they met Will's. A slow smile curved onto his lips. Will remembered the next words; heard them echoing inside his mind as Hannibal spoke them aloud: *Were you trying to kill me again, Will?*

Will's eyes widened. He blinked. Looked again. Hannibal's eyelids were closed. No flutter of movement beneath them.

Will pushed his knuckles into his eye sockets, sending bright white spots dancing across the darkness of his vision. It was enough that the hallucinations had plagued him every night since the cliff, cascading toward nightmares faster than he could wake. Now, he was actually seeing them unfurl in front of his eyes, like a grotesque mockery of a second life he'd only glimpsed in dreams. A second life, a second chance—one in which he and Hannibal had both emerged from the ocean alive and awake, and unable to tear themselves from each other. They'd escaped; and yet they'd died again in his nightmares.

Everything was reversed, and nothing made sense. The timeline was wrong. The visions weren't real.

*How many times did we fall?*

"Uh, Mister Graham—you okay?" Barney's voice, distant. A figment of his imagination.

Hannibal's hand pulling him up to stand beside him—that was real. He could see it in his mind. He held onto it; anchored himself there. He marveled at the color of the sky: lush rolls of gray cloud racing across an indigo infinity of space and time.

Will reached out. Reached back. Across the dark expanse of sky and the heavy tug of the ocean, across the years of apathy and ache and separation. He felt a warm, solid hand under his—still, and impossibly fragile. He curled his fingers around it, squeezing. *Alive."

And then the room disappeared: the machines, Hannibal's body in the bed, the gray light filtering in through the windows.

Will's eyes opened to the shimmering of golden arches, the flickering of candles, and the powdery odor of ancient stone. Hannibal, awake and smiling warmly, reached out to clasp Will's hands in his own. *The next part is hard, Will. We have to forgive each other again.*

Will looked into the other man's eyes—which were shining with a fierce, almost angelic light—and then they were no longer in the chapel, but locked together in heat, sweat sliding between their naked bodies, silk sheets bunching beneath them as they moved together as one. Will gasped as Hannibal lowered his head to kiss him, mouth rough and impossibly sweet. Pleasure like liquid heat coursed through every nerve in Will's body, pooling in the places where he and Hannibal were joined, lighting him on fire. He was burning with it.

He curled his fingers around Hannibal's back, pulling him closer, and from the corner of his eye he glimpsed a single streak of crimson—no, more… his hands were covered in it. *Blood. Still wet. Whose blood?* A flash of golden hair, a bright V of pale skin, torn open and bursting with red. *No no no what did I—*

He squeezed his eyes shut as Hannibal moved against him, their bodies crushed together in an
animalistic embrace—but standing now, Will pulling the other man against him, his heart racing with what he was about to do. A high breeze whipped inside the shattered window, shaking Will to his core.

*Will you forgive me?* His own voice, barely above a whisper; Hannibal's hand against his own, warm, *alive*—but it was time for them to fall again; their forgiveness was already passed. Will's stomach dropped as he raised the pistol against the other man's temple—and Hannibal knew, he knew, and he still didn't move—

*Tell me, Will. How would you do it? Would you do it—even now?*

Will's eyes flew open. The hospital room spiraled wildly back into focus. He gasped—pulled away with a jerk. His palm stung where it had covered Hannibal's hand. He could still feel the ridges of the other man's knuckles.

"No," he whispered, more to himself than to Hannibal's voice in his head. He *hadn't* done it. Wouldn't. Not this time. He'd promised Hannibal an *if*. But to what end—or to *whose*? Escape seemed both inevitable and impossible, in every one of their thousand possible savage futures. Hannibal had *ensured* it.

"Mister Graham?" Barney's voice again, more pressing this time.

"He hasn't opened his eyes at all?" Will's voice sounded flat in his own ears. "No verbal response?" He turned to face the orderly, shoving his hands in his coat pockets to hide their trembling.

"Not as far as I know. I've been here since he was brought in. Doctors haven't seen him do anything. Neither've I."

"Good." Will stepped away from the bed. Tried to calm his racing heartbeat. "If he wakes up, don't tell him I was here. Don't mention me at *all*. You can ask Doctor Bloom to explain. I... I don't want to see him again."

Barney's forehead wrinkled, perturbed, then quickly relaxed into a neutral expression. "All right, Mister Graham. Talkin' to the patients is the doctors' business, anyways. Your secret's safe with me."

Will moved toward the door without replying. The initial flutter of lightness—of *anticipation*—he'd felt had been replaced by a heaviness that he recognized as *guilt*. It disgusted him. *There's nothing to feel guilty about,* he told himself, as Barney held the door for him. He'd made his choice; he'd allowed Hannibal to keep his life. It was more than anyone else seemed to want to give him.

*My life, yes, but not my freedom. Because you've taken yourself away from me.*

Will breathed in, irritation flaring beneath his exhaustion. *Get out of my head,* he told Hannibal's voice. To his surprise, it quieted.

Barney locked the door and nodded to the guards, who tipped their heads in return. He motioned silently for Will to follow him. They made their way back down the corridors lined with patient rooms and storage closets, past the nurse's break room and the ward pharmacy. Will hadn't seen most of the rest of the hospital, despite having spent three months inside its walls.

He glanced up at the signs on the doors with gloomy curiosity. PHARMACY A. JANITORIAL SUPPLY. CONFERENCE B-1. Deceptively normal; just like any other hospital building. No indication as to what kinds of nightmares lurked behind some of the other doors.

When they reached the first-floor reception area, Barney turned to Will with an amiable smile.
"Nice to meet you, Mister Graham. An honor. Sorry if that's weird to hear. Like I said, I heard some things. Doctor Bloom speaks highly. Doctor Schneider, not so much. But I believe Doctor Bloom."

An unexpected skitter of laughter burst from Will's throat. For a brief moment, the heated ache in his chest shifted. Cooled. He expected Barney to stick out his hand then, but he didn't. Will didn't mind. He sensed Barney didn't, either.

"Thanks," Will said. "Not really sure if I'm deserving of either opinion. But I appreciate you showing me out."

He moved to unclip his visitor's badge from his pocket, but was startled by a sudden exclamation.

"Oh! Almost forgot!" The orderly slapped a hand to his lab coat, pulled it open, and withdrew a small envelope from the inside pocket. He extended it toward Will, flap-side up.

"Mister Stonys gave this to me before your meeting. He said you were s'posed to have it. Guess he didn't wanna bother with it in front of everybody."

Will's brow furrowed. He took the offered packet with tentative fingers. "You know Stonys?" he asked, turning the envelope over.

"Yeah, he's come here a few times. Wanted to discuss Doctor Lecter's condition an' make sure I was takin' care of him. Actually, I heard some things about you from him, too. He said…"

But Will didn't hear what Hannibal's lawyer had told Barney. He stared down at the front of the envelope, transfixed at the writing he saw there. It was different stationary—prison-issue, plain—but the calligraphy that curved across the paper was unmistakable.

To be opened only by:
Will Graham
c/o Vadim Stonys, Esq.

It seemed that Hannibal, ever assiduous in his foresight, had left him a letter.
Besa

Chapter Notes

The story will be posted in nine parts over the next nine weeks. If you haven't read the prequel fics, *Of Putrefaction, Saccharine* and *Interlude: Diary of an Incubus*, have no fear: *Eve of Dreams* can be read as a standalone. However, summaries of the prequel stories can be found on this post. Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series *A Thousand Savage Futures* can be enjoyed on YouTube here. Also, the header arts for *Eve of Dreams* contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

—Thirteen days after the fall, late afternoon—

Waves of shimmering ochre sand stretched hundreds of miles in either direction. Wind rippled the dunes, scattering dust into the crevices of the tall rocks dotting the plateau.

To the two men crossing it, the Western Desert felt as empty as it looked. It offered no water to sustain the date palms and fruit trees that were abundant in the populated oases between here and Alexandria. Indeed, the barren sands held little living flora or fauna—except for the Marousian lion.

The great beast, which was rumored to possess a crimson mane and teeth as jagged as the Dolomites, had been attacking camps along the oases for months. It dragged entire families from their tents in the middle of the night, it was said. Mauled and devoured them under the light of the full moon.

It was this very beast that Hadrian and Antinous—skilled hunters, both—had come to slay.

The terrain had been difficult for the emperor, who had been in poor health. His physicians had consulted Pythia at Delphi at his request, assuring him that a cure would be found by the start of the harvest in Sextilis. It was now late Septem. The harvest season would end next month, three weeks before the festival of Osiris. Hadrian was beginning to lose hope for divine intervention, although he steadfastly refused to allow his illness to slow him.

Notwithstanding his declining health, Hadrian and his companion, the Bithynian youth Antinous, had made their way across the rocky plateau and into the valley. Now they were staked behind an
outcropping of black boulders, having left their horses beyond the dunes with the remainder of the royal hunting party. They shared the desire to take down the troublesome beast on their own. They knew this without exchanging words, as was often the case between them.

In the shade from the tall rocks, the emperor poured his young lover a cupful of wine from the flask on his belt. A servile gesture that made a point: *In this hunt, I hold you as my own. You are my protector, just as I am yours.*

Antinous, who was parched from their trek, drank half of it greedily. Then trickled the rest into his hands and splashed the dark liquid onto his arms and cheeks, laughing. It made trails in the dust on his tanned skin.

The emperor lowered his own cup and watched the boy's face change as he smiled. His jaw was still mostly smooth—as was desirable of an erômenos—but it wouldn't be for long. Antinous was nearly nineteen; technically a young man. Hadrian knew that some of his advisors had begun to whisper amongst themselves about this. He didn't care.

"You've wasted your libation," Hadrian said, echoing Antinous' smile. "What if you become thirsty later?"

"Is it a libation?" Antinous asked, a playful look widening his round, storm-colored eyes. "I only meant to disguise my scent, so that the beast wouldn't be able to smell me. But now you're calling me a god."

Hadrian paused, his eyes wandering across the borderless orange desert as he sipped at his wine. "You are like one, to me. You know this. And yet you question my devotion. It should be the other way around."

Antinous pushed aside the drape of Hadrian's cloak to rest his hand on his thigh. Hadrian looked into his face, where concern had replaced the jubilance in his expression.

"I know," the boy said. His voice was serious. A stray curl, brown as an olive stem, hung down over one eye. Hadrian reached out to brush it away. Antinous didn't blink.

"I worship every word from your lips, Augustus. Relish every command. I'm with you always—yours always. Not even death could separate us."

Hadrian was silent. His gaze moved to Antinous' wine-stained mouth. He licked his lips at the sight. Behind them, the dry wind whistled around the rocks, unbridled and impatient.

"Then show me."

Antinous leaned in at the words, eyes closing and lips slipping open as they met Hadrian's. The youth's fingertips reached up to sweep along the back of his neck, his jaw; his thumb caressing the swell of his bearded chin. Their tongues danced together with the flavors of wine and heat and honeyed passion in the darkest hours of the night.

A sound came to them on the wind, interrupting their embrace—a low, rumbling growl. Their quarry was near.

Hadrian broke away, nipping Antinous' lower lip and fixing him with a sly look. "It seems the beast has caught your scent, despite your efforts to confound him."

"Or he's looking for Dionysus." Antinous grinned. Despite the lion's approach, only the slightest trace of apprehension was visible in the young man's lust-darkened eyes.
Hadrian smirked at the intended double meaning. His *erômenos* was a bold one—and he, an overly enamored *erastês*. Antinous' hold on him had always defied sense, precedence, and decorum; Hadrian suspected it always would.

He regarded his companion with a solemn look. "The moment has come; we must do what needs to be done. Are your eyes open? Is your mind clear?"

Antinous grasped the hilt of his steel-tipped lance with a firm hand. He nodded, his eyes blazing.

The curl of the young hunter's fingers around his spear sparked a vision in Hadrian's head of the things that would happen between them later, in their tent, after they'd vanquished the accursed Marousian lion. *Too impassioned, indeed*, he thought, with a smirk. *So be it.*

Hadrian stood, offering a silent prayer to both Diana and Artemis, as his hand tightened around his own lance:

> O Great Goddesses, make my mind swift and sharp as your arrows, my spear steady and true as the silver moon that guards the night.

> Let not myself, nor the one beside me, fall. But should the Parcae halt their spinning, let Morta cut my thread, and not the thread of my beloved…

The lion growled again—harsh, predacious. Hadrian could hear him approaching on the other side of the rock barrier; could almost smell the knotted musk of its red coat and feel its heavy breath on his face—

"—Doctor Lecter?"

A voice in his ear. Quite unlike a lion's roar, but still louder than he would've preferred.

Hannibal's eyes fluttered open. The ochre desert vanished, along with the wine-stained, gray-eyed boy.

"Hey, Doctor Lecter." Barney's hand was on his shoulder, nudging him. "Sorry to wake you, but someone's here to see you."

The orderly's face was a mere foot from his. *False comfort*, he thought to himself. *Good.* Hannibal had found that it often came in handy. He was grateful for Barney's newfound level of trust, even at the expense of an enchanting dream—one he would've liked to continue, although he already knew how it ended.

Hannibal pushed the button to elevate his headboard, minding his bruised spine as the panel rose. He cast off his cloak of sleep as quickly as he could. He could tell by the light slanting onto the floor that it was past midday, moving towards sundown. His unscheduled naps were becoming more frequent with his prescribed higher dose of sedatives. He wondered, with vague amusement, if Alana and Doctor Schneider were trying to put him down discreetly, like a sick dog.

Barney stepped away from the bed. Hannibal blinked, clearing his eyes of their sleep-blurred vision. He recognized the tall figure in the doorway right as the orderly spoke.

"Mister Crawford, you can come in."

"Thank you, Barney." Jack's voice was neither grudging nor strained, as it had been the last time he and Hannibal had faced each other in the BSHCI. But Hannibal had been standing on his own two feet then, and there had been a solid inch of glass between them. Now, the playing field had been
inverted, and Jack was carrying fewer worries. Or so it seemed.

The former BAU director seemed to take into account these factors, as well as Hannibal's currently bedridden—but still straightjacket-less—state. He pulled a black plastic chair near the side of the bed, leaving roughly four feet in between. *Just out of biting range*, Hannibal noted.

Jack plunked into the chair with a calm but determined air. Barney, who was required to accompany all visitors to Hannibal's room per Alana's orders, sentried himself near the doorway with his arms clasped behind his back.

"Well, Jack. A pleasant surprise, you coming to visit."

"You know I'm not here to visit." Jack eyed the bed's guard rails as he spoke, unsmiling. He wasn't wearing a necktie with his suit coat, Hannibal noted. It appeared he was still unemployed by the FBI, or on holiday, or hadn't planned to strangle Hannibal today, as he'd once attempted in his Baltimore kitchen.

"And I'm not here to see how you're doing," Jack continued. "This is *not* a social call."

"Pity. It seems both you and I are at an increasing loss for friends."

Jack's eyes sharpened. He appeared taken aback by the careless, almost caustic, allusion to Will—which pleased Hannibal immensely.

Jack's expression hardened again as he folded his arms across his chest. "You put *yourself* here, Doctor Lecter. Both times. Don't forget that. This—all of this—is on you."

"Then I assume you're both surprised and disappointed to see me awake." Hannibal swallowed, his throat cracking. It was dry after sleeping so long during the day. "I imagine you would've preferred I had died also. Or at least remained in a permanent state of unconsciousness. I can hear the click and whirr of the wheels spinning in your brain, Jack. Don't forget *that*."

"Some water, Doctor Lecter? Mister Crawford?" Barney interrupted from the corner, trying to sound nonchalant. *He can tell I'm thirsty*, Hannibal thought. *Intuitive.* He'd been pleased to find the orderly carefully attuned to his needs since his reawakening. None of the other guards had treated him with such unbiased civility. To Hannibal, it was a welcome commodity in his current state of health. It was also the primary reason he showed Barney true kindness, and rarely entertained thoughts of killing him during his daily nursing rituals.

"No thank you, Barney. I'm fine," Hannibal said.

Jack didn't respond to the offer. He kept his gaze locked on Hannibal's, carefully controlled contempt simmering in his wide-set eyes.

"I didn't expect to see you conscious again, no. After we found the house—found you—and hauled you up from that beach—you looked as good as dead. Like something a dog chewed up and forgot about. The EMTs didn't expect you to make it to the hospital. And yet, here you are." He spread his arms in a short, exasperated sweep. "Defying chance and logic. Again."

"Two things more easily defined in their defiance than in their acceptance, perhaps," Hannibal replied, lifting his eyebrows. "And did Doctor Bloom and Doctor Schneider share your cheerful view on my missed meeting with the Reaper? I imagine Doctor Schneider looked quite surprised when Vadim Stonys delivered the specifics of my directive. As a doctor myself, it would've been wiser of me to leave Chiyoh with more legroom to stretch out her decision. Two weeks isn't very long in the lifetime of a coma."
"Cheerful? No," Jack said, flat. "I wouldn't say they were cheerful. Surprised—yes. No one really thought—or hoped—you'd come out of it. But I'm sure that doesn't come as much of a surprise. Especially considering everything that's happened to put you back in here."

Jack's eyes were heated. Smoldering. This clearly wasn't the direction he'd wanted the conversation to take. Fortunately for Hannibal, it was precisely the street he'd hoped to steer it down.

Now, however, it was time to change the subject—and quickly.

"Kicking me while I'm down. How considerate," Hannibal paused, feigning scorn at Jack's words. "But that's not why you came to see me. You no longer have the taste for gloating. And since I clearly don't have the advantage, I know you haven't come to challenge me. So tell me, Jack: what is it you want from me?"

Jack pressed his lips together. He worried the cuff of his sleeve under his jacket. A moment passed before he spoke. "I'm here because I want to ask—I want to make sure—that you're not going to go after Will's family again."

Hannibal winced at the name as it rolled off Jack's tongue, making sure the other man saw it.

"For all I know, you might've been responsible for his death," Jack said. "Indirectly or otherwise. There's no one left who knows the truth, except for you. And I know that's not something you're going to share with me. You'll take it to your death—whenever that actually comes." He paused. Hannibal pinpointed what looked like sincere regret in his eyes. Intriguing.

Jack cleared his throat. "Whatever happened between the two of you out there, after Dolarhyde, just let that be the end. Not for my sake. Not even for Molly and Walt's sake. But if Will was important to you—if you care about his memory—I'm asking you, for his sake, to let the ocean be his grave. Let it wash him out of you. Don't dredge him back up. He doesn't deserve that, and you know it."

Hannibal stared at Jack, waiting for the hard edge in his expression to falter. It didn't.

At his post by the doorway, Barney stood completely still, an occasional blink serving as the only alert to his presence. Hannibal could sense the orderly's mind dissecting their tête-à-tête with keen attention, as though watching a new sport for the first time. Barney's scrutiny was informative in itself. The orderly wasn't only interested; he was listening—carefully.

Hannibal turned his eyes from Barney to Jack, who was waiting for an answer.

"It appears you've underestimated my affection for Will, and overestimated my interest in his widow and stepson," he said, throwing him a sharp look. "As to your other intimation—while a scornfully inventive idea, I can tell you, without an ounce of regret, that I wasn't responsible for Will's death. Trying to prove that I did is just pissing in the wind, Jack. You have your own version of events in your head, playing out like a movie whose ending you can't quite grasp. I can't make your ending any clearer, because my words will never ring with any real truth in your mind. But I can give you a second story."

Jack smiled. "And why would you want to tell me another story, Doctor Lecter?" He shifted in his seat, folding his arms against his chest. The movement caused the chair legs to squeak against the linoleum.

"For perspective," Hannibal answered. "You came to me with honest questions, and I'll leave you with a straightforward analogy for what you want to know."

Jack looked to the side and chuckled under his breath—his trademark I-can't-belive-I'm-hearing-
"This shit snicker. Then turned back. "All right. Since I hope this is the last conversation we'll be having for a very long time, I'll listen. Shoot."

Hannibal smiled. Jack had shown no awareness of his own mistake, and even appeared to be in something of a tolerant mood. *Excellent on both counts.*

He allowed his mind to drift back to his dream; permitted his features to soften, for the sake of sincerity.

"Do you know the story of the Roman Emperor Hadrian and his young Greek consort, Antinous?"

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Hadrian? Didn't he build a wall?"

"The Picts' Wall, yes," Hannibal said. "And the Pantheon. The wall was to protect northwestern England from barbarian invaders. It now separates modern-day England and Scotland. But the story I'll tell you is about the emperor's hunt for a nightmarish beast—the Marousian lion. The creature had been terrorizing camps along the Western Desert, in today's northern Libya. It dragged children from their tents at night, ravaging them, and did the same to the mothers and fathers who went to look for them. Hadrian and his companion decided to pursue the lion, to put an end to its bloodthirsty reign and also engage in a little sport. You see, both men were avid hunters."

Hannibal studied Jack's face as he talked. The other man's mouth was curving into a small frown, clearly dismayed by the parallels emerging from Hannibal's words. Despite this, he neither moved to interrupt nor leave.

"They came upon the lion at midday, in a barren valley far from any oasis," he continued. "The emperor and his companion attacked the beast together, as one. Hadrian expertly wounded the animal, so as to allow Antinous the honor of dispatching it. But the beast gained the upper hand and leapt at Antinous, who faltered at the last second. Seeing that his companion was about to be mauled, Hadrian thrust his lance at the lion and killed it."

"Sounds almost like he planned it that way," Jack said, scorn hovering beneath the words. "He put Antinous in danger. Just to see what he would do."

"That's one theory," Hannibal said, matter-of-factly. "There are others. In finishing off the lion, Hadrian not only saved his consort's life, but he also maintained his dominance as a hunter. Some historians view the event as a kind of erotic power play. The emperor wouldn't have allowed the lion to kill his beloved young Greek, of course. But he *did* intend to make Antinous part of the sport. It also bound them closer together, as Hadrian had intended." Hannibal paused, allowing the words to soak in. "And so the two men conquered the infamous Marousian lion, and then went on to Egypt—where they encountered an even greater foe."

Jack chewed his lip. He seemed to be searching for an apposite comment. Hannibal imagined the story had inspired many.

In the end, he asked simply, "What did they find in Egypt?"

"Death," Hannibal answered. His eyes burned as he gazed at Jack. "While sailing down the Nile, Antinous fell overboard and drowned. Hadrian was overcome with heartbreak, and remained behind in Egypt for half a year while the boy's body was embalmed. He refused to leave him until he was properly buried."

Jack's eyebrow shot up. "Pretty stark contrast to how Hadrian played him with the lion."

Hannibal ignored the gibe. "He never stopped mourning him. In fact, the emperor had Antinous
declared a god. Temples sprung up in Besa, near where the boy perished, as well as in Rome. Hadrian's true affection for his consort was never so obvious until after Antinous was lost to him."

"Hm." Jack unfolded his arms. He paused on the edge of the seat, as if in contemplation. Then cleared his throat and pushed up from the chair, a little stiffly. "Unfortunate story. Hopefully Hadrian figured out how to let go. If not for his own sake, for the sake of the empire." He shot a pointed look at Hannibal.

Hannibal tilted his head. "Mourning takes longer when death isn't prepared for, Jack," he said, without a trace of sympathy.

He watched the words pierce; saw how they stuck in Jack's ears, stinging. He imagined Bella's lovely smile flitting through Jack's mind, wide and effortless and forever lost.

The look Jack gave him was wistful, and not as thick with disdain as Hannibal expected. "You're right, Doctor Lecter. I don't have the taste for gloating anymore. But I hope your stories can comfort you more than your memories will."

Hannibal swallowed, in the guise of having suffered an equal hit. It was important that Jack walked away believing he'd had the last word.

Barney straightened to attention as Jack turned to leave. "I can walk you down to reception if you like, Mister Crawford," he offered.

"No, Barney, thanks. I know the way out." Jack threw a last look over his shoulder at Hannibal. A look that said, Don't forget what I said, or so help me God, this definitely won't be our last conversation.

Hannibal returned it with a blink. Whether that meant yes or no was up to the other man to decide.

He liked the way Jack strode out of his room, Barney holding the door, a trace of confidence in his step. It bid well for the shards of truth that were beginning to collect in Hannibal's mind. They had begun to take on a familiar form—a curved bowl; a delicate, U-shaped handle. Its white ceramic sheen glowed inside the darkness of his brain like a beacon.

Barney turned to him with a calm expression. "Sorry for havin' to wake you. I know you've been tired."

Hannibal allowed the placid veneer to drop from his face. The short conversation, though illuminating, had taken most of his energy. He'd never tired so quickly before. It was frustrating how much the body took from itself while it was healing.

"It's all right, Barney," he answered, with a weary glance. "And I believe you have another dose of tranquilizers for me. It's been nearly five hours, by my estimate."

A half-guilty look passed over Barney's face. He reached into his lab coat and withdrew a small container with the evening mixture of pills that Doctor Schneider had prescribed.

"Thought I'd wait 'til after Mister Crawford left. Figured you'd wanna be alert while you were talkin'." The orderly filled a plastic cup with water from the sink against the wall.

"I appreciate the thought." Hannibal took the offered cup and the handful of multicolored tablets from Barney's dry palm. "Still, we wouldn't want the good doctor to think I wasn't taking my medicine, would we?"
He swallowed the pills in one gulp, and then drained the rest of the cup in two more, grateful for the slide of cool water against his throat. Hannibal licked his lips and handed the cup to Barney.

"I'd like some time alone now, if you don't mind. We can attend to the other medical necessities in an hour or two, during your normal rounds. Is that acceptable?"

Barney gave a half-shrug. "S'all right by me, Doctor Lecter. As long as you're comfortable for now."

The orderly's shoulders sagged a little as he refilled the water cup and set it on the table next to the bed. Hannibal could tell that Barney had hoped for a debriefing on his conversation with Jack. Endearing, if slightly inappropriate; although it indicated that he and Barney had indeed taken a mutual interest in each other. This, too, could come in handy, Hannibal knew.

"I'll be on pager if you need anything before then."

"Thank you, Barney."

The orderly moved toward the door, fishing inside his lab coat for his keyring. Then stopped as Hannibal was toggling down the headboard.

"Doctor Lecter?"

"Mm?" he replied, simultaneously exhaling with relief. His spine had begun to ache from the sharp sitting position. He'd needed to see Jack's face at eye level, though. Every blink, every twist of the mouth, was a tell—another piece of the puzzle. The picture was becoming solid now; it was no longer a guessing game of colors and curves and lines.

"That story you told Mister Crawford—about the lion and the Greek kid. Was he the same one you were drawing yesterday? You said he was a hunter."

Hannibal smiled. "The very same. And you imagined him to be a prince. Now you know that he was also a god."

He watched Barney's face for any sign of revelation, but the orderly's expression remained passively curious.

"Seems a little like one'a those dreams we talked about," Barney said, sliding his hand down the doorframe. "The kind that bleeds over into reality."

Hannibal lifted his eyebrows, inviting elaboration. But Barney dropped his hand and turned towards the hall, putting an end to the thought.

"I'll be by later, Doctor Lecter," he said, stepping into the hallway.

"Yes. See you then."

He listened to the faint jangle of keys on the other side of the steel door as Barney locked him in and left to go about his orderly's business.

Hannibal lay very still. A smile crept across his face as a near-perfect silence—marred only by the whirr of ventilation from the machines—washed over the room.

Chiyoh was still in Lithuania—of that, he was sure. Unconscious or not, he would've known if she'd visited the hospital. He could always feel her presence in the back of his mind, like the fluttering of sparrow's wings; like the smooth chill of a rifle barrel in the hand. He was also now sure that she
hadn't been the one to execute his living will.

Alana wouldn't have sought Jack's help as a mediator, he knew. She didn't require one; she never had. And Jack had readily—and rather stupidly—confirmed Hannibal's suggestion about Doctor Schneider. The good doctor had indeed been taken aback by the strict terms outlined in his directive. That meant Jack had been listening when Vadim had read it aloud.

A sharp tingle skittered along the femoral nerve in his groin and down his left thigh. Hannibal's smile broadened as his heartbeat quickened inside his chest—sensation atop sensation. Only one common denominator existed between Jack, Alana, Doctor Schneider, and Vadim Stonys that could bring all of them together in one room.

Will Graham was alive.

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--Thirteen days after the fall, late evening--

The fire sizzled and popped as Will stirred the logs with the poker. It was cold in the house. He and Molly had been trying to save on heating by adding extra quilts to the beds. The temperature had plummeted after the storm as the snow had started to melt, and the northern Virginia winter had snapped from fluffy and picturesque to dry and humorless in the space of a day.

Despite the chill, Molly had come down to the living room an hour before, barefoot, a pale blue slip hanging loosely from her shoulders. Randy followed beside her. He'd trotted around the front of the couch and pushed his wide black nose into Will's palm. The dog sniffed and nodded, seemingly satisfied with Will's smell.

Molly had laid her hand atop Will's good shoulder. Her fingers were cool, although her palm was warm—a paradox of body heat. When he'd turned to look at her, her eyes were searching. Anticipating. Like beams from a lighthouse prism, scanning the coastline for an expected ship. Will had curled his fingers around Molly's hand and squeezed. His sea was empty tonight, he knew. She knew it, too.

"Going to bed soon?" He'd tried to make his voice sound casual. It came out pathetically flat.

"Yeah. Probably." Behind him, he could hear Molly's tired exhale. Randy ran back around to her, snuffling and whining for attention. "Too damn cold to do anything else." The bullmastiff yawned as Molly reached down to scratch his head.

"Mm." Will leaned back with the murmured assent, resting his head on the back of the couch and tucking his cheek against Molly's arm. He allowed his eyelids to slide closed.

"Except…"

Will opened his eyes. Rolled them up to look at her. He watched a grin blush across her lips—which, to his upside-down view, appeared as a frown. He could see how hard she was trying.

"Come with me to bed?"

Will swallowed. Forced a smile. He tried to envision Molly's thighs clutching his hips, Molly's hair
brushing across his face in open-mouthed pleasure. In his mind, he saw only the book with the envelope hidden inside.

"In a little bit," he said. "Going to let the fire die down first."

An awkward pause, during which several indiscernible expressions crossed Molly's face.

"Okay." She patted his hand, then let hers drop. "Might wanna bring the throw with you. The weather guy on W-TOP said the river could freeze."

"Sure." His voice faltered as she moved away, blonde waves sweeping across her shoulders. Then, in afterthought, he added, "Keep the bed warm for me."

The hint of an invitation. She heard it. Stopped. Will rolled his head against the back of the couch to look at her. She could see he was trying, too.

She turned away, the ghost of a smile lingering on her lips. Then she was gone.

Now, with the witching hour threatening any hope of making good on his innuendo, Will turned his eyes back to the fire. It was crackling with renewed light and the extra log he'd put on. He slouched deeper into the couch and shivered against the cold, old leather. He couldn't remember the last time it had snowed so much, so soon before Thanksgiving. The fickle Virginia climate had defied the late-autumn forecast for chilly and dry. For weeks, it had been only icy, damp, and dark—not unlike the Atlantic waves, drenched with salt and blood.

As far as Hannibal believed, the waves still frothed with Will's blood.

Alana's call four nights ago had shattered what little reserve he'd had to burn Hannibal's unopened letter. It had also set the world off balance—his world, tilting and wobbling out of orbit—but not his and Molly's. Not yet. He hadn't told her what Alana had called to say.

Will... it happened. Fucking impossible, but it did. Those were Doctor Schneider's exact words, by the way.

His heart had flip-flopped inside his chest, which had felt suddenly hollow. He didn't—he's not—dead? Is he?

Alana's laugh was sarcastic. No. Not in the least. Hannibal Lecter is very much alive, awake, and kicking. Well, not kicking, per se. He has no mobility below the waist, as Doctor Schneider suspected. But his mental faculties are remarkably and, unfortunately, intact.

Will's chest had hitched. He'd exhaled, releasing the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Not dead. Hannibal was alive. Awake. Aware.

Did you tell him what we—?

Yep. I sold him the story. He bought it. He thinks you're dead. Body unrecovered. He was pretty disoriented when he woke up. I don't think he took it well. But it's hard to tell sometimes—you know that. You spent enough time in each other's heads.

Will grimaced. He decided not to fault her for being passive-aggressive. He knew she'd been hoping she'd never have to make this particular phone call.

Thanks, Alana. I appreciate it. Just... let me know if anything changes.
Changes? You mean with his medical condition, or with him believing you're dead? A terse pause. I'm sure Vadim Stonys will call you if anything needs to be done with Hannibal's directive on your end. Though I doubt it, since he's cognizant now.

Will swallowed. I meant the second thing, primarily. But either. Whatever you'd want to know if you were me, do me a favor and let me know. Okay? Just so I'm aware of what we're dealing with.

Alana sighed. Look. If you'll do me the favor of not pretending that you're in any way obligated to deal with Hannibal again—which, by the way, I definitely advise that you don't—I'll do you the favor of not pretending to know what, exactly, you'd want to know. Or why. Especially since you didn't choose to see him when you were here.

Will's eyebrows jumped. It seemed Barney hadn't told Alana about their impromptu visit to the medical ward. Nor, apparently, had she or Doctor Schneider bothered to review the CCTV footage of Hannibal's room. Interesting.

But yeah, she continued, sounding tired now. I'll let you know if anything important happens.

Thanks, Alana. Good luck.

'Night, Will. I'd say sleep well, but...

Yeah. I know. You too.

He'd tapped the END CALL button on the screen. Almost immediately, he'd felt the black waves rushing into the calm stillness of his and Molly's bedroom, sweeping, swirling, surrounding. Ice-cold, saline-thick—but no longer suffocating. They lifted him up, just above the waterline, where his hand broke the skein of murky ocean water to taste the frigid sea air.

There they were again, himself and Hannibal, spit back onto the beach. Hands and knees covered in gravel, clothes soaked in blood—theirs, Dolarhyde's, and the blood of others to come.

Will shivered at the flashback. Even as a sailor and a fisherman, never in his life had Will been so eager to be out of the water.

The dark hours of that morning were blurred in a haze of misremembered dreams and memories: the heaviness of Hannibal's bloodied skull in Will's palm as he tucked his torn shirt fabric underneath it. Hazel eyes rolling as the other man's limbs thrashed under his body, electrified by the sudden seizure. His own voice screaming at Hannibal to stop. Then picking their way up the cliff, arm in arm to steady each other, as the Atlantic frothed angrily below them. Hannibal, wrapped in a towel in front of the fire, weak and warming; Will unable to take his eyes from the regal slope of his shoulders, the golden shine of his skin.

Glimpses of things that hadn't happened. Things so bright and alarming, he could still feel their teeth in him.

He also remembered stumbling up the winding path on his own, too shocked to mind his footing, his blood-drained body weakening with every step. And Hannibal's unconscious form, growing smaller every time he looked back—thirty, now fifty, now seventy feet below. Reaching the top, alone. Numb. Staggering into the kitchen. Jack's soft voice in his ear: You did the right thing. The receiver dropping from his fingers, swinging on its cord like a hanged man. Please just get here fast...

Which reality was the truth? Which was the dream?

That depends on which one you want to keep. Hannibal's voice inside his head: steady, coaxing.
But where does the difference between dreams and memories come from? Waves embraced Will like an infant, freshly birthed, caressing him with foam; his cry lost to the crash of the sea.

You can't answer that question on your own, Will.

Water between them again, salt and skin and blood dividing and uniting them, even as they clung together on the bluff, in the water, in the sweat of their fused bodies. And heat—reluctant heat—lingering long after the sea and circumstance and the FBI had parted them.

But he'd been cold—so cold—when Jack had shaken him awake him on the kitchen floor. His hypothermia had been too moderate to cloak him in false warmth; his blood loss, too devastating for his body to generate its own heat.

Fire and ice. There's never any in-between. Not when it comes to me and you.

Will sighed. Slumped back against the sofa. He was tired of remembering. Of reliving. He'd told Molly he would come to bed… hours ago. The fire, though, was comforting. Familiar.

His eyelids drooped with the heat. He could see the flames reflecting on the polished linoleum floor of Hannibal's cliffside house. Tongues of light and shadow mirrored inside the speckled tile, as if in a dream. He'd sat beside the piano for hours, struggling to put something back together—a clock? An old one. Wooden. This was something he could fix; a puzzle he would eventually solve, so unlike the enigma that he and Hannibal had become. Old strangers with new lives, digging for a years-old scent.

The taste of scotch swelled thick on his tongue—a memory. The invisible weight of tiny, wooden wheels and rusted springs in his hands, like the decimated entrails of some small animal. His eyes slid all the way closed, his body swaddled in firelight and warmth.

Sharp scents, layered atop one another: olive oil, champagne, salt, and skin. Wetness around his feet, a dull ache between his thighs. Hot breath against the back of his neck. The slick slide of teeth.

Hannibal's teeth.

Hannibal's hands clutching around his hips; the other man's chest bent hard against the small of his back, rising and falling. Breathless.

"Did you manage to fix the clock?"

Will's eyes flew open as his lips shaped the remembered reply. I couldn't figure it out.

A spasm coiled through his body, jerking him upright. There hadn't actually been a clock. They'd drank wine by the hearth before Dolarhyde had shot through the glass, but the moment had been brief—too brief. And Hannibal had never held him like that. Had never touched him like that. It wasn't a memory, but it wasn't a dream, either.

Something undefinable. Something in between.

A heated shiver ran through Will's body, settling in his spine. He scrubbed his hands across his face. Exhaustion was catching up with him, he knew. He'd drifted off for only a moment, and yet he'd slipped back into it again—the other world. The hallucinations—visions—whatever they were—were coming faster and faster. Shooting up from the darkness behind his eyelids as soon as he closed them… sometimes even before.

This wasn't sleepwalking; this was dreamwalking. Memories turned inside out and relived in
daylight, pulling him both forward and backward in time.

It was entirely possible, Will thought, that he was going crazy.

He pushed himself up from the couch. He needed to move. Needed to not think.

He went to the kitchen and poured himself two fingers of Laphroaig in the dark. He brought the tumbler to his lips even before he found himself drifting past the bookcase, reaching for the one volume he knew had been recently opened.

It was an old college textbook of Molly's that she'd held onto—mostly for the artwork, she'd said. He could remember setting up the shelves with her, unpacking their books, laughing as they began to transform their house into a home.

He swallowed, relishing the sweet, familiar burn of the whiskey. It was his first drink in four days.

Will turned the book over in his hand. It was a hardcover. Heavy. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome.* Only a faint trace of dust along the edges, unlike most of the books in his and Molly's jumbled collection. Jammed into the middle of the tome was Hannibal's letter. The envelope was undetectable from the outside, but it had already stretched the inner binding with its thickness, dividing the volume in two.

Will tucked the textbook under his arm and took it, along with his glass of scotch, over to the oak-slab coffee table. The whuff of quick steps on carpeting made him turn—but it was only Winston, up from his bed in the living room.

"Hey Winston," he said quietly. He sifted a hand through the mottled scruff on the back of the dog's neck. "What're you doing up, huh?"

Winston panted, his bottle-brush tail swishing along the floor like a mop. The movement stirred a small cloud of dog hair and dust that floated into the air, shimmering in the firelight.

"That's a good boy." Will reached for his glass. He took another sip and gave Winston a conciliatory pat. The scotch seared down his throat, smoky and sharp—a missed feeling. The dog curled up at Will's feet with a sigh and laid his head on his paws, his long nose pointed toward the fire.

Will picked up the book. He flipped idly through the first half, noting the lack of dog-eared corners and underlines. These were pages softened by age, not by love. The textbook still looked somewhat new, despite being more than twenty years old.

Amidst the old architectural photos and colorful maps that sprawled across the pages, an illustration caught Will's eye. He stopped. Flipped back. Peered down. The picture showed two men in a vast desert, one young and curly-haired, the other older and bearded and wearing a laurel wreath. Between them reared an enormous, snarling lion. Their spears were raised to strike, but they weren't looking at the lion. The men's eyes were locked on each other's.

Will squinted at the chapter heading at the top of the page. *Hadrian's Travels,* it read.

He frowned. The picture had stirred something in his memory, although he knew he hadn't seen it before. It felt, rather than looked, familiar—like too many other things he'd experienced over the past two weeks.

He reached over for his drink. The last few pages turned stiffly, of their own accord, pressured by the bulge of the envelope beneath them. Will found himself staring past the rim of his glass at another familiar sight—one that stirred an equal awareness of déjà vu and memory:
To be opened only by:

Will Graham
c/o Vadim Stonys, Esq.

The cursive looped and curled in front of his eyes like a nest of young vipers. Hannibal's perfect penmanship looked absurdly formal on the plain prison stationary. A dark spot stained one corner where the snow had melted through Will's coat pocket on his walk to the BSHCI parking lot.

He swallowed. He loosened the letter from the book's spine with careful fingers, as though the words might jump from the paper and bite him. He slid his index finger under the lip, unsealing it, and unfolded the single sheet of paper inside. His hands, he noticed, were trembling. Will told himself it was the alcohol. His first drink in four days; the slight buzz was inevitable. It certainly wasn't anticipation.

Yeah, sure. That's why you hid the letter from Molly. That's why you haven't told her he's awake.

At his feet, Winston whined in tacit agreement, but didn't stir.

A coil of words slithered from the page, precisely penned in black ink:

Dear Will,

Should this letter find its way into your hands, it will be during a time of uncertainties and unknowns —perhaps even chaos. I will be unable to correspond or guide you beyond the words written here. While I admit to this being intentional on my part, it is not in an attempt to instigate emotional anarchy. I only wish to bestow upon you a gift, in return for the many that you have given me.

Like all those who love, I could not help myself. I wanted not only to want, but also to be wanted in return. Perhaps that was my greatest mistake. When I knelt down in the Virginia snow, I imagined that doing so might inspire that spark in you, however belatedly. But I could not force the butterfly to drink from the flower, just as I could not predict what would hatch from the chrysalis.

You are your own man, Will, and you know who you are.

I ask you now to make a choice—not for me, but for both of us. It will become part of who you are, as much as it will define what I will become. I have faith that you will do what you believe is best.

I leave myself with you, wholly. Your decision is my privilege.

Yours,

Hannibal Lecter

Will stared down at the paper in his hands. It suddenly seemed a fragile thing, no longer ripe with fang and warning. He read it again, unable to tear his eyes from the words. They looped and blurred in the dancing firelight, pernicious in their abbreviated eloquence.

His eyes burned. Not the Laphroaig. Not the heat from the fire. He blinked and felt wetness.

He reached a shaking hand to his mouth. Longing and anger boiled hot and tangled beneath the
surface, just as when he'd glimpsed Hannibal lying in the hospital bed, unconscious and alone in the blackness of his injured brain.

Not unconscious now, though—aware. Awake, or perhaps asleep, dreaming of death; Will's imagined one, or his own to come, alone in a prison cell in the dank, lightless basement of the BSHCI.

His eyes flashed across the page again. *I could not help myself.* In truth, Will knew, neither could he. When he'd returned to the hospital the first time, after Jack had asked for help on the Tooth Fairy case, he'd already known that he was beyond saving.

He'd tried to explain it to Molly, in so many words—and still she'd let him go. *Urged* him. *I'll be different when I get back,* he'd told her, knowing that Hannibal's pull was akin to that of a star on the cusp of supernova. A soon-to-be black hole. Hannibal's gravity had always been too dense for Will to resist. Jack knew it, Alana knew it, and Molly had known it, too—or, at least, knew enough to realize that a part of him wouldn't be coming back to Great Falls.

And now his and Hannibal's orbits had overlapped again, in a design both calculated and coincidental. *Like all those in love…* Was that what the universe was driven by? Flame and fierceness, revolution and combustion? Or was it the gentler kind of love, the kind with soft eyes and careful words, and passion that slowly ebbed to affectionate monotony over time?

He didn't know. He doubted he ever would. But he understood *now* how different the admission felt coming from Hannibal's pen than from Bedelia's mouth. *Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you, and find nourishment at the very sight of you?*

*Yes,* the cobwebbed words seemed to whisper. *I did. I do. I always will.*

Will tilted back his glass. The whiskey slid down his throat with a dark, honeyed sluice. Beyond the coffee table, the fire sparked and popped. He lifted his eyes from Hannibal's letter to the hearth, where the flames flickered amid the blackened shards of wood.

Fire was the great destroyer of both nature and humanity. It could take down entire forests in a single day; could swallow homes, lives, in a matter of minutes. But it could *create* as well as consume. Replenish as well as destroy.

*Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.* He recalled Hannibal's eyes, glowing with a preternatural shine, as he'd spoken the words at the dinner table in Aukštaitija. His lips had curled in a secret smile—one that was only for him. *Picasso. Do you remember, Will?*

Light from the chandelier had reflected in his wine glass, scattering across the table in a white-hot burst of stars. It had reminded Will of the too-bright swarm of tactical flashlights illuminating Hannibal's bruised face, as he'd knelt down in the muddy driveway. He'd turned to Will as he'd clasped his hands behind his head, knees buckling against the wet snow, never to rise free again.

*I want you to know exactly where I am. And where you can always find me.*

Will closed his eyes. He was both found and lost in Hannibal's words—fully, forever.

*I knew. I know. I always will.*
Nearly fifty miles away, inside a small, dark room in the heart of the BSHCI medical ward, Hannibal's eyes snapped open.

Inside his groin, he felt an uncomfortable, obtrusive sensation. Something foreign; something that shouldn't be there.

More alarming still, it felt as though the lower half of his body was on fire. Flames danced beneath his skin, licking along his thighs, his calves—alighting in the nerve endings in his toes.

Sleepiness slipped from his body like a silk robe. His hands flew to the guard rails on either side of him, clutching and shaking, pulling himself to a sitting position. He didn't need the support. His pelvis scooted back on its own, spine sore but curving as it was meant to, the muscle memory of movement returning in a single, glorious sweep.

The flames leapt higher, dancing through his hips, his groin, his empty belly. He could feel the healing hole in his abdomen where the Dragon's bullet had pierced him. To his surprise, it was tender. A gasp slid from his mouth as his right foot jerked involuntarily, stretching the cloth strap tethering his ankle to the bed. Legs, feet, groin, guts—he could feel all of it.

His chest swelled with a burst of triumph. Then he remembered the cameras.

It was dark in the room and he'd moved only the one foot; he was sure of that. He'd have to remain still, as still as physically possible. The CCTV cameras wouldn't have picked up much, but the discomforting ache in his groin was growing with every second. The catheter would have to come out.

If he'd been a free patient in any other hospital, he would've been given the option to change the device himself. However, the BSHCI didn't allow inmates to tamper with their own medical equipment. Too many sharp ends and dangerous fluids.

If he removed it now, the cameras would record it. Doctor Schneider would want to know why, and his newly regained mobility would be discovered.

But there was also Barney. Which meant there was a chance he could hide his un-paralyzed state from Alana and Doctor Schneider for a few days. Enough time to probe, to think, to make a plan. To warm himself in the weak light from the block windows a bit longer, before Alana banished him to the bowels of the basement.

He eased back against the headboard and reached for the call button on the side of his bed. He kept his lower body very still, aware more than ever of the camera trained on him. The call would go directly to Barney, who Hannibal knew was on overnight duty.

He laid back against the pillows spaced beneath his neck and spine and waited for the orderly to arrive. He forced his tingling legs to go lifeless, fighting against the urge to move, to touch, to slap at the burning sensations still buzzing along his skin.

It took Barney only six minutes to arrive. Hannibal inhaled, steadying himself at the sound of the keyring jangling against the lock on the other side of the door.

He and Barney had forged a steady, even semi-confidential, rapport over the past four days. The orderly was one of those who possessed the rare combination of self-assuredness, simplicity, and easy fascination, without the need for sciolism. He fed on Hannibal's eloquence and infamy like a babe at a teat, and Hannibal suckled him in exchange for small favors, such as the gradual dropping
of the orderly's guard. But had their acquaintanceship grown enough roots to coax Barney into willing obfuscation? The moment would tell.

Hannibal swallowed as the door opened and the orderly stepped inside, his lab coat and scrubs glowing bright amid the gloom.

"Doctor Lecter? Everything okay?" Barney moved toward the bed, pocketing his keyring. Hannibal noticed that he hadn't relocked the door from the inside, as he usually did.

The thought entered Hannibal's mind of stabbing Barney through the throat with the nearest sharp object—his drawing pencil, resting atop the table to his right—and then fleeing the room as the orderly choked on his pierced windpipe. The idea lingered, but only for a moment. After two weeks of total paralysis, he knew his legs would likely be too weak to support him, the muscles softened by the onset of atrophication. Besides, there were too many guards, too many cameras. He'd be apprehended before he made it out of the medical ward. And then Barney would be severely injured, or dead; and Hannibal would have to contend with whatever brute of a new orderly Alana threw at him.

No, that scenario wouldn't do. Not at all.

Hannibal swallowed, thirst thick in his throat from anticipation and sleep. "It seems I could use your assistance. I'm in a bit of pain."

Barney's brow furrowed as he stepped closer. "What's goin' on? Bedsore? Back hurtin'?"

"Not quite," he answered, darting his eyes in a quick check of the room's perimeter. One camera, two feet to the left of where the inside wall met the ceiling, just as he'd remembered. It was strategically positioned to see behind the open door—but not to show the entirety of the bed, if someone were standing in front of it. "It's, ah, an emergency. I require help to the bathroom."

"Oh. Okay. No problem, Doctor Lecter. We can get you changed with some fresh sheets after, too."

The orderly rounded the left side of the bed and reached down to pull off the blankets.

"Barney."

"Yeah?" He stopped, immediately on alert at the other man's tone.

Hannibal lowered his voice. "Stand right there. Right where you are."

Barney did, his eyebrows knitting a deep line in the middle of his forehead.

"Can you see this?" Hannibal moved his knee two inches to the right. Then back to the left. Barney's eyes bulged as he stared at the shape of Hannibal's leg underneath the blanket.

"I can." Barney's voice dropped to a near-reverent whisper. His eyes traveled up to meet Hannibal's. They stared at each other for a moment, each weighing the other's imagined thoughts and strategies in silence.

Barney lowered his arm in front of his own waist. He pointed to indicate his groin, then raised his eyebrows in questioning. Hannibal gave a slight nod. He kept his eyes trained on the orderly's face, watching each micro-expression as it crossed his features—understanding, vacillation, and then, finally, resolution.

Barney's forehead relaxed as his mouth slackened to a small, pensive frown.
"Let's get you to the bathroom, Doctor Lecter," he said, his voice rising to a normal volume. "Then we'll get you cleaned up."

"Thank you, Barney."

The orderly unstrapped Hannibal’s ankles from the rails and lifted him, wrapping a sturdy arm around his back and the other under the bend of his knees. Hannibal winced as the wound in his stomach protested at the movement. If Barney had entertained any thought that Hannibal's renewed mobility might've enabled him walk on his own, he'd chosen to pretend otherwise—hopefully, for the benefit of the CCTV and not for Hannibal himself.

Barney lowered Hannibal into the wheelchair beside the bed, unhooked his fluids bag, and rolled him into the adjoined bathroom. Along with the patient meeting rooms, the bathrooms in the medical ward were some of the few spaces in the hospital where cameras hadn't been installed. Most of the inmates who found themselves in the medical ward had already been incapacitated by something or someone. As such, the risk of illicit activity taking place during routine toilet activities was deemed low. ICU care also demanded a necessary level of privacy. As a former emergency room surgeon, Hannibal had seen even seasoned nurses wince at some of the intimate and odiferous tasks they were required to perform. The patients themselves had usually been howling or crying.

Barney shut the bathroom door and turned to Hannibal with an awed look.

"You can move your legs."

"As of ten minutes ago, yes."

Barney stared at him, chewing thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek. "You're not paralyzed anymore."

"It would appear not."

A pause as they evaluated each other again, Hannibal gripping the wheelchair's armrests in an imitation of fragility, as he awaited the orderly's next words. Barney standing, his arms dangling loosely at his sides, staring down at his not-so-incapacitated charge in surprise.

"You don't want Doctor Bloom an' Doctor Schneider to know. They'll move you out of the med ward. That's why you had me stand in front of the camera."

Hannibal smiled. Clever boy. And more perceptive than he’d imagined.

"Yes," he answered truthfully. He swallowed again, his throat parched now, his groin throbbing in irritation. "And I hope I'm correct in my assumption that your discretion right now means that you'll share this secret with me. I believe Doctor Schneider has scheduled a spinal MRI for next Wednesday morning. That gives me six days—six precious days—of sunlight and privacy, before being exiled to the darkness of my former cell." He paused. "I missed the sun immensely during the last three years, Barney. I thought I would never see its face again."

Barney's gaze was steady, his countenance betraying no support or rejection of the idea.

"I promise complete discretion, in exchange for your assistance," Hannibal continued, his voice low. "If I'm discovered sooner—which I'll try very hard not to be—I'll insist you didn't know." He paused. Lifted his eyes to Barney's in earnest beseeching. "Would you help me, Barney? For just a few days more?"

Barney folded his arms loosely over his chest. He looked away, towards the closed bathroom door,
and then back to the right. His eyes alighted on his own reflection in the mirror. Hannibal watched as his mouth quirked. One eyebrow lifted in deliberation. Then the orderly sighed and ducked his chin, his mind seemingly made up. He turned back to Hannibal.

"I'll try t'get you a little more sunlight," he said softly. "We can work together. I think I can trust you, Doctor Lecter." He nodded again, as if to confirm his own decision.

"You can, Barney. Believe me."

"Would you swear on it?"

"I've already promised you my fidelity, but yes. I would."

"Would you swear on Will Graham's grave?"

Hannibal's mouth curled in mild irritation. As far as anyone knew, Will Graham had no grave, because his body had never been recovered. The reason being, of course, that he was likely still alive—a fact to which Hannibal had not been made privy, either by Will himself or by anyone else who'd seen him over the past thirteen days.

A sudden thought pierced the gnawing pains in his throat and pelvis. Had Barney talked to Will? If the orderly had seen Will, spoken with him, it could mean that Barney's reasons for agreeing to lie weren't motivated by Hannibal's plea alone. Could it be that Will's intentions were different than Hannibal had anticipated? Different than Alana, Jack, Doctor Schneider, and the rest of them had been led to assume? Or did it simply mean that Barney was having fun playing triple agent?

Hannibal exhaled, pain pricking every corner of his body. A dull headache had begun to undulate in the back of his skull. Too much medication and too little food to cushion it, and far too much time spent in sleep.

He coughed, careful to keep any sign of suspicion off his face. "I'll swear on the life Will lived, but not on his death," Hannibal said, his voice solemn. "And I don't swear lightly."

"Okay then." Barney uncrossed his arms. "I believe you. We're good."

Hannibal shifted in the wheelchair's curved seat. A shudder washed over him, making him feel faint and a little sick to his stomach. The tingling sensations in his legs had trickled away. Now he felt merely drained.

"More immediately, Barney, I need you to remove the catheter, as it's becoming quite uncomfortable. And I may, ah... actually require some assistance with the toilet." Hannibal blinked as another wave of nausea overtook him. He shivered in the thin, shin-length hospital gown. "I don't believe my legs will support my weight at present."

Barney immediately knelt down, sensing the urgency in Hannibal's words. His eyes flickered over Hannibal's countenance, glimpsing the fatigue there. With gentle hands, he nudged the fabric over his lap and straightened the catheter tubing, instantly easing the ache between his legs. Hannibal sighed. Better.

"Sorry, Doctor Lecter. Lemme grab some gloves and the syringe, and I'll get it out for you in a sec'. And then we'll do whatever else needs t'be done."

Hannibal rested his head against the cushioned back of the chair as Barney left to gather the necessary supplies. He willed his mind to remain alert despite the uncomfortable sensation he knew was coming. He could feel his heart beating in his temples, throbbing over and over to the same
He wondered vaguely if, and when, Vadim had given Will his letter, and if Will had read it. If he'd burned it, like the last one.

*I ask you now to make a choice—not for me, but for both of us... I leave myself with you, wholly.* Hannibal's eyes slid closed as he recalled his own words with perfect clarity. He breathed in through his nose, long and deep. The scents of all the world seemed to fly to him, rushing into his nostrils from their hiding places. Odors both putrid and saccharine—stifling, ugly, and sweet.

He could smell Alana's four-day-old lie through the closed door, and it was fresh this time. The scent was no longer layered with the reek of cognitive dysfunction that had plagued him. *They haven't found him,* she'd said, her eyes darting furtively. *Some of his blood and clothing washed up, but not his...*

*Body,* Hannibal's mind filled in. He exhaled, releasing the scent through his mouth and catching the tip of it on his teeth. He nibbled on it, sampling the fetid aftertaste.

His own body and mind, which were reforming themselves in stages, would come first. Then Will's. If his Antinous was indeed alive, then no beast nor body of water—nor any living person—would prevent him from blazing a path back to their last embrace.

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*–Fourteen days after the fall–*

When he opened his eyes, it was freezing, and it was nearly nightfall. Will blinked. *That's not right—it's supposed to be morning.*

The sinking sun, visible in violent streaks of orange and red outside the tall Renaissance windows, said otherwise.

Dense, scratchy wool covered his arms. He could feel hardwood firm beneath his hips. Will's body jerked as his brain finally caught up with his eyesight. It was cold now, just like his and Molly's house. But this wasn't their bedroom. This wasn't Great Falls.

He pushed himself up, scooting backwards and knocking his head against the carved walnut paneling. Winced. Cupped a hand around the back of his head as apprehension bloomed in his chest. *Not home. Not Virginia.* The quilt slipped from Will's body as he sat up. A draft of cold air hit him, and he shivered. He'd taken off his jacket at some point before he'd dozed off—but that must've been hours ago.

He blinked. Old books and yellowed documents littered the floor around his makeshift bed. Most had been annotated and dog-earned to excess. An imposing line of bookcases rose in front of him, their shelves sagging with the weight of hundreds of canvas-bound volumes. To his left, leather chairs were situated around a long reading table. Tall sets of square double windows overlooked the forested hills from the walls. A dense gray haze wound amongst the looming conifers and bare oaks, accentuating the landscape's late-autumn gloom.

He realized, with sudden clarity, exactly where he'd awoken.
He also knew that it was impossible for him to be here.

He screwed his eyes shut, massaging the stinging spot on his scalp and breathing in deep, gathering as much air into his lungs as he could. He smelled the dust of the library and the thick, woodsy damp of the Aukštaitijan forest beyond.

He breathed out and opened his eyes, hoping vainly for the familiar striped walls of his and Molly's bedroom. Only the dark walnut bookshelves stared back at him. The spines of old books poked from them like teeth, waiting for a curious hand to reach out, to touch.

An unexpected sound broke the air. Clip-clop-clip. Hooves clattering against invisible stone. Will whirled toward the noise.

"Hannibal?"

He stood up so quickly that he almost fell. His head swarmed with a sudden rush of blood, and he shot out a hand to steady himself.

Clip-clop-clip-clop…

A harsh, breathy snort. He knew the sound; he'd heard it before in his dreams. The feathered stag was just on the other side of the bookshelf—he could hear it, could feel it approaching—

"Hannibal?" Will called. Louder this time, his voice echoing in the vast room.

A figure emerged from the darkness, rounding the end of the long line of bookcases. Not the stag. Not Hannibal.

A man—tall and solidly built—walked toward him, shoulders squared. Will squinted in the dim lighting.

"Jack?"

The former BAU director stepped into the light between the wall and the bookshelves, blocking Will's view of the windows. He wore a dark gray suit and collared shirt. And no tie, Will noticed.

Jack's wide-set eyes were solemn as he walked into the light.

"Hannibal isn't here, Will." His voice was calm and artificially comforting, as if he were speaking to a child. "You killed him. Don't you remember?"

"What? N—no," Will vehemently shook his head, trying to remember. His mind was swimming. Where was the stag? Hannibal would lead him to it—Hannibal, whom he was sure he hadn't killed.

Jack's smile was sanguine. "You did, Will. Hannibal's gone. You did the right thing."

Will's mouth dropped open. "You—you can't be here," he whispered. He looked down at the books and documents scattered about his feet. "I can't be here. And I didn't kill Hannibal. I didn't kill anyone."

Jack didn't reply. He stooped down, bracing a hand against his knee, and picked up a single sheet of paper from the spray of loose pages. He held it out to Will.

"But you did. See?"

Will snatched the page from Jack's hand. He peered down at it. Hannibal's neat, curling scrawl
blazed across his vision, the text as synchronously stinging and soothing as it had been the previous night:

Dear Will,

Should this letter find its way into your hands, it will be during a time of uncertainties and unknowns…

Will looked up, frowning. Beads of sweat were gathering on his forehead, despite the chill of the room.

"But we had a meeting—all of us, together. In Alana's office. I said not to do anything to him. Not to change him."

Jack's eyes brightened—a disconcerting mixture of pity and vindication.

"Yes, but you took yourself away from him, Will. You let go… And then you used the gun."

Will's eyes widened. He could feel the pistol trigger hot against the tip of his index finger; envisioned Hannibal's blood splattering the windowpane, thick with bits of brain and skull. The shocking sag of Hannibal's body in his arms as he fell—an exploded star dissolving into the too-great pull of its own gravity.

And then, suddenly, his cell was ringing, the shrill sound jarring the musty stillness of the library.

He bent down, scrabbling for the phone in the mess of blankets. Disturbed by the movement, a small thermos upended and rolled across the floor. Tea spilled across the archaic pages scattered at his feet, leaving streaks of brown that resembled dried blood. From the corner of his eye he could see deformed clock faces scribbled on every one. Warped circles and backwards numbers, glaring up at him in wobbling black ink.

Then his fingers closed around his phone, and he hit the ANSWER button and smashed it to his ear.

"Hello?" He glanced up, breathless. Jack had vanished, along with the books on the floor, the letter, the thermos, the wrinkled quilt—all of it.

"Hannibal?" Please let it be him.

"Will." Hannibal's voice was warm. A pause followed that seemed to echo across years. "I can't feed you if I can't find you. Wake up and join me for dinner?"

Relief flooded Will's body like a sun-warmed wave. A chuckle arose in his throat at the teasing invitation, and he opened his mouth to answer—

—And then, without warning, the room burst into startling, golden brightness. Glittering light assailed his eyes, beaming from the windows and the ceiling and the floor. He threw a hand over his face to allay the luminous invasion, thinking he must be in the Capella Palatina in Palermo, the light was so blinding—but how could that be, if he'd awoken in the Lecter Castle's library—

Then his eyes flew open a second time, and the striped brown walls of his Great Falls bedroom stared back at him in dull welcome.

He lowered his hand from his face, his heart racing. The somber gray glow of afternoon seeped through the open curtains, falling across the colorful patchwork quilt covering the bed—which was empty, aside from himself. He'd slept through the entire morning. Molly was already gone.
He reached out to touch the small impression on the neighboring pillow. *Cold.* It was the only indication she'd been there at all.

Will shivered. His t-shirt and boxers were drenched in sweat. He tossed the heavy quilt to the side, his skin drinking in the house's chilly air with feverish gratitude. He glanced at his cell on the bedside table, which was illuminated by a bold notification bar. *MISSED CALL (2).* And underneath it, in smaller text: *Molly Foster.*

He'd heard the call in his dream. Not Hannibal but Molly, nudging him awake.

Will stripped off his nightclothes and dropped them next to the bed. He tugged on a heather gray Henley and jeans from the dresser against the wall. Tucking his cell in his pocket, he went barefoot into the living room, disorientation thick in his throat like a stuck blade.

An explosion of canines greeted him. They'd been quiet until now, patiently waiting for him to wake up, as he'd trained them. But now Winston led the charge, yelping and prancing, rearing up on Will's thigh before he'd taken two steps inside the room.

"Whoa—hey guys! Hey—down," Will scolded, nudging a disgruntled Winston off his leg and eyeing Randy and Bowser, the Australian shepherd. Both dogs looked uncharacteristically antsy.

He stepped amidst the flurry of whipping tails to the side door and opened it wide, letting the pack run out into the sunless chill of the backyard. Winston stopped on the porch to look back at Will, one paw raised and an inquisitive look in his round eyes. He knew Will was worried—which meant Winston was, too.

Will gestured for Winston to go on. "It's okay, boy. Go get some exercise." The mutt ran down the steps as he was bid, his bottle-brush tail wagging behind him, to join the others in their races around the backyard.

Will sighed. He let the screen door wheeze closed and pulled his cell from his pocket. He pushed the home button and stared at the screen. *MISSED CALL (2). Molly 13:12. Molly 13:27.* He pocketed the phone without checking to see if she'd left a voicemail. He'd call her back later. First, though, he needed to check the bookcase.

He'd burned the envelope last night; it would only take up space. The letter, though, he'd kept. He'd carefully tucked it back between the pages of Molly's history book, making it undetectable from the outside.

In the greatroom, the bookcase leaned against the uneven wall like an old man stopping to catch his breath. He pulled *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome* from its place on the third shelf from the bottom. It didn't appear to have been disturbed overnight. He turned it flat, peering at the sides. Flipped it open in his palm and paged through to the middle, to the drawing of the two men and the lion that had caught his eye.

The single sheaf of paper was still there, blended seamlessly between the other pages. The calligraphy leapt up at him like tongues of flame, seductive in its foreshadowing. Hannibal's words, hidden among a sea of archaic Mediterranean maps and bloody historical narratives. *Appropriate,* Will thought.

He flattened his hand against the page. Like eyes, words could be distracting. *You read too much; you don't understand enough.* Between his fingers, they singed and pulled, dragging his eyes back down—
...I will be unable to correspond or guide you beyond the words written here... I only wish to bestow on you a gift, in return for the many that you have given me.

Will shivered, heat and cold seizing him at once. The stillness of the house tightened around him. He'd cast both himself and Hannibal back into prisons of their own making—one framed by the cement-and-steel walls of a state hospital, and the other nestled within the embrace of a hearth gone cold. Both suffocating. Frigid. Bleak.

A rush of guilt hit him as he remembered his cell phone in his pocket. Molly would expect him to call back; she usually did.

But would Hannibal expect a reply?

Hannibal had fished Will out of the BSHCI after landing him there, creating another trail of bodies for the Chesapeake Ripper to claim. Later, he'd surrendered himself to a life of confinement simply to remain close. He'd saved him from Dolarhyde after setting the Dragon directly in his path. And now Hannibal had left his life with Will, wholly—mind, body, and future.

Will had made his choice. He'd saved Hannibal—but he'd also chosen to lie. Hannibal would believe that there was nothing left of Will to scavenge or cling to, except in his memory palace.

You've taken yourself away from me... I can't feed you if I can't find you.

Will slapped the textbook closed. He felt feverish. Strained. He'd promised himself—and Jack, and Alana—that his part in preserving Hannibal's life was finished. That he'd washed the years of blood—his and Hannibal's own, and the many streams that gushed from them—from his hands for good.

Somehow, though, it had all come flowing back to him, defying both gravity and nature to find him—like a river running in the wrong direction. In his persistence, Hannibal was much like the Rhine or the Nile, winding south to north in flagrant opposition to the geographical norm. Scouring for the low ground, the weak points, to flow into and flood.

But floods, like fire, did more than destroy, Will knew. They also brought forth life. They ensured the continuation of harvests, and prevented land from becoming barren. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full. The words of the pastor at his childhood church in Biloxi swam up from his memory, unbidden. Unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. Will had always trusted the Mississippi to take care of him—not God.

I have faith that you will do what you believe is best, Hannibal had written. This was a flood, receding. Hannibal had placed his life in Will's hands long before the bluff; even before Dolarhyde. Now that the water no longer covered him, Will realized that his fear of drowning had disappeared. In its place, a voracious thirst had risen. It had started as a small, dry tug; a parched desire for dreams relived. Now, it scorched. And underneath it smoldered a fire, low in his belly—rekindled, undeniable. One that the Atlantic had tried and failed to quench.

His vision darkened. An idea drifted to him, smooth and shifting, like smoke. He saw it unfolding in his mind's eye, like a vision in a scrying glass. Pinpricks of sensation skittered along his arms as flame and flood combined to force smoke and water into his lungs. He breathed in, allowing the foreignness of it to fill him. To transform him.

For the first time since the ocean had broken his and Hannibal's embrace, he was awake—no longer drowning in lethargy and misdirection. He had no more need for oxygen. But he would have to set a course—a path for the elements to follow.
A gift, in return for the many Hannibal had given him.

He would need help, he knew. Someone to nurture his kindling; to assist in navigating the waters. Someone he could trust to feed him perspective—or conversation, if nothing else. From there, he'd be able to glean how best to answer Hannibal's invitation.

The letter's messenger would be his starting point. His headwaters. Barney Matthews, the orderly who'd taken him to see Hannibal and who'd ensured that Hannibal's correspondence made it into Will's hands. Barney had done so discreetly, behind the backs of those to whom Will had publicly declared his intention of staying away.

Will knew Barney had been Hannibal's attendant since he'd arrived at the BSHCI fourteen days ago. The orderly had seemed to grasp something of Will and Hannibal's connection, based on the few words they'd exchanged. He'd also discreetly avoided mentioning their visit to Hannibal's room to Alana. Not deceptive, exactly—but perhaps willing to bend, like the river.

Had Barney and Hannibal's rapport flowered long enough to coax the orderly into deliberate misleading? Another meeting would tell. But first, Will would need to call the gatekeeper.

A low bark sounded at the door—Winston's. Will shook himself, reeling his mind back to the present. The dogs were ready to come in.

He bent down, sliding the textbook with the letter inside back into its spot on the shelf. He went to open the side door, ushering in a parade of furry, panting bodies. Zoe, the Pekingese-pug, and Buster, the Jack Russel terrier, shook their short coats of the outside chill, clearly relieved to be back indoors.

He followed his pack into the kitchen. Winston and Randy ran to the large water bowl in the corner by the pantry and jostled over the drinking space, bumping and shoving in their thirst. Zoe yelped at them, attempting to boss the bigger dogs into behaving, as she always did. Will smiled, warmth filling his chest at the sight.

He dumped three spoonfuls of grounds into the coffee maker and set it to brew. He consulted his appetite and found it lacking, but settled on a slice of toast with honey and butter. It was Molly's cure-all for upset stomachs, hangovers, and keeping out the winter cold.

As the other dogs wandered off to the living room to lie down, Winston remained in the kitchen doorway, perched patiently on his haunches. He whined as Will tucked his plate and coffee mug into the dishwasher.

"Hey, Winston. What's wrong?" Will hunched down to scratch his ears. The dog lifted his snout and gently flicked his tongue against the scar on Will's cheek.

"Wanna go for a ride, boy?" Will said. "Just you and me. Sound good?" Winston's forelegs twitched in anticipation, sending a shiver down his trunk.

"Okay," Will chuckled. He stood up and grabbed his keys from the peg on the wall and his heavy fleece from the hall closet. The other dogs looked up from their beds as he and Winston passed through the living room, but they seemed to understand that the outing was invitation-only. Randy lowered his head, tucking his nose under his leg and watching the two of them with his small, black eyes.

It would be good to get some fresh air, despite the teeth-rattling temperature. Will wouldn't have been surprised if the Potomac had frozen overnight.
Air wasn't the only reason he needed to get out of the house, though. The chill creeping in through the walls—into the widening spaces between himself and Molly—was beginning to feel far icier than the brash, mid-November weather. It had moved into their speech, into the way they looked at each other. It had moved into their bedroom.

Will thought of the small dent in the pillow next to his own, and wondered whether Molly had neglected to wake him out of kindness, or disappointment.

What he needed was a stream—a river. A channel to wade into and follow. Rushing water had always gotten his blood and brain moving faster than static cold.

Outside, the sky hung over the front yard like an abandoned tent, sagging with the gloom of oncoming rain, or possibly snow—it was hard to tell which. Will opened the Subaru's passenger door for Winston, who bounded up onto the seat with a scraping of nails. Will climbed into the driver's side, pulling his cell out of his jeans. He tapped into the address book with one hand and steered down the drive with the other. He stopped on a little-used number near the top of his contacts list—Alana Bloom (office).

Will knew that, like Chilton before her, Alana had opted not to wire her office line into the BSHCI's recording system. It made him feel only slightly less anxious about making the call from his own cell. Focus. Stay calm. He had nothing to hide, after all. Not yet.

The line rung shrilly. Alana picked up midway through the second ring.

"Hey—Will?" Her voice relaxed, unchecked. Which meant she was likely alone.

"Hi Alana." He paused for a moment, suddenly unsure how to continue. The bare trees loomed on either side of him as he turned onto the county highway, tires crunching over loose gravel.

"Um. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah—fine." He swallowed. Winston turned from the window to glance at him, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. "I'm calling to ask a favor. It's important."

"I hope this isn't about Hannibal," she said, suddenly sharp.

"It is."

Her sigh was audible. Will could imagine her eyes rolling toward the ceiling. You promised to minimize your involvement.

"Okay, then. What is it?" Terse now. Not because of Will, but because of the man-eating tiger lying in her medical ward, now awake and reinvigorated.

"I need to talk to Barney. I want to caution him, in case Hannibal guesses I'm still alive. He'll go to Barney first, if that happens. I know the way Hannibal's mind works. I know what he'll say. What he'll try to do."

Alana's laugh was breathy and mirthless. "Will, Barney knows what he's doing. He's seasoned. And remember, I've been dealing with Hannibal for the past three years, more or less successfully."

Her unspoken words hung on the air like icicles, steel-sharp: The prison break was yours and Jack's idea—not mine. Will decided not to mention that Alana's lapse in judgment over Hannibal's phone privileges had almost cost Molly and Walt their lives.
"Besides," she continued, "He has no access to the outside world. No TV, no internet, no newspapers, no phone privileges, except for his attorney. And Stonys has already agreed to uphold your request. Hannibal's not going to find out anything to make him believe you're not dead."

"Alana. Even if Hannibal doesn't have access to a computer or anyone else outside of the hospital, he'll find out one way or another. Probably sooner rather than later. You know how good he is at getting people to confide in him. Hannibal's going to start doubting what you've told him, and then he's going to start asking questions. I want to make sure Barney knows how to answer them. If Hannibal even suspects that he's lying, he'll pull the truth out of him. And then he'll kill him." He paused. "I'm not eager to have his blood on my hands. Are you?"

Alana's tongue clicked in frustration. Several seconds passed. Then: "Will, no one's going to die here. I'm making sure of that. And there's been no change in his medical condition, so he's not going to be moving around on his own anytime soon. Barney's as cautious and alert as they come. I trust him."

She paused, allowing the hard edge to drop from her voice. "Anyway, Hannibal bought the lie, like I told you. He hasn't given any indication that he believes otherwise. If anything, he's been moping about it."

Will's forehead wrinkled. Beyond the windshield, the landscape began to melt from gray to green as he entered the pine woods on the far side of Leigh Mill Bridge.

He tried for a gentler tone. "No offense, Alana, but you're not the most convincing liar. Most people would say that's a good thing. But Hannibal can smell a lie through solid walls. He'll see it on your face. Hear it in your voice. He might be preoccupied with licking his wounds now, but he'll work it out eventually."

"Hey, now—I am a good liar!" Her voice lilting high and petulant, like a girl's—the casual Alana of four years ago. The one who'd jogged through yellow fields alongside him and the dogs, hunting invisible creatures of the night.

"Besides, you can't say that from experience," she retorted. "Even when it was against my better judgment, I've never lied to you."

Will sighed. "That's exactly my point."

On the other end of the line, silence.

Will glanced to either side before cutting the steering wheel and looping in a U-turn across the deserted asphalt. He pushed the button to roll down the window, ushering in a burst of chilly air and giving Winston enough room to stick his nose out.

"Look, I'm just trying to save everyone some trouble." Will shifted the phone to his left hand. His healing shoulder was sore from holding it up. "You, most of all. Just do me a favor and give Barney my number. Tell him to call me. He'll appreciate the pointers, trust me."

"I suppose you think I might need some, too."

Will imagined her red lips pursed next to the mouthpiece, an unamused expression hovering in her ice-blue eyes.

"Fine. I'll tell Barney to call you. But whether or not he takes your advice is up to him. Okay?"

"That's fine. I wouldn't expect you to follow up with it. You have more than enough to worry about with Hannibal being awake."

The SUV bumped over an old pothole as Will turned back onto the bridge crossing Difficult Run River. The waterway was milky and half-frozen, like everything else in Virginia.

Alana was quiet. Will could hear a flutter of breath through the earpiece. Hesitation.

In a rush, she blurted, "I'm not worried about Hannibal, I'm worried about you. Is that fair of me to say?"

Will scanned the empty highway, still dotted with slush from the previous storm. The battered green sign for Millwood Road was coming up on the left. Home—where his heart had once sailed to harbor. Now it felt more like a dock; just a place to drop anchor. If only to prevent himself from drifting.

"It's fair." He paused, biting his lip. He hated lying to Alana, but there was no other option. "But don't worry about me. I'm staying out of Hannibal's head this time."

"I'll hold you to that."

"I know you will. Thanks again, Alana."

"Bye, Will. Oh—hi to Molly."

"Yep."

The line went dead as Alana hung up. Will tossed the phone on the console by the shifter and steered onto the winding lane to the house. He glanced out the window at the misshapen, green pond between the trees. Difficult Puddle, Molly had humorously nicknamed it, after the river that twisted near the house. They'd taken the old rowboat out on the pond several times over the summer, but neither Molly nor himself, nor Walt, had been able to catch any fish.

The phone vibrated against the console's hard plastic as he steered up the driveway. He picked it up as he rolled to a stop and shoved the Subaru into park. Winston pawed at the seat beside him, happy to be returning home.

It was a text from Molly. Guilt pricked him as he thumbed open the message screen.

Hey hotshot. Saw you needed sleep so didn't wake you. Up now? Tried calling. Thinking abt cooking tonight, need grocery list. Have a con call soon, so txt me what to get. Maybe a Netflix after Walts in bed? :)

The prick intensified to a stab. Winston jumped out the driver's side behind him and jogged alongside as Will strode up to the house, hurriedly typing a reply.

Sounds great. Sorry just woke up. Spaghetti& meatballs, green beans carrots? Need noodles veggies will check on sauce

He hit send. Then, in afterthought, he typed out:

Good luck w the con call :)

He sighed and pocketed his cell, and kicked off his boots inside the doorway as Winston ran to join
the rest of the dogs. Will padded to the kitchen and stared at the shelves of cans and glass jars inside the pantry, unseeing.

*It won't be the same,* Hannibal had told him, his hooded eyes shining in the dim overhead light of his cell. Will could still hear his voice in his head, the velvety syllables forewarning the naked truth. *You'll see it's not the same. The unspoken knowledge will live with you, like unwanted company in the house.*

*Molly and I want it to be the same,* he'd replied, his voice sharpening against his will.

*Do we?* he wondered now. *Do I?* His own voice in his head sounded small and unsure. It wasn't that things were necessarily wrong, Will thought—they just weren't right. It was like trying to wear a shoe on the opposite foot. Right part of the body, wrong curve.

His eyes fell upon a can of Hunt's tomato sauce on the top shelf, tucked between a cluster of lunch-sized SpaghettiOs and mason jars stuffed with pickled vegetables. He turned it around and scanned for the date. 29 Aug 2015—only a little over two months expired, which meant it was technically still good.

*Mutual assurances you try to exchange in the dark,* Hannibal's voice persisted, the months-old words still sharp with scorn. *And in the day will pass through some refraction, making them miss their mark.* Will remembered how the other man's eyes had gleamed.

The thought of Molly's vegetable garden in the backyard came to him in an unbidden rush of reverie. How excited she'd been when she'd started it the spring after they'd moved into the house. The cauliflower harvest had been meager and slightly sour-tasting, but the radishes had grown large and red and thick with bittersweet juice. Molly had beamed with delight at the small bumper crop, her grin stretching from ear to ear and coaxing pink spots to her cheeks. Will could remember a time when she'd looked at him the same way.

He set the can of sauce on the counter and pulled out his cell to message Molly with the grocery list. He still needed to finish fixing the hole in the fence so the deer wouldn't gnaw on her radishes next spring. Maybe he'd do it while he waited for Molly and Walt to come home from the store. Maybe, if he could fix just one thing the right way, the voices and visions would stop. Then maybe he and Molly would fumble their way back to normalcy. Maybe he'd sleep again.

Inside his mind, Hannibal grinned. *Life has become maddeningly polite, hasn't it, Will?*

He didn't reply.

Before he could send the text, the screen on his phone screamed to life. Its ring pierced the stillness of the house as Will's eyes shot to the number on the caller ID. 667 area code. *Eastern Maryland.*

His finger hovered over the ANSWER button for a fraction of a second. Then he pressed it, and lifted the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end was familiar and buoyant. "Mister Graham? It's Barney Matthews, from the hospital. Just talked to Doctor Bloom, and she said you had some ideas you wanted'ta share with me. Hope I'm not catchin' you at a bad time."

Will closed his eyes. He could feel the smoke and water churning inside his lungs. It should have been suffocating, but the need for air seemed to have completely deserted him.
"Yeah, I do." He paused. "I'm glad you caught me. Right now is a very good time."

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–The same day–

The early afternoon offered little in the way of sunlight. The sky was again threatening snow, or possibly rain; through the heavy block glass of the windows, it was hard to tell which.

Hannibal had drawn the blankets up to his waist to chase away the chill of the room—and to keep his lower body hidden from view. His drawing pad lay open in his lap. The top page was silvered with bold, sweeping streaks of pencil—graphite, this time—that united to form a flurry of feathers and fire.

He was sketching his own version of the classic Greek phoenix, from whose birthplace—Heliopolis—Hadrian and Antinous had departed on their ill-fated journey up the Nile. The mythical bird was depicted frequently in the ancient murals he'd admired on his travels through Italy as a young man. It was, he thought, an appropriate subject for the day's artistic efforts.

Long, curving wings swept upward from the bird's sides, the tips extending nearly to the edges of the page. Sharp talons were anchored in the shoulders of an anonymous male figure, whom the phoenix appeared to be lifting into the sky. Thick scrawls of blood ran from where the creature's claws were embedded in the flesh. They dripped down the figure's nude body, staining the earth below.

In place of a bird's slender skull, Hannibal had drawn a man's face. The hair was tousled and dark; the eyes round and blazing with a fierce gray light. If Barney could have seen the picture, he might have asked if Hannibal was drawing "the Greek kid" again. In truth, it could have been Antinous. The second-century youth and Will Graham shared a distinctive likeness.

Barney had come by twice since the previous night, once at dawn and again after breakfast, just before the end of his shift. I know they won't let you call anybody, he'd said, low, while helping Hannibal back into the wheelchair behind the closed bathroom door. But if you really need me, get Sheryl or one of the other nice nurses, and they'll page me. You can tell 'em it's about your meds. The nurses don't keep track of that stuff like I do, so sometimes they call me for questions. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon, and I'll come up an' see you first thing.

He'd thanked the orderly and promised to do so, should the need arise. Then grasped his shoulder, white-knuckled, as Barney lifted him up and settled him back into the bed. His feet and calves, though brimming with renewed sensation, still refused to support him. His legs had buckled both times Barney had attempted to help him stand. Hannibal would try again tomorrow afternoon when the orderly returned. To walk out of the BSHCI on his own two feet, he would need to force his body to cooperate.

The sound of a key in the lock made Hannibal lift his head. He hadn't been expecting anyone; though privacy in a state prison was, as ever, a pipe dream.

The door swung open, and Doctor Schneider strode in with his usual pompous flair. He didn't lock the door behind him, Hannibal noticed. Careless. Over-confident. Good. He kept his eyes on his drawing, not looking up as the physician approached. He could feel the other man's terse smile tainting the air, like phosphine wafting from a carcass.
The doctor glanced at the drawing pad, and then at his patient in the bed. Hannibal could sense the physician's eyes roaming his form, inspecting for signs of change or improvement. He kept his legs very, very still.

"Doing more cartoons, I see. How nice." Doctor Schneider licked his finger and folded a page over the top of the wooden clipboard in his hand. "And how's your back today, Doctor Lecter? Any return of sensation? I assume you're still feeling drowsy from the sedatives. Terribly sorry about that, but you know the protocol. How's your sleep? Has Barney been moving you around? We don't want you getting any pressure ulcers. Nasty business to treat."

Hannibal continued to scratch his pencil across the surface of the paper, largely ignoring the other doctor's jabbering. The headache that had started earlier that morning, after his lower body had reawakened, was still nagging him. It clattered inside the base of his skull like a cache of lead marbles. On top of it, bursts of nausea had assaulted him throughout the morning, robbing what was left of his appetite. To feel so weak after regaining one's strength was, Hannibal thought, decidedly disagreeable.

"Did you hear me? I asked you a question, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal tucked the pencil against the sketchpad with his thumb, quick and soft. He looked up.

"You asked many questions, Doctor Schneider. And the answers are: no different, none at all, fine, and yes. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

The haughty expression slipped from the physician's face, replaced by a barely contained flare of anger. The corners of Hannibal's mouth twitched at the sight. Doctor Schneider wasn't used to being snapped at, he knew—especially not by those under the perverse sphere of his control.

The doctor glanced sharply at Hannibal's drawing pad. His eyes lingered on the wounded man suspended in midair from the phoenix's talons.

"What's this crap you're drawing, anyway? Is that supposed to be me?"

Hannibal smirked. "I can assure you it isn't. As you can see, the man's face is nearly featureless. If your observational skills are so meager, and your ego so great, as to assume that I would spend my time in sick bay conjuring derogatory portraits of you, then perhaps you should refrain from treating patients. The medical calling requires both a careful eye and a strong desire to help others—sometimes at the expense of the self." Hannibal paused strategically, watching as the other doctor's face grew redder with each word. "However, I highly doubt you've ever been acquainted with the concept of selflessness, doctor."

The other man lunged, quick as a snake, before Hannibal could anticipate the movement in his drugged state. With both hands, Doctor Schneider brought his clipboard down on Hannibal's left kneecap. It connected with a crack. A sickening jolt of pain shot through Hannibal's patella and into his tendon, and radiated down through his tibia. It took every ounce of his self-control not to move. The width of the clipboard had covered the reflexive jerk of his knee at the force of the blow; Hannibal was almost certain the doctor hadn't seen it.

His fingers burned with the desire to pierce his drawing pencil through the physician's eye. A shadow of memory surged up through the white-hot burst of pain, twisting into his gut. He'd been helpless like this before. Another cruel man, another hand upon his body he hadn't invited. But he'd been a child then, and hadn't yet experienced the thrills of vengeance or bloodlust. Until then, his life had been whole. Mischa had been whole; her milk teeth still white and small and shining like pearls
when she laughed.

His hand tightened around the pencil as the pain spread like wildfire down his shin. It seemed Doctor Schneider was stronger than he looked, despite his grandiose posturing and short stature. Hannibal had felt the force of his anger through the blankets. The impact would most certainly leave a bruise.

"You're a paraplegic now, so you won't feel that," the doctor hissed, his face less than a foot from Hannibal's. "But if you could have, I guarantee it would've hurt. You won't be feeling a great many things anymore, Doctor Lecter. You can forget about ever walking again. Or shitting without someone to hold you up and wipe your ass."

Hannibal stared hard into Doctor Schneider's narrowed green eyes, blood thrumming hot in his temples, knee blazing with pain, his pencil gripped tight in his fist. Never in his life had he wanted so badly to kill. And never in his life had it been so essential to restrain himself from killing. He knew, with absolute certainty, that he'd be sent back to his cell if he did anything to the doctor now. And with as hell-bent as Alana was on keeping her prize prisoner locked down tight this time, that would lower his chances of escape to approximately zero.

He remained silent, returning Doctor Schneider's glare with equal disdain. This seemed to enrage the man even more.

"You can forget about jerking off, too, while you're at it," he spat, his rat-like features twisted in rage. "Tugging yourself while thinking of your precious Will Graham—who I can guarantee doesn't think about you while he's doing it!"

Doctor Schneider seemed to realize his mistake exactly as Hannibal spoke.

"Will Graham is dead." Hannibal kept his voice calm, belying no trace of knowledge to the contrary. The physician stepped back, seemingly no longer eager to be in Hannibal's physical proximity.

Hannibal followed Doctor Schneider's movements as he tucked the clipboard back under his arm. He gave a jerky, dismissive wave. "That's what I meant. He wouldn't have thought of you—if he were alive."

The doctor moved away, nearly bumping into the visitor's chair Jack had occupied during the previous day's visit.

"But who would? You're not exactly a desirable male specimen anymore, Doctor Lecter. Especially not in your current state. You're never getting out of here."

Hannibal smiled. The doctor's fumbling, passive-aggressive attempts to cover his colossal flub were delightful to watch.

"You might consider asking Doctor Bloom about that," Hannibal replied, tilting his head. Doctor Schneider's face scrunched in a kaleidoscope of anger, annoyance, and confusion. Hannibal could see he was trying to work out which part of the previous statement Hannibal was referring to.

"My relationship with Doctor Bloom is strictly professional," the other man said, crossing his arms, and the clipboard, tight over his chest. He was grasping at straws, Hannibal could see. Better to release him now, before he decided to order upper body restraints or additional tranquilizers. Hannibal had much to think over, anyway, and wished to be alone.

"Oh, I never insinuated that it wasn't. My relationship with Doctor Bloom is also, unfortunately,
quite formal these days." Hannibal swept his pencil upright, resting the tip against the surface of the paper. "Now, if you've no additional questions or any further desire to bludgeon me with blunt objects, I'd like to be left in peace to finish my sketching."

Doctor Schneider glared at Hannibal, but remained silent as he went to the door, foregoing his usual swagger. The doorknob opened freely. The doctor didn't appear to take notice. It seemed the staff were no longer in the habit of locking themselves into his room as they were supposed to, Hannibal noted. He doubted the security requirement had been repealed, despite his presumed paralysis. He almost felt sorry for Alana. Her employees had grown deplorably lax in the face of danger.

"I'll leave you with your cartoons." The physician lingered in the doorway, his mouth bent in an anxious sneer. Beyond the open door, Hannibal glimpsed the edge of a dark blue sleeve, and part of an arm belonging to one of the uniformed guards stationed outside his room. Two of them, at all times. Those he would need to consider carefully—and what to do about them, when the time came.

"I'll be back Wednesday morning for your spinal MRI. I doubt it'll show anything promising. Until then, Barney will inform me of any changes in your condition."

"Yes, I'm sure he will. Good day, Doctor Schneider," Hannibal said, without lifting his head. The doctor turned without reply, and pulled the door shut behind him—harder than necessary. Hannibal heard the familiar turn of the key in the lock, and then: blessed silence.

He allowed himself to wince at the ebbing ache in his knee, although he was careful not to move. The camera was still watching. He wouldn't be able to inspect the injury now. The camera had also recorded Schneider's tantrum, of course; though he knew that would only make Alana smile if she saw it. He would have to keep up his paralytic charade until Barney returned and wheeled him into the privacy of the bathroom.

Barney. Hannibal tipped the blunt end of the pencil against his lip, considering. The orderly had lied to him—he was sure of it now. Jack's testimonial had been encouraging, but Doctor Schneider's outburst had confirmed his suspicions. Will was indeed alive—no longer masquerading as Schrödinger's cat. Barney would have known, along with the rest of them.

Hannibal frowned as he swept another line of silvered blood across the faceless man's shoulder. His open wounds were multiplying; the phoenix's claws had dug in deep. Barney had lied, but why? Because Alana had asked him to? Because Will had asked him to? Because he didn't think it was important for Hannibal to know? Perhaps that's why he'd asked the question: Would you swear on Will Graham's grave? Trying to gauge his reaction. See whether or not it made him tick.

Irritating. Distasteful. Unless...

Hannibal's head jerked up. The pencil in his hand stilled.

Unless the orderly's falsehood was meant to be a hint.


Hannibal's eyebrows lifted as the realization stung him. In his own way, Barney had been trying to help him see—without directly revealing the truth.

He tipped the pencil back down, his mind churning with propitious possibilities. He flicked the tip across the man-phoenix's full lower lip, shading in a drop of saliva—or perhaps blood—that begged to be licked off.
Despite his churning headache, the hollowness in his stomach, and the fresh pain in his knee, Hannibal found himself possessed by an unblemished sense of well-being for the first time since his return to consciousness. Barney was proving to be a tremendously interesting new acquaintance, in more ways than he'd predicted.

And Will—his dearest Will, his beloved Antinous—was still alive in this, and in every world he'd ever imagined. Not drowned at Besa, but resurrected. Neither fate nor the cruel waters could defeat him—could defeat them. Will had risen from the Nile’s paradoxical current as the mythic phoenix, leaving Heliopolis in ashes.

Everything would change, however, and soon. Hannibal could feel it in his bones, in his marrow. Fire and water would rise again to create a new world for himself and Will—one in which separation and death belonged solely to their enemies.

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"Tell me."

Hannibal's lips, flushed with heat, closed around the tip of Will's finger. His eyelids slid closed as he swirled his tongue along the underside, sucking off the blood with a salacious lick. Will watched his throat move with the taste.

"Uhmm," he said, grinning. His lips parted, revealing a row of red-tinged teeth. "More sweet than salt, with an acidic aftertaste. And unpleasantly viscid."

Hannibal's eyes gleamed as they opened, studying Will's face with a kind of languid predation. He propped his elbow against the pillow and rested his head in his palm. Light sprinkled down from above, soft and golden, reflecting off the high Saracen arches that rose to the ceiling.

They were lying on Will's bed in Will's living room in Wolf Trap. The teal stucco walls had been replaced by a grandiose, muraled ceiling resembling that of the Capella Palatina in Palermo. The smell of blood was thick in the air. It mixed with the odors of dogs and motor oil and long-melted snow—and underneath it all, the heated scent of bare skin.

The air had grown warmer with the descent of the day, and both their bodies glimmered with a faint sheen of perspiration. The gilded ceiling ensconced them in a splendor both secret and hidden; no one would look for them here.

A pale thigh peeked from between the sheets as Hannibal shifted, rustling the cotton. The heat seemed to move with him, hazy and rippling. In Will's vision, Hannibal rippled too, a fata morgana of flesh and tendon and muscle and bone. All the parts needed to keep a human together. Hannibal had been wearing his person suit more often lately, leaving Will to forage for their food. It fit him well, Will thought. He himself was growing surprisingly comfortable without his own human veil—just as Hannibal had predicted.

Evenings like this, though, had a way of bringing blood closer to the surface.

"It's a somewhat passive-aggressive mixture of flavor and texture. Very interesting. You should taste it," Hannibal said, lowering his voice and raising an eyebrow at Will. Casually, like he didn't know what the dropped octave did to him. A hot pulse flared in Will's groin. Impossible bastard.
"That being said," Hannibal continued, "it's exactly how I'd expect a self-aggrandizing herbivore with one kidney to taste." A grin. Teeth crimson-slick and wicked. Will was already well acquainted with the force of their bite.

He nodded, trying and failing to hide a smile. "Right again. I… don't know how you do that."

Will shifted, tucking one leg under himself and making sure to hold the palette level. Beside them on the bed, a breakfast tray held a half-dozen ceramic ramekins, each filled to the brim with stolen ambrosia. Varying shades of burgundy and maroon gleamed in the half-light; all had been harvested by Will himself.

"They are as distinct as wines. Age, sex, diet, psychological mannerisms—all affect the quality and flavor of human blood to varying degrees. And meat, of course. If you have the taste to discern it."

Will smirked. Hannibal's sense of taste was certainly refined enough to do so; it was his most prized skill, second only to his sense of smell. No blindfold was necessary for this exercise. Though, Will had to admit he'd grown particularly fond of Hannibal's aptitude for touch, as of late.

He darted out his tongue to sample Hannibal's cooling saliva on his finger. The flavor was at once intimate and strange and suffused with want—like Hannibal's hands on him, like the dip and rise of their bodies together and the fluttering of eyelids closed in pleasure—but jarred by the acrid taste of Chilton's blood. Will decided he'd rather taste Hannibal himself.

"Close your eyes."

Hannibal did.

"Open your mouth."

He obeyed, the barest hint of a smile rounding his lips.

"And this?" Will said, dipping his finger into a new whorl of blood and thrusting it into Hannibal's waiting mouth. He hooked around the other man's teeth and jerked down, and then leaned forward to crush his open mouth against Hannibal's.

Hannibal's tongue ground against his, rough and invasive, and together they licked and sucked around Will's finger until he let it drop—and then he let the palette fall from his hand. *Fuck the sheets*, Will thought. They'd done enough damage to them already. He reached up to cradle Hannibal's jaw in his palm, shifting his body closer and escalating their shared heat.

A sigh escaped Hannibal's mouth as the blood-nectar mingled on their tongues, sweet and dark as the richest Syrah. They kissed again and again, never quite tasting enough—like men who'd thirsted in the desert for weeks.

Will overlapped Hannibal's bare thigh with his own, and pried his eyes open to look at him. His breath caught in his throat. Hannibal's eyes were hooded and dark; his hair, still sleep-tousled and sticky with humidity. Silver-and-fawn-colored strings stuck to his forehead. His lips, redder than usual, looked like they'd been bitten. *Animal*, Will thought. *Mine.* Desire burned so hot in his bones that he feared they'd become embrittled and turn to ash.

Both their mouths were flushed with blood now—their own blood, and also—

"Bedelia," Hannibal said, grinning beneath his heavy eyelids. His pupils were wide and black as he gazed back at Will. "That one I knew by smell alone."
Will's eyebrow quirked. He felt a muscle in his chest constrict. "Oh?"

"She has a certain… boldness to her flavor. It comes through in scent."

Hannibal dipped his hand into the ramekin that held Bedelia's essence, coating his three middle fingers in red. He dragged his palm across Will's chest, streaking him with the dark fluid. Then nudged him back against the pillows, the corner of his mouth curving in a sly smile.

"You remember how she smelled, how her flesh tasted. How her blood felt as it rushed over your hands. You killed her, after all, Will."

Will gasped at the hot pressure of Hannibal's hand and felt the pillows give way under his back. Hannibal was climbing over him, blood-slick fingers clutching his shoulder and the rigid tip of his cock grazing the scar on his belly.

Will reached down as a wave of heat overtook him. He wrapped his fingers around the other man's foreskin, pushing it further back and coaxing a groan from above. Hannibal's torso obscured the image of Christ Pantocrator on the sanctuary's dome, although the deity's halo now appeared to hover over Hannibal's head. The old mattress squeaked as he sank onto Will's body, hot and wild as a fever, the insides of his thighs slick with sweat—

—except Hannibal wasn't on top of him, and it was chilly in this room.

Will opened his eyes to blackness. No golden light beamed from the walls. The sharp, coppery scent of blood had vanished from the air. He groped for Hannibal in the darkness, uneasy, knowing he must be there—and then his elbow crashed into an arm.

"Oh," Will blurted. "There you are."

"Will," Hannibal breathed. It sounded like relief. He reached out, brushing his fingers along Will's jaw with a sigh.

It wasn't the first time they'd woken like this—panicked from a nightmare or disoriented by a dream, unsure if the other was actually there, or simply a figment of some fading illusion.

Hannibal's thumb grazed his cheek. His nail scratched the healing stab wound, making Will flinch.

"Ah—did I hurt you?" Hannibal's words, sharp with worry, hung in the stillness of the room.

"Mm. No, s'okay," Will said. He yawned, still drowsy, and winced again as the movement stretched the injury. His brain wasn't quite as awake as the rest of him, it seemed. "You all right?"

He smoothed his hand over the ridge in the blanket where Hannibal's hip was. Stopped when his fingers found the hard bone. He curled his palm around it, tempted to move his hand lower. His blood was still simmering from the vampiric imagery of the dream.

"I thought you'd vanished," Hannibal said. "Disappeared from under me."

Will lifted his head from the pillow. "What? You were dreaming about us?"

"Yes. It was a good dream. Bloody. I would've been happy to continue it. But now you're here."

Hannibal turned and settled his shoulder against the pillow. He gazed across the small space between them, eyes shining like twin pools of ink. Bottomless, with too many stories to tell.

One certainly needed telling, though.
"A bloody dream," Will said, echoing Hannibal's words. "That's... odd. I was having one, too. What happened in it?"

Hannibal rolled onto his back with a languid exhale. The scents of sleep-warm skin and their shared aftershave (Hannibal's selection, of course) mingled and danced on the air. Will drank it in. It was their scent—the one he drifted off to each night, and woke to with each dawn. In the dark, it made them indistinguishable from each other.

"You were spoiling me. Hand-feeding me, actually. Not flesh—blood." Hannibal smiled at the memory. "From several different exsanguinations. I had to guess each one by taste." He chuckled on the last words. The sound scampered away like a small animal.

"There was Jack. And Alana. And our dear friend, Doctor Schneider. Then Chilton. And right before I woke, you fed me—"

"Bedelia." Will's eyes widened. "You knew hers by smell. I kissed you. And then you painted me with it."

Hannibal's brow wrinkled. "How—?"

"You were—you were on top of me—in my dream. It was humid, like summer." Will's fingers clenched Hannibal's hipbone. He could feel the heat rising into him; was aware of the stiff drag of his own flesh underneath the blanket.

"Will," Hannibal said, under his breath. "We can't have shared the same dream. Our minds are unconventional, true. But not telepathic."

"Pretty sure we just did." Will swallowed, his pulse hammering in his throat. "No—I know we did."

He pulled Hannibal toward him, dragging him by the hip, recalling the slide of blood, sharp and vicious and hot, between them and inside their mouths. He wanted to taste Hannibal on his tongue again. In his mind again. Needed to feel his living flesh against his own because this was real; this was their best possible world. Hidden away in the small, spartan cabin at the edge of the lake, buried under a foot of fresh snow—scarred, but alive. Lost to the world, but not to each other.

Outside the familiar log walls, there was nothing but darkness and stars. But in here—inside the shimmering well of their shared consciousness—a reflection was growing. Brightening. Merging. Their minds, moreso than ever before, were moving together with alarming ease. Their bodies, too, had finally found their way to mutual pleasure, some weeks ago. Of course they'd shared a dream.

They were vibrating on the same frequency now. It had only been a question of time.

Hannibal's breath hitched. A sound escaped his lips—an unarticulated syllable—as he allowed himself to be maneuvered. Will pulled him up and over his body, crushing their chests together. Needing him closer. The air seemed to wrap around them, dense with dreams, as their mouths found each other's again in the waking world. Not a mirage this time—real, Will thought. Their tongues rolled, the taste now absent of the rosy tang of their enemies, but still dancing with a thousand flavors.

"That's not to say," Hannibal murmured against Will's lips, "that I'm opposed to sharing a dream."

Will tilted his head. Regarded Hannibal with solemn eyes. "Just this one, or any other?"

Hannibal stared back at Will. He seemed to be gazing into the deepest, most secret part of him—the part he'd unleashed, years ago. The place where Will's heightened empathy and his bloodlust and his starved understanding of love joined and ached in a gutting, grotesque knot.
Hannibal brushed his thumb along Will's hairline. It lingered over the scar on his forehead. "My Will," he breathed, low.

Will bit his lip at the sound. Hannibal's voice, gravelly with lust, was electrifying.

"Every life where we can do this—be this—is a dream."

Will moved in, claiming Hannibal's lower lip with a swift suck. "And our best possible world," he countered, the words muffled as the other man's tongue sought his.

He sensed Hannibal reaching between the pillows, into the gap between the mattress and the headboard. They'd been keeping the small plastic bottle there, at an arm's reach, always ready. The Dragon and the cliff and the Atlantic had battered them, but it had also fused them together beyond the reaches of time and death. They had dreamed of an eternity—one that waking life had refused to give them. Together, they had finally seized it for their own.

The pop of a cap. A small exhale of air and fluid. Will shivered. It was the dead of winter; he knew Hannibal's touch would be cold. He nudged his thighs apart in expectation, as the other man stroked his oil-slick fingers along Will's side, and then down to—

No, not down. Up.

Hannibal's palm circled Will's cock, coating it in the slippery liquid to the base. Chilly, but not cold. The pressure of Hannibal's hand unspooled him. Will's body jerked as a surge of heat flashed through his spine, into his belly.

"You—you want—" he stuttered, unable to finish.

He felt dizzy, his cortex flooding with neurochemicals as the other man climbed atop him. Mounted him. His fingers clutched at Hannibal's hips, at the soft flesh of his buttocks. Mine. The sheet slipped from Hannibal's body like a wave as he straddled Will's thighs, pinning him.

A silken whisper: "I want you to make me yours, Will."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came. He knew words would be meaningless in the face of the sacred invitation.

Hannibal bent down, feathering his lips against Will's cheek. Will felt the base of Hannibal's cock, swollen and hard, nudge his abdomen as the other man lifted his hips and reached back to grasp Will in his hand.

"I give myself to you, wholly."

A stiff and sudden pressure. Will trembled as Hannibal's body began to open for him.

"This is for both of us."

Will gasped. His eyes flew open in the darkness—wild, searching. Something had startled him.

The ghost of Hannibal's skin slipped away like a shadow, and with it the musky, cedar scent of the bedroom.

As Will dragged himself up from sleep, he found that his hands were no longer clutching Hannibal's thighs—but instead, curled around himself, inside his boxers. The salty aftertastes of sweat and skin lingered on his tongue. Underneath them, he detected the faint, metallic tinge of blood.
The presence of a body beside him brought his senses to alert: Molly. Sleep-warm and silent, unaware of his waking. His erection throbbed in his fist. He tugged upward, biting his lip to keep from groaning. The damp, pheromone-drenched weight of Hannibal's flesh still permeated his mind. But as he breathed in, his nostrils filled with his and Molly's mingled smell—the scent of a conjoined life. Their life.

*It's too much.* The words had lingered on the tip of his tongue in the dream, but he couldn't say them. Not to Hannibal. Not to Molly, either, in the waking world. Both had offered him gifts, but he could only hold one at a time. Hannibal wouldn't have understood why it was too great for Will to take in all at once. And Molly, whose gift he'd chosen over Hannibal's, would never comprehend Will's persistent ambivalence in the face of his choice. He barely understood it, himself.

His cock ached. The blanket was stifling; he was hot—too hot. Thoughts of gifts and their consequences slipped from his mind as Hannibal's teeth slid against his jaw—imagined, nipping. Lips soft and wet, as they found his own. The dizzying rush of his body sinking down and Will grinding back, hard and slick and ready.

Will's palm curved, sliding against his sensitive flesh and drawing a weak, involuntary murmur from his own throat. *I give myself to you, wholly.* The whispered words lapped at his ears as he shifted against Hannibal, easing up, easing inside. Hannibal's muscles clenched, unprepared; unviolated until this moment. His sharp intake of breath ricocheted through Will's body. Then came a generous roll of hips and the pained yielding of flesh. At that moment, Will knew that this was for him, and *only* him—and that Hannibal had planned it exactly that way.

Will's fingers tightened around his cock. His breathing had gone high and sharp. He had to get up, to get out of the bed—get away.

He jerked his hand from his boxers, grimacing as the waistband tightened around his erection. He pushed the covers away—gently, so as not to wake Molly—and stumbled down the hallway to the bathroom. He closed the door and leaned back against it. His eyelids slid closed as he tipped his head against the paneling with a soft thunk.

He shoved his underwear down around his thighs and took himself roughly in his hand. *Fuck.* It was too much—not enough. He could feel the hard, tight slide of Hannibal's body around his cock; thick hamstrings lifting and falling against Will's hips with animalistic grace. The swell of Hannibal's ass grinding against his pelvis, harder, *harder.* Will's thighs tightened as the invisible friction of their bodies ignited his skin, setting him aflame.

The picture shifted as hot bursts of pleasure warped through his nervous system. He could imagine Hannibal's mouth around him, too; lips stretched tight, eyes gazing up, heavy-lidded, unmerciful. Pupils blazing with a preternatural flame—a demon with his throat full of Will's cock.

And then he felt himself surrounded. *Consumed.* Different now; Hannibal stretched out on top of him, elbows braced on either side of his shoulders, their bodies fused by sweat. Will's leg curled around the other man's back as Hannibal moved inside him, heavy and slow; his tongue trailing a love letter along Will's neck, his jawline, up to his mouth. Hannibal's lips crushed hard against his own, trembling in his need. *Wanting,* but also *giving.*

The image undid him, shattering him into a thousand fragments that broke and gathered together again with each imagined thrust of Hannibal's body. *I give myself to you, wholly.*

Will moaned in the darkness of the bathroom. He shoved his knuckles into his mouth to stifle the noise, as a low, thudding pressure began to build inside of him—
—In equal darkness, dozens of miles away, Hannibal awoke with a start.

"Will..." the syllable slipped from his lips in a rush of breath. The cool dusk of the cabin and the rolling hardness of Will's body beneath him evaporated. The taste of Will's mouth still filled him, heady and sweet. Beneath it trailed the coppery sting of blood.

They'd been in Will's house in Wolf Trap, and then somewhere else... and now he'd woken alone, swaddled in layer upon layer of dream.

One thing remained, though—a high, dizzying sensation he hadn't felt in weeks, since before returning to the BSHCI. A pained noise escaped Hannibal's mouth. His cock was throbbing. He was fully erect, his foreskin drawn halfway down his length. The tip of his head was tender where it nudged against the stiff hospital sheet.

He sucked in a breath and pushed his hand under the blanket, grateful for the new moon and the incumbent darkness it cast over his room. He ignored the residual discomfort from the recently removed catheter and gripped himself in his palm. He grazed his fingertips along the swollen vein on the underside. A hot burst of bliss shot through his body, engulfing him.

Hannibal's eyes slid closed. Will's scent was thick in his olfactory memory; the rough grind of his hipbones still battered his thighs. I want you to make me yours, he'd whispered. He'd meant it. What I would give you in dreams, he thought. What I wouldn't give you in life...

Everything. Nothing.

He dragged his hand up his shaft, slow and aching. Sparks of pleasure, long overdue, danced inside the blackness of his brain. A thousand stars, exploding across some surreal parallel universe in bright bursts of light. Will's sorrowful gray eyes and salt-damp skin surrounding him, devouring him. Then the two of them falling together like twin comets, consumed by flame.

His hand moved faster, breaths coming sharp and shallow. He knew it would be quick. Messy. He didn't care. His dream-bank was overflowing with taste and aroma and Will Will Will—as vivid and lifelike as in his dream of the emperor and his beloved youth. The Marousian lion had been slain; the Nile's winding embrace no longer carried the stench of death. They were drawing closer together now, so close—

—Will's mouth dropped open as he tugged with hurried, frantic strokes. So close. His ass ground against the door and he braced himself, allowing his animal brain to take over. Starved. He hadn't been with Molly since the night after he'd been discharged from UMMC, over a week ago. Not enough.

His thumb grazed the tip of his head. A calloused thrill of sensation scattered behind his eyelids, like sparks from a welding torch. He could feel Hannibal's breath ghosting his skin, Hannibal's body enclosing him, claiming him—even as Will bucked, driving himself high inside his body. The movement coaxed a soft hiss, and a smile that gleamed sharp and wicked in the darkness.

Part of him knew this wasn't what was intended; wasn't what he was meant to see or desire. It was the part Will knew he'd already let slip away—before going back to the BSHCI, before Hannibal's letter. Maybe even before the cliff. Had he ever really meant to sever himself completely? His caution was like an outgrown skin, stretching and ripping with the contortion of his new form.
Pressure spiraled up inside him, sharp and dizzying. He staggered forward. Groped blindly for the sink. His fingers hit the edge and grasped at the porcelain. His breath hitched in his throat as a wave of pleasure rushed toward him, immense and dark and roiling—

—Hannibal's orgasm cascaded over him with the force of a tidal surge. He shuddered, cum spilling between his fingers, onto his belly, soaking into his hospital gown. He tipped his head back against the pillow, breath suspended in his throat, a soundless moan hovering on his lips.

In his mind's eye, Will was coming, too. His face was a mixture of bliss and beauty as Hannibal rode him to climax—his back arched against the mattress, mouth suspended in a wide 'O' of pleasure. *My dearest Will—my beloved Antinous.* Not claimed by the Atlantic or the Nile, but very much *alive,* as Hannibal was now sure. The goddesses Parcae had heard his prayer; Morta had spared them both.

His cock gave a final, adamant twitch, and then calmed. Hannibal sighed as the release flooded his brain with soothing neurochemistry. Spontaneous, but necessary. His body was now fully reset. Even the pain in his knee, which had flashed back to life before his libido had taken over, was temporarily numbed.

Hannibal's eyes narrowed as the image of Doctor Schneider at his bedside came rushing back, uninvited. He saw the man's pointed features, twisted in arrogance and rage, as he'd lunged at Hannibal with his clipboard—a ridiculous weapon, albeit surprisingly effective. If not for the vow he'd made to abandon Alana's penal dollhouse and return to Will, Hannibal would have delighted in redecorating the room's walls with Doctor Schneider's intestines. The man was a coward of the lowest order; he hardly deserved the guts he carried in his paunchy little abdomen. Better to spread them around, and air out the pusillanimous stench.

If time and opportunity presented themselves, Hannibal decided he would give the good doctor a *generous* dose of his own therapy. First, though, he would need to make his final exit of the BSHCI. To do that, he would need help. Unwise to hope for more divine intervention, perhaps; but *Barney* might be exactly the man he needed.

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Will's body sagged, his boxers pulled taut around his shaking thighs, his right hand slick with fluid. He pushed himself away from the sink. *Enough.* He wiped the perspiration dotting his forehead with his other hand.

When the wave had crashed over him, he'd given in without thought, without restraint. Without *guilt.* It had been Hannibal's thighs wrapped around him, not Molly's; Hannibal's body smothering him with heat and need and rapacious comfort, like a warm and turbulent sea.

His animal brain had welcomed it. But as his cock softened and the stickiness between his fingers cooled, the anxious sense of *déjà vu* chugged back into his consciousness, like a train at full speed. *I'm not letting him in—I'll be different when I get back—I'll take better care of her than I did before.* How many lies and half-truths had he told to the people who trusted him? How many more would he tell?

An abrupt, screeching howl jerked Will from his thoughts. The sound was inhuman—*unearthly.* He
froze. Whipped his head around, in the direction of the backyard. Listened. It had come from outside, not from within the house. He was sure of it.

His pulse ratcheted back up as he wiped off his hand on his boxers and yanked them up. He grabbed a pair of pajama bottoms hanging over the towel rack and pulled them on one-handed, trying not to stumble as he crept out into the cold hallway. The icy chill of the floorboards sank into the soles of his feet as he hurried past Walt's room, down the staircase, and into the living room.

Winston and Wilhelmina, the cockapoo, raised their heads to look at him. They wagged their tails in sleepy, half-hearted greeting. The other dogs were still asleep, Will saw—though Randy's ears twitched at the sound of his footsteps.

Another piercing cry, this time much louder. Closer. He couldn't place it as either animal or human, which was unsettling in itself.

As a boy, Will had run across a possum on a country backroad in Mississippi with its hind legs stuck in a coyote trap. The rusted steel jaws had nearly severed the animal's limbs from its trunk. The possum had snapped at him with its needle-like teeth as he approached, holding a stick out in front of him for protection. The banshee-like screech the animal had made reminded him vaguely of the noise that swarmed his ears now.

The dogs, though, didn't seem to be disturbed by it. Winston pushed himself to his front paws, looking to join him. Will raised his hand. "Stay, boy," he said, under his breath. Winston obeyed, plopping back down onto his bedding with a resigned snuffle.

*They should be able to hear it—they should know something's out there. Why can't they hear it?* The thoughts raced through his head, skipping in time to his heartbeat. Will opened the side door and held his breath as he stepped onto the back porch. The screen door groaned shut behind him.

The cold slapped him with the force of the Atlantic tide. He shivered in his thin t-shirt and bare feet. It was well below freezing—probably in the single digits. *Whatever's out here should be holed up somewhere for warmth. Not making a racket in the middle of the night.*

He tiptoed down the wooden stairs. Peered past the torn hog-wire fence, to the tree line twenty feet beyond. It was black as pitch outside. *New moon,* Will's mind automatically supplied. The only light came from the half-burnt-out motion sensor on the north corner of the house, and the smattering of stars that dotted the indigo sky.

He needed to replace the bulbs in the sensor. He'd meant to do that last week, too—but then Vadim Stonys had called, and Hannibal had come blazing back into his life, usurping the lukewarm strangeness of his homecoming to Molly and to Great Falls.

At the edge of the property line, something stirred. Something *big.*

Will took a step forward, then another; muscles tensing, bare feet crunching over the half-melted snow. A hushed snort sounded in the darkness—then a thump, as something struck the icy ground.

A hoof. Pawing at the earth.

Will's blood froze as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. There it was, standing in the clearing not ten feet from the fence. The familiar outline seized his eyes—inky feathers sprouting from a slope of black fur, and a huge, heavy rack of antlers that curved into sharp points of nothingness.

The creature stamped at the ground and lowered its head. Water dripped inexplicably from its hide and the tips of its feathers. Will watched, open-mouthed, as droplets spattered onto the ground
around its hooves, leaving small, dark indentations in the frost. The creature shook its antlers like
some ethereal, avenging witch's familiar, come to punish him.

Will stepped back as a cold wave of adrenaline surged through him. His ankle hit the edge of the
bottom step, sending a spike of pain through his Achilles tendon. He cursed under his breath. This
had to be another dream. A hallucination. He couldn't be seeing the stag—shouldn't. Hannibal wasn't
here. Besides, the creature had only ever existed in Will's mind; he knew that. You're dreaming.
Sleepwalking.

He blinked. The stag was still there, staring up at him from between its curving velvet horns. The
creature lifted its head and fixed him with its black-rimmed stare. Then tensed, as if to charge.

"N—no!" Will's cry was smothered as the nightmare-stag burst into flame, its feathery coat and
antlers igniting with brilliant tongues of reddish-orange fire. The trees beyond the clearing were
thrown into sudden, alien brightness as the animal squared its body and galloped toward the fence.

Will stumbled back, throwing up his arms to wield off the scorching apparition. His foot hooked on
the second step and he went down.

The stag leapt, its body a bright smear of light. It crashed through the hog wire and ripped the
unrepaired hole to shreds. Pain flared in the small of Will's back as his spine struck the staircase.

The creature landed with a loud crack of hooves and charged straight toward him, antlers lowered. It
was going to run him through and roast him at the same time. He'd be impaled, like Cassie Boyle.
Like Marissa Schurr. And then incinerated, just like Georgia Madchen.

"Nn—don't!" he cried, the stuttered syllables falling from his mouth as weakly as his plea for
Abigail's life; for Molly and Walt's safety. For all of the people he was supposed to have protected,
and failed.

Remember, Will, sprang Hannibal's voice in his mind. Cassie was Garret Jacob Hobbs' doing. No
one could save her—not you, not Hobbs himself, even if he'd wanted to. But none of the others
would have needed saving if the teacup had never shattered. Do you understand, Will? You read my
letter. Did you decipher the notebook?

Will squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the blinding rush of heat and pain as the stag's antlers
sheared into him—but it never came.

Instead, complete and stunning silence assailed his ears. Not even the wind stirred.

He lowered his arms. The demon-stag was gone. The backyard was again cloaked in perfect
darkness.

The creak of a board made Will turn. His bruised back stung with the movement. Molly stood upon
the stoop in slippers and a flannel nightshirt, arms folded across her chest. She was shivering.
Beneath her bangs, her eyes were tired and ringed with dark circles.

"Will… what are you doing?" Her voice was flat. Irritated.

"I, uh…" He swallowed as he pushed himself to his feet, which were covered in specks of dirt and
dead grass. He rubbed his back, wincing at the tender spot over his spine. "I thought I heard a noise,
so I came out to check. Slipped on the step."

She gazed at him, silent. For the first time, he could see doubt clouding her gray-green eyes.
Molly sniffed and looked across the porch to the driveway, to where their cars were parked side-by-side on the slush-crusted gravel. "Okay."

*Were you dreaming? Did you hurt yourself? It was probably nothing. Come back inside, it's freezing.* Words he could imagine Molly saying. Words that didn't come.

A smolder of indignation flared in Will's chest, melting his earlier, ice-cold panic. "Sorry if I woke you. Didn't mean to."

He strode up the steps and walked past her into the house, wincing as his half-frozen feet hit the coir mat inside the door. The screen door banged shut and then opened a moment later, followed by the soft slide of the deadbolt.

He went into the kitchen and took down a glass from the cabinet over the sink. Poured himself two fingers from the bottle of Laphroaig, which was well on its way to empty, despite being recently opened. He and Molly had shared a drink earlier, in front of the TV. Whiskey always made her tired, though, and so she'd ended up dozing off before the Bond flick had ended. He'd gently helped her up after the credits had stopped rolling—and after polishing off a second drink himself—and had walked her to bed, all languid warmth and hazy blinking.

Molly stopped in the entrance to the kitchen, arms tucked tight against her chest. She stared at him, eyes shadowed in the overhead light. "Will, I—"

"Let's not," he cut in. "Okay?" He took a long swig. The liquid burned like hot coal inside his throat. "Not right now."

For a fraction of a second, Molly's eyes widened as a small, hurt expression flitted across her face. The corners of her mouth twisted, stopping just short of a frown. Then she looked down, blinking. "Why are you wearing my pajamas?"

Will followed her gaze to his own legs, which he now saw were clad in a pair of baggy, pink-and-red-plaid sleep bottoms. Under normal circumstances, he would've laughed. *They* would've laughed. He didn't feel like laughing now.

"They were the first thing I grabbed. I'll put them back before I come to bed. Okay?"

Molly paused, her mouth agape. "I wasn't complaining." A statement. Not a lighthearted tease, as it should've been.

He cleared his throat. "All right."

They stared at each other as Will took another swallow of the scotch. He looked away first, unable to bear the confusion and disappointment that was written across Molly's face in bold, sweeping punctuation.

From the living room, Randy whined. Molly turned and walked abruptly to the hall and up the stairs, without stopping to assuage her adopted stray.

Will clenched the tumbler in his fist, willing the glass to shatter like Hannibal's proverbial teacup. Wanting to feel the shards as they cut his fingers to ribbons.

He took another gulp, relishing the liquor's harsh, smoky burn. Then measured out another two fingers from the bottle. He knew Molly would probably pitch a fit if he came to bed drunk. He decided not to care.
None of the others would have needed saving if the teacup had never shattered. Do you understand, Will?

No, he didn't understand. He didn't understand why Hannibal was in his dreams and on his mind and in his mind at every turn. Why, despite not having spoken to him or seen him awake in over two weeks, Hannibal's presence was still as pervasive in his thoughts as when he'd decided to go after Dolarhyde.

No, came his own voice. You were going to watch the Dragon change him. You were going to let him die. You did the right thing. Jack said so. Molly said so.

A void exists only where one is felt, Will. Hannibal's sleek accent, now winding serpentine through his mind. You came back for me. Hunted with me. Died with me. And then saved my life—twice. Now you're home, and you can't stand still. Something's eating at the edges of you, like a flame. What are you really missing? What is it you're trying to salvage?

"Probably myself," Will said, to the empty room. His brain buzzed with the Laphroaig. "Best answer for both." He chuckled under his breath—a low, dark sound—and downed the last of the whiskey in one swallow.

Then let me help you, Hannibal urged. You read my letter. Did you decipher the notebook?

In his mind's eye, a picture immediately arose, vivid and insistent. He could see the journal Hannibal had been scribbling in after bringing him home from Muskrat Farm. An eternity seemed to stretch between that moment and the moment Will had watched the cruisers back down the driveway. He'd been unable to feel anything. Unable to think. Hannibal's white face had turned to the thick glass, peering back at him. Will had followed Jack's SUV with his eyes as it rolled down the drive through the thin snowfall, carrying Hannibal away from Wolf Trap, to the FBI Field Office in Quantico, and, later, to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Only after the lights of the convoy had been completely swallowed by darkness had Will removed his glasses.

The notebook, with its inky scratches, had been the only thing that remained of Hannibal Lecter on his property. Hannibal had taken it with him when he'd left; Will had found it the next morning, set atop a tree stump in the woods behind the farmhouse. He left it for me to find, he'd thought, as he stared at the snow-dusted leather cover. The ribbon bookmark hanging from the middle had seemed to lick at the air like a snake's tongue. Of course he did.

He couldn't read it now, though. He'd burned it later that day, along with most of his memories of the previous two months.

He remembered that it had been full of equations—long ones. Elaborate. They'd looked to Will like physics calculations, but he hadn't been sure then and couldn't go back to look now. It was impossible to un-shatter a teacup—but not to reroute a choice gone wrong, or to repair a heart once wounded. Was that what Hannibal had meant?

Will sighed. There were too many meanings to choose from, and not enough direction. He'd never be able to guess.

A headache was starting to tick at his left temple, and his spine still stung where he'd hit the stair. Fucking stag. The thought snarled through his brain and settled in the pit of his stomach. He rummaged in the kitchen cabinets and found an ancient bottle of Tylenol, its label yellowed with age. Screw it. He swallowed three of the pills dry, then poured himself another helping of the Laphroaig.
If he was going to get drunk, he might as well commit to it.

Will carried the tumbler over to the bookcase in the greatroom. He set it down in front of his copy of Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi in Two Worlds* and Walt's tattered *Dr. Seuss* books, which Molly had held onto in case Walt had kids someday.

The thought made him smile, for a fraction of a second. Molly as a grandmother. *Himself* as a grandfather. What would that look like? Would they take their grandkids to the beach in the summer? Teach them to play baseball, as Walt's father had done before cancer took him from his family and the Cardinals? Or would they be distant and tiresome, preoccupied with their own day-to-day trifles and dissatisfactions?

Molly's parents lived two hours north, in Harrisburg. They refused to drive long distances, so Walt saw his grandparents only when Will and Molly could make the weekend trip. When Will's father had decided to move from Louisiana to Virginia early last year, he'd hoped it would give Walt a closer family experience—one Will had never had.

But Bill Graham Senior's liver had been steadily rotting over the past several decades. He'd died less than six months later, leaving his son and his newly acquired family with another death, another hole to fill.

*Tough to hold onto anything good. It's all so slippery.*

Will had never understood the truth of Molly's words as fully as he did now.

Tonight he'd snapped at her, without thinking, without warning—just like the dying possum on the side of the road. He'd never been short with her; not like *that*. Will's throat hardened as he thought of Francis Dolarhyde and the cold, powerful, sweeping release he'd felt as he'd slashed the blade across his abdomen, eviscerating him. How soon until a terse comment from himself or Molly turned into a shout? Until a shout became a curled fist? Until the red rage took over his carefully curated instincts, and *he* was no longer safe for his family?

Will bent down, knees cracking, and pulled out *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome* from the bookcase.

*Maybe you were right, Hannibal. Maybe there wasn't any point in going home.*

Wounded animals were the most dangerous, Will knew. Doctor Schneider and Alana would find that out for themselves if Hannibal decided he didn't like his arrangements at the medical ward. Part of him relished the thought of watching Hannibal do to Schneider what he'd done to the Dragon. Another part of him abhorred the idea—and knew, with uneasy conviction, that the BSHCI probably hadn't been too far off the mark four years ago. Maybe *he* still belonged there, too.

*Or maybe*...

A new voice arose—the syllables sharp and resounding, like the call of a bell. Foreign, and yet eerily discernable.

*Maybe neither of us do.*

His own inner voice and Hannibal's, blended together in perfect resonance.

He grabbed his glass and gulped the last of the scotch. His father would've shaken his head at Will's neglect to savor it, he knew. Right now, he didn't care. He opened the atlas and flipped through to the middle, to the drawing of the two men and the lion. Hannibal's carefully scripted letter lay nestled
against the illustration, unassuming in its folded dormancy.

He'd already memorized the words; had tasted both the poison and the sweetness they offered. But he knew that he wouldn't—couldn't—destroy it. Hannibal's first letter warning him about Dolarhyde, as well as his notebook, had already disappeared into a roar of fire and smoke, just like the nightmare-stag.

*You read my letter. You didn't deny me my life.* Hannibal's voice rose inside his head, alone and aching.

*No,* Will whispered. *Not your life.*

*My freedom, then?*

An invitation. Not an accusation, as it had been that night in the kitchen.

In the black well of Will's mind, something stirred. A tiny spark of light, dancing amid the darkness. It grew, twisting and glowing, as an idea flared atop the kindling. He held his breath as it took hold of him, then began to burn. *Caught flame.*

He unfolded the letter and touched a shaking finger to Hannibal's weeks-old calligraphy. His skin seared with heat where it met the page. He had a sudden image of standing over a burned corpse in the lab at Quantico—a corpse that was *not* Freddie Lounds—as Hannibal studied him with smoldering eyes.

*Fire destroys and it creates. It's mythical,* Will had said. Hannibal had silently agreed. Silently praised him for his cunning destruction.

Years and several more betrayals later, on a night that had never existed but which Will remembered as vividly as the charred corpse, Hannibal had smiled as Will swallowed the last of his Condrieu at the Lecter Castle dining table. *Every act of creation is first an act of destruction,* he'd said. Had Hannibal been thinking of Will's ruse then? Had he anticipated that Will would betray him once more?

*The window. The gun. Our last embrace.*

*What do you intend to destroy this time, Will?*

Will snapped the Penguin atlas shut. He returned the book to its place on the shelf. He felt electrified, unsettled; every nerve ending in his body, every neuron in his brain, was humming with anticipation.

Tonight, he would plan, and pretend to sleep while listening to Molly's quiet breathing. Tomorrow, he would meet with Barney before the start of his shift, like they'd agreed over the phone.

From there, Will would know just how far he'd need to go to answer Hannibal's invitation.
Antinopolis

Chapter Summary

The conclusion to Act I, and the last chapter before the shit/ship hits the fan.

This story will be posted in nine parts over nine weeks. It can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics, Of Putrefaction, Saccharine and Interlude: Diary of an Incubus, can be found on this post. Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series A Thousand Savage Futures can be enjoyed on YouTube here. Also, the header arts for Eve of Dreams contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

The emperor lounged on a low reed chaise inside a curtained tent on the largest boat in the flotilla. The Nile's night-blue waters beat steadily against the sides and bow of the ship.

They were sailing upriver, towards Thebes. Yesterday, Hadrian had noticed how the current's relentless push had already ground away much of the ornamental painting across the boat's prow, leaving it with a war-battered look. It was a state with which the emperor could identify.

The late autumn's southern winds had remained in their favor, however. The admiral had predicted a seven-day journey between Heliopolis and Hermopolis; so far, the commander's timing had proven correct. At the metropolis, the royal convoy would disembark to pay tribute at Thoth's temple under the watchful eyes of the stone ibis and the ape. There, Hadrian would rest for a few days, and pray for the ibis-headed god to bless him with his abundant wisdom.

The pains in his body and mind had intensified since their departure from Heliopolis, despite the spectacle of physic for which he'd so handsomely paid. The years-old weakness that had plagued him was now accompanied by frequent bouts of chill, and nausea that discouraged his appetite for even the most delicate foods.

Hadrian had declared a week of rest in Heliopolis for the royal party before setting sail, both to alleviate and disguise his intensifying illness. However, Antinous—who seemed to possess a heightened attunement to his erastês' state of mind and health—had perceived his discomfort. Hadrian could tell that he was distressed. This both touched and displeased the emperor, as he did...
not wish for the young Greek to fret over him. *Think of me, my phíltatos*, he had told him. *Don't worry about me.* Worrying was for women and plebeians.

Hadrian shivered. He clutched the hide of the Marousian lion—slain by himself and Antinous weeks ago—around his shoulders, and settled deeper into the silk cushions. Even in Ægyptus, the hour before dawn brought with it an ominous chill. The early-morning wind blew off the dark waters lapping at the timbers of the quinquireme, and whistled along the paddles of the oarsmen rowing in sync inside the hull.

He caught a glimpse of the shoreline through the tent flap, the sky reddened by dawn. Empty golden sands reflected the morning sun in muted shades of white. The lush fruit and shade trees had given way to desert yet again; soon they would approach the tombs of Beni Hasan and the neighboring village of Besa.

Half a day after that, perhaps, they would reach Hermopolis—or Khmun, as the Ægyptusans called it. The city was named after the ancient deities of water, magic, darkness, and eternity. The deities—four male and four female—had given birth to Ra, the sun god, whose blazing eye held all of Ægyptus within its ferocious gaze.

For many years, Hadrian's arrival to Ægyptus had coincided with the Nile's anticipated overflow of its banks. The annual flood, essential for agricultural and economic rejuvenation, had yet to arrive this year. The date trees were blistering; the oases had shrunk. Now, whispers of Hadrian's waning power had begun to flutter on the breeze. He'd heard murmurs of speculation from hushed lips and behind cupped hands. Some said it was because of the boy. Perhaps the maturing youth was draining the elder Hadrian's strength—or perhaps the emperor was too focused on sensual pastimes, and not enough on the expansion and fortification of the empire.

Hadrian's eyes narrowed as he gazed out over the silted banks. Rumors had been flying about himself and Antinous since the youth had turned sixteen, nearly three years ago. He knew that certain men among his advisors believed he should have outgrown his interest in the young Bithynian long before now.

This in itself did not trouble Hadrian; their advice was his to consider or ignore, as he saw fit. But the more recent talk was rife with strange and unsettling speculation. It irritated him, despite his efforts to dismiss it. Was he not ruler of all lands and peoples within Rome's generous, industrious embrace? As emperor, was he not divine? No erômenos, however beloved, could milk him of his sovereignty or his strength. This was fact—not a defense.

He shivered again as the front flap of the tent lifted. He caught a glimpse of the tanned arm of one of the guards as Antinous entered, bringing with him the brisk morning breeze.

The youth was clad only in a pleated ivory *shendyt* belted at the waist, in the style of the Ægyptusan men. He carried a bronze platter in his hands. When Hadrian looked up, he saw Antinous' storm-gray eyes were bright and uneasy.

"I've brought you food, Augustus."

The youth placed the platter on the low table next to the chaise, beside a bottle of wine Hadrian hadn't yet bothered to open. The emperor admired the lean muscles of Antinous' slim arms and nearly hairless chest as the youth folded himself down, cross-legged, next to the couch.

His skin had taken on a golden hue during their sail upriver. Antinous enjoyed spending time on the deck of the ship during the day, whereas Hadrian found the shade and privacy of his tent preferable as of late. The scent of sunlight clung to the boy like a cloak; but Antinous always joined his emperor
in the shadows when he was bidden.

Some of Hadrian's other erômenoi had fastened themselves to him like barnacles, or behaved like skittish colts in his company. He hadn't kept them for long. Antinous, however, was neither overly bashful nor overly affectionate in his attentions. He carried the same quiet air of intuition and reverence that Hadrian valued in his trusted advisors. It was no wonder that the emperor had sometimes deigned to discuss matters of state with the youth, unfitting though the conversation may have been for his civilian ears.

Hadrian peeked over the edges of his fur wrap. The platter was piled with figs, grapes, dates, and a dish of honey in the middle—sweet, delicate foods that Antinous had procured to stoke his appetite, no doubt.

"The finest Alexandrian dates, and honey from the famed hives of Heliopolis," Antinous announced. "The merchant ambassador took in a dozen jars of nectar for his household before we set sail. I asked one of his men to row one over when we were docked in Memphis." He blushed. "I hope you don't think it too bold. I wanted to surprise you."

Hadrian smiled. The light of Antinous' eyes, his presence, surrounded him like a warm sea. It brought vigor and sweetness to his blood, despite his ill health.

"You procure ambrosia without my permission, and then prepare to feed me in a graceful temper," Hadrian teased. "If you were any less beautiful, my phíltatos, I'd have you flogged for insolence."

Antinous blushed again and looked down, not returning the playful spar. Something was deeply troubling him, Hadrian could tell.

"Open the wine, and then we'll eat together," he offered, making room for Antinous on the chaise.

The youth did as he was asked, uncorking the bottle with hands as silent and graceful as moth wings. Their movements disguised the calluses on his palms from the lance and bow, but Hadrian knew they were there. Their familiar roughness grazed his skin each night, contrasted by the soft slide of his lips.

Antinous filled two cups with the purple, sweet-scented liquid. The Ægyptusan wine, which they had been drinking since their arrival in Alexandria, was both thicker and sweeter than the Roman varieties. The grapes grew wilder and juicier here, made hardy by the harsher climate.

Antinous handed the fuller cup to Hadrian and sat down next to him on the chaise. Hadrian loosened the fur from around his shoulders and reached for a stem of grapes. He wasn't particularly hungry, but he would eat to assuage the pensive look in Antinous' eyes, if that was what it took. The boy himself went for the dates.

"Now I see why your skin is always warm," Hadrian said, his words punctuated by the crush of grape pulp between his teeth. "The date fruit's sweetness quickens the blood."

Antinous took a sip of wine. He licked a smear of sticky-sweet date skin from his thumbnail. It was a moment before he spoke.

"In truth, I haven't felt warm since we departed Heliopolis. It's as though a shadow has followed us."

Hadrian eyed him. "And does this shadow fall upon yourself only? Or do you see its shade hovering over me, as well?"

Antinous was silent, holding half of a honey-glazed fig between his fingertips. Hadrian could sense
the boy's wariness; he was afraid he'd misspoken.

"I do, Augustus," he said, after a pause. "I feel it hovering over both of us. I pray morning and night for your comfort. Your happiness."

Hadrian raised an eyebrow. "You believe me to be uncomfortable and unhappy?"

Antinous again fell quiet; uncharacteristic for the oft-daring youth. A frown crept across his lips. "I—I don't know," he stuttered.

Antinous turned his eyes to Hadrian's. Fear was writ within their blue depths. Its source was plain for the emperor to read.

Hadrian sighed and took a swallow of his wine. "It bothers you," he said, as he lowered the cup.

The youth looked away, toward the Nile and its border cities beyond. A golden glob of honey fell from the forgotten fig and onto a corner of the silk pillow.

"Rome honors me with his attentions," Antinous said, his voice low. "What could possibly bother me?"

Hadrian watched as the honey dripped a syrupy trail to the floor. He knew his erômenos was holding back for his sake. Right now, however, it wasn't what the emperor needed.

"Græcia's fairest youth disagrees with what Rome commanded the magician Pachrates to do in Heliopolis. He thinks it a brutal and fruitless test. And that his emperor delights in wickedness."

Antinous' gaze shifted to the red-curtained walls of the tent. He brought the slice of fig to his lips and bit into it, watching the fabric sway with the motion of the boat. He chewed in silence. Then glanced down at his feet and sighed.

"It's not my position to judge your orders, Augustus."

Hadrian tipped his finger under the youth's chin and tilted his face, forcing him to look into his eyes. A stray dab of honey shone on his bottom lip, untasted. Hadrian brushed the bead of nectar away with his thumb. He wanted badly to taste it—and to taste Antinous, within its sweetness—but knew it was not the time. Antinous needed to hear him now.

"You saw how powerfully the conjurer demonstrated his magic," the emperor urged. "The slave fell ill in two hours. He was dead in seven! A potion with the power to kill so quickly, absent of external force, must have the ability to cure as well as curse. Surely you can see the simple wisdom in it. Pachrates assured me of the mixture's efficacy before he transcribed the instructions for it."

Hadrian searched his companion's face for signs of faith. Antinous appeared unmoved, in his eyes a gray haze of disbelief.

"Is that why you paid him double?" The boy's lip twitched on the last word.

Hadrian dropped his finger. A hardness welled in his throat. "You speak brazenly of Rome's purse," he snapped. "That is not your position to judge."

Antinous swallowed. A flush of embarrassment rose in his cheeks. "I'm sorry, my Augustus. I only fear for your safety and well-being. The thought of your spirit faltering brings bitter tears to my eyes."
Hadrian pursed his lips. As weary as he was from having slept fitfully during their sail, he knew he couldn't remain angry with Antinous for long. The youth's eyes were dewy already.

He set down his glass, then reached out to weave his fingers through the dark curls along Antinous' temple. "Rome doesn't need your tears," he said gently. The boy looked up. "Your fealty and love are among the empire's greatest gifts. And the emperor himself has many fleets of ships, and hundreds of thousands of men and horses, to protect him. Why does Graecia fear for Rome's safety?"

Antinous blushed at the royal designation. It was a generous and tender compliment, and Hadrian knew that the youth, in receiving it, would understand his seriousness.

"Rome is the earth under our feet and the brightest star above our heads," he answered. "The bounty of every harvest and the provider of every feast. Rome is the heart that beats within you—within me. My fears come from superstition, not from any deficit in your great empire, Augustus."

"Superstition?" Hadrian's brow furrowed. He slid his hand down Antinous' forearm, to where his wrist was propped against the silk cushion. He overlapped the boy's hand with his own. "The gods smile on reason. They frown on superstition, Antinous."

"I know." Antinous glanced to the side, his eyes darting towards the dark river lapping at the boat. "It's just that… there are thoughts that won't leave me, though I've tried to forget them. They pierce my waking mind and invade my prayers. They darken my dreams as I lie next to you at night."

"What thoughts shade your dreams, my φιλήτατος?" Hadrian slid his hand along the boy's cheek, gently bidding the youth to look at him.

Antinous' eyes were wide and dark as they met the emperor's. "Secundus' words, Augustus. The sophist."

Secundus. Hadrian dropped his hand from Antinous' face as the name brought a fresh chill to his flesh.

The emperor had summoned the renowned philosopher—whom he knew had upheld a vow of silence for many years—before leaving Athens. To test him, Hadrian had threatened the man with death unless he spoke aloud. Secundus had bowed his neck to the sword, and Hadrian had relented, impressed. Then he bade the man to spell out a prophecy of the emperor's future in writing.

Not even the hide of the Marousian lion could stave off the icy sensation that spread through Hadrian's body as the sophist's handwritten words flashed across his memory. You, Hadrian, are full of fears and apprehensions. Grooves have been burned into you, like the lines made by the fire of encaustic painters. Being a short-lived creature and full of infirmities, you foresee yourself being cut and torn apart, roasted by the sun and chilled by the wintry wind…

"But what of the fate that controls our lives?"

Hadrian suddenly realized that he was speaking aloud. Secundus' scripted words, buried inside the deepest reservoir of his memory, were now burning to be given voice.

"Is it destiny decreed by heaven, or the whimsy of personal luck?"

Antinous' voice joined his own in the recitation. "We know not whence it comes. Today is already passing us by, and what the morrow will be, we do not know."

The emperor shuddered as they both fell silent. It seemed the prophecy had tainted his erômenos'
memory as much as his own. Would he and Antinous never be free of those cursed words?

The suck and roll of the Nile's waves rose above their silence in a melancholy crush of sound.

"What if there was another way?"

Hadrian's brow wrinkled at the sudden question. He glanced at the youth. His eyes were furtive. Anxious. Too bright.

"The generals and physicians speak of a means by which victory and vigor can be transferred from one life to another," Antinous said. "It was how Decius Mus triumphed against the Latins during the Battle of Vesuvius." He sipped nervously at his wine. A drop rolled over the lip of the glass and down his chin.

Hadrian frowned. The chill crept down his spine on skittering legs. "You speak of devotio, Antinous. Pluto and Persephone do not take their sacrifices lightly. You would be consumed by fire and ice in Hades, without hope of ever reaching the fairer end of the Western Ocean."

Antinous' face hardened. His lips pressed to white, defiant. "I would rather never feel Elysium's bountiful breezes caress my skin, or recline in the shade of its verdant woods, than to allow my speeding manhood to conflict with your divine efficacy, my Augustus. Soon, you will need another erômenos—a younger one. One more beautiful, perhaps." His lower lip trembled on the last words.

A weight curled into Hadrian's stomach. Without thinking, he kneeled before his beloved, abandoning all sense of imperial propriety. The lion's hide slipped from his shoulders. It fell to the floor in a tawny heap as he took the youth's hands in his own.

"Antinous. My φίλτατος. You must banish this thought from your mind. I desire you by my side in this life and in the next, if the gods will it."

Tears welled in the younger man's eyes. His fingers tightened between the emperor's palms, and Hadrian could feel the hot pulse of Antinous' living heartbeat in his wrists.

The boy's voice was a whisper when he spoke. "The philosophers and priests say that when we go to the gods, our souls become eternally free. Though Pluto may destroy my life, nothing will vanquish my devotion to you. That has set me free. As I said to you in the desert, Augustus, not even death could separate us."

Words tumbled about in Hadrian's mind like an armada of ships caught in a storm. Devotio was no mere sacrifice. It was a double death—that of the body and the spirit. A death that no man, however wise or strong or good, could reverse. A human essence, shattered, never to be gathered together again.

Secundus, too, had condemned Hadrian to a double death through prophecy—one by the gnawing teeth of fear, and one by the ravages of nature. You, too, Hadrian, are a human being like all the rest of us, subject to every kind of accident, mere dust and corruption. The life of brute beasts is even such.

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Was there no way to shatter the force of those words? He and Antinous had slain the Marousian lion, the most foul and unnatural beast of any they'd encountered on their hunts. The creature's hide lay in a heap on the floor; but where was its spirit, its essence? Had it even possessed one? Did Antinous? Did he?

A gull's cry pierced Hadrian's thoughts. He looked at his erômenos to see a single tear dripping down the youth's smooth cheek. A pain tore at the center of the emperor's chest, crushing his reserve
with the force of a threshing stone.

He rose, pulling Antinous with him, and took his lover in his arms. The heat of their bodies mingled in the cool dawn air. The desert sands had not yet been touched by the slow-rising sun, but Hadrian knew that he and Antinous would never require light to bring them warmth.

"You would sacrifice yourself. Take yourself away from me," Hadrian said, his voice rough, his lips hovering at the shell of Antinous' ear. He curled his hand around the back of the boy's neck, his fingers tightening in the fall of soft curls there. "Now that is wickedness."

Antinous tucked his chin against the emperor's shoulder. "I only wish to give you a gift, Augustus. In return for the many you've given me."

Hadrian could feel the wetness of the youth's tears seeping through the fabric of his toga. He thought to dry them with his sleeve, but decided against it. Antinous was becoming his own man; he would soon learn to conceal his weeping.

"A life without you isn't freedom, my φιλίτατος," the emperor said, smoothing his fingers through his companion's hair. "I forbid it. Even for my own sake."

"You should try to eat something."

Hadrian started. Not Antinous' voice.

He pulled back and looked down. The boy in his arms had changed. No longer smooth-faced, the youth's jawline and lip were now stubbled with dark hair. His body, too, was different—tougher, more muscular. Only the boyish curls and ageless, storm-blue eyes—so unlike the eyes of the other Greek boys—remained the same.

Hadrian stepped back, his mouth dropping open in surprise as he broke the embrace. His eyes were deceiving him; the gods had surely sent a sickness to his brain.

Antinous casually plucked his wine glass from the table and took a sip. His Greek youth—now a grown man—gazed back at him with a cold, unruffled stare.

"I've brought you some food, Doctor Lecter... Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal's eyelids slid open, heavy with sleep and dream. The voice was muted by the clack of a plastic tray being set on the bedside table. He glanced over. The nurse—the one who'd dropped her teacup after he'd woken from his coma—Kat something; Katherine? Katarina?—glanced down at him with a patronizing, and slightly apprehensive, look.

"Barney said you needed soft stuff. Said you haven't been eating. He should be up to check on you before long."

Hannibal blinked and toggled the button for the headboard, careful to keep his legs still. The nurse took a step back as the panel moved him into a sitting position.

"You need anything else?" She fist her hands on her hips. Hannibal could tell she was eager to leave.

"No, thank you. This is fine." He glanced over at the tray. A lopsided cube of red Jell-O wobbled next to a paper bowl of plain porridge. A grainy plastic cup of coffee and a small dish of cream, already half-hardened with skin, completed his afternoon meal.
"No tea today, nurse?" he asked, flashing a curt smile.

The nurse's eyes widened for a fraction of a second. Then she pursed her lips and turned swiftly towards the door. She threw a sharp glance at Hannibal before pulling it shut and locking it with an audible click.

Hannibal's smile faded as the footsteps retreated down the hall. The headache that had lingered on and off over the past several days had returned, along with the nausea. On top of this, a dizziness had taken up residence inside his skull and had spread to his limbs, buzzing in the tips of his fingers and the ends of his toes. For once, he was glad he wasn't standing.

He poked a finger at the gelatinous cube of hydrolyzed collagen that qualified as "food" in Alana's hospital. It was lukewarm. Soggy. He would've enjoyed force-feeding a vat of it to the lackeys on the kitchen staff, just to see how much they could stomach before vomiting became inexorable. If this was meant to stoke his appetite, he'd be facing starvation before Alana had the chance to transplant him to his cell.

He allowed his eyes to slip closed again, irritated at his body's weariness; disenchanted by the muted view of his hospital room. He'd been staring at the same steel door and eggshell-white walls and plastic chair for the past two weeks.

*The chair.*

Hannibal froze. He looked to his right, to where the visitor's chair Jack had sat in was pulled up against the wall.

It was an Eames-style piece, decades old, with a moulded plastic seat and spindly aluminum legs. The base, he knew, would be attached to the seat with a handful of screws. If he unfastened the legs from the plastic and popped the glide caps off the feet, he could conceivably use the rack as a spear.

He would've preferred the IV pole, of course, but the medical staff had already bolted those to the wall, having learned a fruitful lesson from Abel Gideon. But if he could regain control of his balance, and then draw the guards into his room, he could surprise them from behind the door.

Hannibal knew that one of the guards regularly left the clip unhooked on her holster; he'd glimpsed the leather flap hanging open on more than one occasion as the door to his room had been opened and shut. He might be able to grab the gun, if he was quick enough.

It might be his only chance. It was a slim one, but one he was willing to risk.

Hannibal's mind roiled with visions of possible escape. His body was still weak, but he would need to make himself stand—to gather the strength to attack, to run. He'd meticulously studied the blueprints of the hospital buildings and grounds during Will's incarceration years earlier, curious as to whether he would attempt an escape—and, if so, how he might do it. Where he would run to. And what he might say when he found Hannibal already waiting for him there.

The prison's main buildings, dating back to the late eighteenth century, were grouped together at the south end of the campus. They housed the administrative offices, the medical ward and surgical center, cell banks for roughly three-dozen high-priority inmates, and the patient research facility.

The medical ward in which Hannibal resided met the back of the research facility at the edge of the grounds. A full-sized baseball diamond, once fielded by inmates with outdoor privileges—and even the Orioles, which had held tryout practices there in the 1950s—bordered the two buildings. The ballpark itself was no longer used. If the windows in Hannibal's room had been constructed of
thinner glass, he could've looked down over the dark, triangular field at night from on high.

Beyond the muddy field, a thick fringe of trees bordered the southern portion of the campus. Through them ran a small spur that joined with the complex's side entrance. The trees enclosing the spur would offer temporary, but critical, cover; the Baltimore-Washington Parkway beyond would provide permanent escape.

The disused stairwell on the medical ward's third floor, which Hannibal had spotted on one of the original plans, was the key. It would spit him out directly onto the ballfield. A sprint of perhaps one hundred and thirty meters across open ground, and then he'd reach the tree line. From there, it would be only a short distance to freedom—and to Will.

He would need to either steal the key to the stairwell, or convince someone to unlock it for him. Both options came down to one set of keys, and one man.

In one scenario, the man would live, and be richly reimbursed for his malefaction—just as Hadrian had paid the magician Pachrates. In the other, the man—who had also become a friend—would die, along with the guards flanking his door.

As if on cue, the sound of a key sliding into the lock arrested Hannibal's ears. The sound was firm and familiar: Barney.

He shook himself, willing away the dizziness droning in the back of his skull. Which path would the man choose, and how far would Hannibal need to go to reclaim his phíltatos? The moment would tell.

The head orderly stepped noiselessly through the door on soft-soled sneakers. He scanned the room in his usual way, ensuring that nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Then his gaze fell on Hannibal. Seeing he was awake, Barney closed the door and came to his bedside.

"Afternoon, Doctor Lecter. You manage all right while I was away?" He eyed the untouched tray of Jell-O and oatmeal, and glanced at the sheets pulled up around Hannibal's waist. "You need help with the bathroom? I came up soon as I clocked in."

"Good afternoon, Barney." Hannibal said, nodding. His head swam with the movement. "Excellent timing. It so happens I could use some assistance, now that you're here."

Barney moved to the side of the bed, blocking the ever-present eye of the camera. Hannibal watched as he pretended to fuss about with the disabled catheter.

"All right, let's get you into the bathroom," he declared.

The orderly lifted him up and settled him into the wheelchair. He waited to speak until they were safely sequestered behind the bathroom door.

"You feelin' all right, Doctor Lecter? You don't look so good. Seems like you managed okay without the nurses, though."

Hannibal swallowed as a chill passed through him, raising gooseflesh along his arms and legs. "I managed well enough on my own, though you might want to send the pillow slips down to laundry. I don't feel entirely well, though. Feverish. Nauseas."

Barney placed his palm against Hannibal's forehead. The gesture sent another wave of dizziness through his body, and he gripped the arms of the wheelchair to steady himself. The orderly moved two fingers to either side of Hannibal's neck, testing.
"Well, you definitely got a temperature," he said, frowning. "And your lymph nodes are swollen. But you prob'ly already realized that."

"Ah. I hadn't checked," Hannibal said, his voice sounding thin to his own ears. "Not very diligent with self-diagnosis these days, it seems."

Barney moved his fingers to Hannibal's temple. Hannibal tilted his head, allowing the other man to sift through the hair covering the still-healing wound from his head injury. The stitches had been removed only a few days ago, and it was still sore. Hannibal knew it looked ugly.

Barney appeared unconcerned by the wound's appearance. He bent down and tilted Hannibal forward with warm hands, and then pulled up the fabric of his hospital dress. He lifted the gauze over the exit wound from Francis' bullet and peered close. His fingers probed the swollen ridge of Hannibal's spine.

Checking for signs of fresh inflammation, Hannibal thought to himself, wincing.

Since when has pain bothered you? Will's voice in his head was condescending. His storm-dark eyes stared down with cold assessment as he sipped his wine. It seems you've been changed after all, Doctor Lecter.

"So it's just fever and chills and general feeling bad?" Barney's voice broke through Hannibal's reverie. "No sharp pains or blackouts?"

Hannibal cleared his throat. "No, no blackouts. Fatigue, primarily. And lack of appetite. Though that may be due more to the kitchen staff's idea of food than my hesitation to eat it."

"Yeah, the cafeteria's not much better," Barney said, thoughtfully. He flipped Hannibal's gown back into place and straightened up with a wheeze.

"Well, nothing looks outta the ordinary or infected, so it's not that. If I had to guess, I'd say you got a good ol'-fashioned case of the flu." Barney chuckled. "I'll get you some Ibuprofen and Zofran, and make sure you get extra fluids. Not much else you can do. Might help if you tried to eat somethin', though. Nurses said you haven't touched anything since yesterday."

"Barney." Hannibal looked into the orderly's face. "I need to stand. I need to walk. Will you help me try now?"

Barney's mouth curled. He seemed to be debating with himself. Then his chin jerked in a nod.

"Al'right. I know you're not feelin' good, Doctor Lecter. But we'll practice. So long as you promise to try'n eat somethin' afterwards."

"I will try. Thank you, Barney."

The orderly bent down and slid his arm underneath Hannibal's shoulder.

"Okay, on the count of three, I'm gonna pull you up. Ready?"

Hannibal nodded. A tingle of anticipation flitted down his spine, chasing away the chill that had washed over him a moment before.

"One… two… three… an' up!"

Hannibal's legs jerked underneath him as his feet connected with the cold tile floor. Fresh nausea
gripped him, tightening somewhere between his stomach and his gut, as his body tried to make sense of the forgotten experience of standing.

"Okay?" Barney's voice reverberated against the inside of his skull.

"Um." Hannibal's head swam with a hundred different shades of vertigo. "Don't—don't let go just yet."

"I'm not gonna, don't worry. Not 'til you're ready."

Hannibal grunted in acknowledgment. His legs shook beneath him. There were few things he despised more than his body's own refusal to cooperate with his needs. He felt as if he were back in Florence, lying helpless in the bottom of the copper tub beneath Bedelia's wobbly needle. She'd had too much to drink again the night before. It still showed in the pockmarked scars from the stitches she'd sewn into him that morning.

"I appreciate the help, Barney," he said, swallowing the feverish ache in his throat and leaning into the other man's shoulder. He could feel his left knee—the one Doctor Schneider had smashed—threatening to buckle. "I wonder, though, if there might be a way we could help each other further—to our mutual benefit."

Barney eyed him sideways and tightened his grip around his back. "How's that, Doctor Lecter?"

To Hannibal's surprise, the orderly's voice sounded strained. Almost as if he'd anticipated the suggestion. He turned to look Barney in the eye—as directly as he could in their awkward positioning.

"We've known each other for some weeks, Barney. Though I wasn't cognizant for all of it, I could feel your care and attention even through the fog of my unconsciousness. I could sense your desire to help. I still sense it. And you've proven yourself a trustworthy caretaker, just as I've remained a cooperative patient."

Barney shifted his arm underneath Hannibal's shoulder blade to prop up his weak side.

"Doctor Bloom pays me to take care of you, Doctor Lecter. But you're right—I'd say we get along pretty good. Now try taking a step."

Hannibal braced his left foot against the floor and commanded his trembling quadriceps to contract and lift. To his satisfaction, the muscles obeyed. He took a stilted step forward, bumping against Barney's chest as his other foot reconnected with the tile.

"Yes, but do they pay you well, Barney?" Hannibal's stomach churned with the effort of standing upright. He swallowed down the nausea, and focused instead on choosing his words. "I imagine, for all the time and care you devote to the patients under your charge, it must feel as though the salary and accommodations fall short on many days."

Another step, this time with his left foot. Barney didn't reply.

Hannibal's bruised knee lurched as the tendon seized. He pushed down with his heel, ignoring the welling tenderness in his kneecap. Both legs would need to cooperate in tandem; but the dizziness was spiraling up through his spine, into his head. His ill and injured body would meet his determination only halfway, it seemed. He wouldn't be able to hold onto Barney much longer.

"It may surprise you to know that I've been inside the campus apartments," Hannibal panted, pressing on despite his body's disobedience.
He didn't mention that it was Matthew Brown's studio he'd visited, after the police tape had been torn away and the FBI's fuss over Hannibal's near-murder had subsided. The deceased orderly's dwelling had yielded a predictable library of bodybuilding manuals and true crime novels, as well as an extensive collection of torture porn. In a word, disappointing. Hannibal had left without desiring to know anything more, his curiosity deflated.

"Not only are the units deplorably small," he continued, "but they also lack many modern conveniences necessary for the comfort of twenty-four-hour nursing staff like yourself. Private laundry facilities. Dishwashers. Entertainment options. A gym. The closest grocery store is a twenty-minute drive. You're isolated here, Barney. Fenced in like a dog in a too-small run, without the things you need. The things you desire. And I'm certain that Doctor Bloom's meager recompense doesn't make up for those things."

He paused, giving room for Barney to speak. The orderly was silent, his eyes downcast in careful thought.

"What would you do, Barney, if you didn't have to think twice about scrabbling for the fruits of your labors?" Hannibal urged. "If you could do as you wished, live as you wished, without financial constraint? Without the burden of endless responsibility hanging over your head, day in and day out?"

He allowed the appealing note to hang on the air. It was several tense and wobbly seconds before Barney answered. When he did, his voice was startlingly matter-of-fact.

"You're not the first person to ask me that today, believe it or not." He grunted, pulling Hannibal's arm tighter over his neck. "One more step, Doctor Lecter. Then we'll take a rest."

Being taller by several inches, Barney had to hunch to support him. Hannibal could tell that his own weight was taking its toll on the orderly's back. More concerning, however, was his previous statement.

Not the first. Curious. Who else asked you, Barney—and why?

Hannibal kept his eyes on the floor and his voice even as he pushed down with his left leg. "An interesting coincidence. Has someone made you a job offer?"

A flare of pain ground through his patella. He gritted his teeth and pushed past it.

The orderly chuckled, but there was no mirth in it. "You could say that. Think you'd find it 'specially interesting."

A hot rush of anticipation surged inside him at Barney's tone. Hannibal had told himself not to hold out hope for divine intervention. But was it feasible that someone other than the Fates had decided to embroil themselves in his and Barney's deceptions?

He stepped forward again. Relief flooded him as his leg straightened without help. Then his left knee suddenly buckled, and he slid towards the floor. Hannibal's fingers dug into the soft, over-washed cloth of Barney's lab coat as the orderly pulled him up. He didn't fall.

"All right, not bad," Barney huffed, curling his forearm around Hannibal's other shoulder. He guided him gingerly backward to the wheelchair, lifting his weight along the way. "Let's sit you down for a sec'."

Hannibal collapsed against the chair's padded cushion. His brain felt light as a balloon, bumping against the insides of his skull. The short walk had taken its toll—but it was a start.
Barney rolled the wheelchair to face the bathroom's back wall, and then plopped down on the lid of the toilet, opposite Hannibal. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve.

He was breathing more heavily than he should be, Hannibal saw. Several decades of poor nutritional choices, infrequent exercise, and a possible pre-diabetic condition had not been kind to the man's health or physique. An all-too-common, but addressable crisis, if the orderly started paying more attention to his diet and exercise. It was yet another scenario he could use to tempt Barney away from Alana's nest.

Barney's eyes shifted to Hannibal's legs, where the cotton gown was rucked up over his knees. He frowned at the red-and-purple patchwork of bruises stretching from his kneecap to the top of his shin.

"What happened there? Didn't see that on you before I left yesterday."

"Doctor Schneider took umbrage with my knee," Hannibal answered. The physician's name was like salt on his tongue.

Barney's eyes widened. "He didn't find out—?"

"No," he answered, quickly. "He believes I'm still paralyzed. But he became a little temperamental when he stopped to check on me, and decided to take it out on my knee. The good doctor seems to have a distinct lack of compassion for his patients, as well as limited self-restraint."

Barney's eyes darkened as they scanned the injury, though he didn't move to touch it. His forehead creased, widening the grooves between his eyebrows.

"That's not right," he muttered under his breath. His eyes darted to the side, then back to Hannibal's knee. "Not right. Shouldn't be doing that to patients. Not here. Not anywhere."

"A deplorable violation of the Hippocratic Oath," Hannibal agreed. He fought the buzzing lightness in his head to seize on Barney's previous words. "You said I wasn't the only one to speak of your hospital duties today. Tell me, what did the first person say?"

The orderly coughed and leaned forward, one elbow crooked against his thigh. "They offered to help me with a problem," he answered, fixing his eyes on Hannibal's. "One I didn't know I had 'til a couple days ago. 'Til you asked me to not to tell Doctor Bloom and Doctor Schneider about bein' able to move your legs." He glanced back at Hannibal's knee with a mixture of concern and unease.

Hannibal's eyebrows lifted. A spark of hope rose in his chest, fire-bright and hungry. He didn't dare form the name in his mind.

"Not yet."

"The past only changes in dreams," Barney continued. "We can't make it different now—that's a fact. But I know you've been thinkin' about how to change the future, and why, and who you'd wanna change it for. Been seein' it in your eyes. And I know I gotta be part of those thoughts, 'cause of where I am. A hurt animal's the most dangerous—if you'll pardon the comparison, Doctor Lecter. I never fooled myself about that with you. Thing is, though, you're not the only person who's been havin' those thoughts. Which benefits me."

Hannibal stared, recalling his pledge of two days ago. No beast nor body of water, nor any living person... He'd made the vow and he would keep it, no matter the cost.

This was the critical moment. In his mind, he could see the locked stairwell slipping open with a turn of Barney's key. He could also envision the chair leg lodged in the side of Barney's throat, a dark stream of jugular blood spurting from it.
"And what did you think of their solution?" Hannibal asked carefully. He cocked his head, and the world sloshed sideways. He blinked against the wooziness, waiting for the other man's reply.

The orderly breathed in deep, as if to preemptively cleanse his lungs of his next words.

"I think we gotta get you walking by Tuesday, Doctor Lecter."

A hard, steady glimmer rose in Barney's eyes as he stared back at Hannibal. The unspoken awareness of the shift in their alliance—and the altered course of their fates—flashed between them like lightning inside a thunderhead. It illuminated the space around them for a dazzling instant—and then shrank back into its cloud to await the inevitable unleashing of the storm.

Through the trembling in his muscles and his fever-tinged fatigue, Hannibal felt the spark inside him brighten and spread. A tongue of flame leapt within his breast, flickering with a millenniums-old echo: *My phíltatos.*

The world was no longer a reverie; his Will was coming for him. The cracks in their teacup were starting to mend. Even his years-old equations had proven correct. Fate and circumstance had again returned them to this moment, and soon, he and Will would together map the many crossroads of their dreams and memories. They would forge a new path—a reimagined future that belonged to them, and them alone.

*I forgive you, Will.*

Barney's voice pierced Hannibal's thoughts as the orderly stood up. "First, though, we gotta take care of that fever and get you eatin' proper again. Then we'll get you moving. Not gonna be much use to anybody if you're too sick to go very far."

For the second time that day, Hannibal's lips curved in the approximation of a smile. He wove his fingers together in a servile gesture.

"*I much* prefer your course of treatment to Doctor Schneider's, Barney. Consider me your eager patient."

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--Fifteen days after the fall—earlier that morning--

Will swirled his spoon around the rim of the green ceramic coffee mug. It was his second cup. He'd already mixed in cream and honey, but he needed something to do while he waited.

Outside the arched windows of the coffee shop, a few desperate snowflakes swirled as the dwindling autumn continued to mimic winter. A yellow plastic sign taped to the glass declared: *ICE CREAM BY THE SCOOP, HAND-DIPPED.* The sleet that had frozen on the roads the previous day had largely melted; still, Will doubted that many of the customers who drifted into Bean Hollow had come in search of ice cream.

The small, eclectic café was a fifteen-minute drive from the hospital. Will had chosen a table in the corner by the window, away from the main seating area. Privacy was important. So was preserving the remains of his sanity. Between his sleep deprivation and the slow fraying of his nerves, the thought of sitting in proximity to strangers made him want to scream.
He stirred his coffee into a small whirlpool, splashing a drop over the rim. Glanced at his watch beneath the lenses of his glasses. He needed to stay focused. Had to keep his head in the present, or risk unraveling his resolve.

It's 11:28 a.m. on Friday. I'm in a coffee shop in Ellicott City, Maryland. My name is Will Graham. And I'm waiting for Barney Matthews.

As if in response to his thought, the door of Bean Hollow opened, ushering in a frigid blast of air. Will looked up. A tall figure wrapped in a quilted overcoat stepped inside. Barney let the door fall shut behind him, causing the antique sleigh bells hanging across the top to jingle. He looked out of breath.

Will gave a short wave. Barney nodded when he saw him, then pulled off his blue beanie and went over to the register.

While Barney placed his order, Will sipped at his too-sweet coffee and gazed at the window display of the jewelry store across the street. He went over his list in his mind, making sure he remembered everything he needed to say. How to say it. The persuasion and order of the points would change, depending on Barney's responses. But he was well-armed; he now knew more about the BSHCI, and about Barney himself, than he'd ever cared to.

He'd bolted out of bed as soon as the front door had clicked shut that morning, jumpy from feigning sleep. With Molly and Walt finally out of the house, he'd made a beeline for his laptop. A few hours of clicking and poking around in government databases—most of which he technically no longer had access to—had helped him cross off most of his list.

Afterward, he'd wandered into in the kitchen, still clad in his boxers and t-shirt, and dumped a sizeable amount of grounds into the coffeemaker while considering how best to present it all.

The first spark, he knew, would need to come from Barney. The remainder of the kindling would catch fire easily. At the moment, however, everything rested on the head orderly and the decisions he would make.

Barney shuffled over from the café counter, balancing a saucer in one hand. Against the odds, the bowl atop it contained two scoops of vanilla ice cream drizzled with chocolate. An enormous waffle scone was tucked against the dish, half-smothered in sauce.

Will raised an eyebrow. "Ice cream in winter?"

Barney gave a shrug as he plopped into the chair. "I don't drink coffee."

He pulled the cherry off the top of the sundae and bit it from the stem.

"The hand-dipped cones are supposed to be their specialty." Will's mouth twitched in a lopsided smile.

The orderly's eyes were elusive as they met his. His gaze roamed over Will's thick tortoiseshell frames before looking back down.

"Cones are too messy. I like to keep things neat. Contained."

Will brought his mug to his lips. He swallowed, wincing at the saccharine mixture of too much honey and cream. Better to let it settle. He set the coffee back down.

"Good philosophy."
The orderly picked up his spoon and dug into his sundae. "You wanted to talk to me about Doctor Lecter."

*Smart, Will thought. And to the point.*

"Did Doctor Bloom happen to tell you why?"

"Nope. Didn't ask."

The orderly broke the scone in two with his other hand. "Want some? The pastries are good here."

Will waved away the offered piece. "Thanks. I had breakfast earlier," he lied. He took a breath, steeling himself. "I told Doctor Bloom that I wanted to caution you about Hannibal's interest in me. That he'd start asking questions about why my body hasn't been found. That he'd smell a cover-up. And that Hannibal Lecter does *not* like being lied to."

Will paused, casting a glance at the sparsely occupied seating area. No one was watching them. "That's what I *told* Doctor Bloom," he continued. "But that's not why I asked you to meet me."

Barney looked up. A half-frown tugged at his mouth, but his eyes were glinting. "So why did you, then? Lie to him, I mean."

Will's mouth opened, then closed. He pushed his glasses higher on his nose. This was one of the tricky points he'd known he'd need to navigate.

"I... it was to protect myself. Initially. I thought I'd be better off—that *Hannibal* would be better off—if he didn't know I was alive. The doctors didn't think he'd come out of his coma, so I didn't think about what would happen if he *did*. Didn't know what I'd want to do or say. What I'd want him to know."

"Seems to me like he's thought about it an awful lot." Barney spooned another bite of ice cream into his mouth, allowing his words to gather weight in the silence. He swallowed. "Could tell it was you he was thinkin' and talkin' about, even when he was tellin' stories. Told one to Mister Crawford, about two guys and a lion. Historical stuff. It was like he was talkin' about the two'a you. He's been seein' things in his dreams, too. Doesn't sound very happy about it."

Will's pulse quickened at Barney's words. In his mind, he could see Jack shrouded in the gloom of the Lecter library, holding out Hannibal's letter—the same letter that was nestled inside Molly's textbook, against an illustration of the story to which Barney had just alluded. The coincidence was almost too portentous.

*You're either dreaming again, or you really are going crazy.*

The thought clattered through his head like a tin can down an alley.

Will picked up his mug and rotated it between his fingertips, letting the warmth seep into his skin. "*Does* Hannibal think I'm alive?"

The orderly's eyebrows lifted. "*Think?* Nah. If I had to guess, I'd say he *knows*. Like one'a those sixth sense things."

Will opened his mouth, but Barney beat him to the question.

"Doctor Bloom said not to say anything about you to him, like you asked. And nobody's told him, 's far as I know. Seems to me like he can *feel* it, though. Just like you can feel him. I see it in both'a
you. Saw it in your eyes when I took you to see him. He can sense you're still out there—mark my words, Mister Graham. And that's why Doctor Lecter's been thinkin' about how to get out of the hospital. He's not gonna rest 'til he finds you again.

The space between them seemed suddenly charged, as though the air was filled with static. Will's ears were buzzing. If the orderly's suspicions were true, then it meant Barney would need his help just as much as Will needed his.

He set his mug down without touching his coffee and leaned closer.

"What makes you think Hannibal's planning an escape? He's paralyzed. He can't even get out of bed."

Barney's features slid to a somber expression. "Just got a feeling. Call it my sixth sense." He swirled his spoon through the melting puddle of ice cream and chocolate sauce, mixing it into a velvety brown puddle. "Besides, he can walk now. Well, sorta. His body's tryin' to remember. I'm helpin' him figure it out."

Will's eyes widened. "He—what? Doctor Bloom didn't—"

"Doctor Bloom doesn't know," Barney said quietly.

Both men fell silent, evaluating each other across the table. Prickles of heat skittered along the back of Will's neck. Hannibal's paralysis had reversed. That meant his spine was healing. And Will's own anticipation had been proven correct. It appeared Barney was willing to bend—but by how much?

"You're lying for him."

"He asked me not to tell the doctors. Not 'til his MRI on Wednesday. Then they'll find out, and they'll send him back to his cell. They'll lock him down again. That's how I know what he's thinkin'. If he's gonna try to break out, it's gonna be before then."

Will blinked, reigning in his surprise. Barney's awareness of—and even nonchalance toward—Hannibal's prospective escape plan was both startling and convenient.

"If you're right, then there's something you need to know," Will said, serious. "Once Hannibal's made up his mind to do something, he won't hesitate—not even for a moment—to kill anyone who gets in his way."

Barney's spoon stilled. "That means me, too."

It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

Will glanced at the college-age barista, who was poking at his smartphone behind the counter. The nearest customers aside from themselves were, thankfully, well out of earshot.

"We both know we're at different ends of the board in Hannibal's chess game," he said confidentially, lacing his fingers together on the table. "But there might be a way we can help each other out. One that would benefit you, most of all."

Barney glanced at Will, then shifted his gaze away. "That's why you wanted to talk to me. You wanna ask me to help you."
He picked up the other half of the scone and crunched on it as his eyes traveled the perimeter of the room. They halted when he spotted the security camera pointed at the window behind their table. Will had seen the camera when he'd sat down earlier, but it hadn't concerned him.

"Doctor Bloom knows we're meeting. Don't worry about the camera." He paused, waiting until Barney's gaze returned to his face. "Listen—I need your help, Barney. And you need mine. Plus, Hannibal's interests might be worth a considerable amount of money, for the right kind of help."

The orderly's eyebrows lifted—not in reproof, Will saw, but interest. "How much d'you mean by considerable?"

Will took another sip of his coffee. It was starting to go cold. "Let me put it this way. You could keep babysitting federal inmates for the next twenty-five years, for around fifty grand a year. Or you could let someone else do the babysitting, and walk away with enough to retire now."

He paused, letting the idea sink in. Reminded himself to keep his voice steady. Confident. Barney needed to believe in him if he was going to agree to anything.

"The funds won't be traceable," Will continued. "And you won't be implicated. You just have to go along with the plan, and help with a few things. Then play dumb, and walk away from the hospital system whenever you decide to. Or you can quit after it's all done, and just leave. Go wherever you want. How does that sound?"

Barney tapped the spoon against the rim of his bowl. When he spoke again, his voice was soft; almost reverent. "Money's the only thing that's truly holy. I've believed that for a long time now. Everything else changes, or slips sideways. But with enough money, you can do most anything you put your mind to." He looked up. A spark shone in his milky brown eyes. "I'd like that, ya know? To put my mind and money in the same direction."

"So you'll help Hannibal?"

Barney sighed and leaned back. He tucked his arms over his puffed coat. "There's a but."

At that moment, the barista walked past the table, clutching a roll of trash bags in one hand.

"Need a refill, sir?" he asked nasally, tipping his head at Will's congealing coffee. His tone indicated that he hoped the answer was no.

"Thanks, I'm fine," Will said. He waited until the kid had sauntered off to the garbage bins at the back of the café before turning back to Barney. "You've got concerns."

Barney nodded, his face impassive. "I do. Like I told you at the hospital, I heard some things. How am I s'posed to know you're not lying? That one or both'a you isn't just gonna kill me when this is all over? Seems like an easier solution to me. Not sharin' the burden of knowing."

"I know you've been trying to help Hannibal," Will said, leaning forward. He pulled off his glasses and folded them into his front pocket. Now both of their faces were naked.

Show him he can trust you. Make him see you're telling the truth.

"If you help me help him, I can guarantee your safety," he continued. "Hannibal wouldn't condone that kind of repayment. Neither would I. He would consider it… rude."

Will smirked, remembering the comment he'd once made to Jack about Hannibal and lesser rudeness.
"Right now, you work for Doctor Bloom. She pays you to lie to Hannibal for her, and you do. She pays you just enough to keep a one-bedroom apartment on the hospital grounds and whittle down the loan on your eight-year-old Galant. Those things are the price of your lies. Not very much. Hannibal can pay you much more."

Barney seemed to consider. He also didn't seem surprised that Will knew as much about him as he did. Then again, the orderly had heard some things—as he continued to remind Will.

"Instead of lying to Hannibal about me being dead, I'm asking you to lie to Doctor Bloom about Hannibal," Will coaxed. "Not really that big a difference. Just a better price for your lie. If you trust him, then you can trust me."

Barney chewed his lip thoughtfully. "And where're you gonna go? Away with him?"

"I—" Will's mouth felt suddenly dry. He looked down. "I owe him. I need to see it through. He was responsible for getting me out, once. Now he's handed his freedom to me—his life. It's my turn to give it back to him."

Barney sighed. "People like you and me are s'posed to say that freedom stops being a right when you start takin' it away from others."

"Supposed to, yeah." Will swallowed and lifted his eyes, keeping his expression neutral.

The orderly's gaze roamed to the ice cream sign hanging across the café window. His eyes softened a little as a memory seemed to cross his mind, like a star traversing the blankness of the heavens. Then he looked back, and the yellowed whites of his eyes seemed to darken.

"I know you wouldn't be tellin' me all this if you planned to let it drop if I said no. I know about you, Mister Graham. I know what things you've done, what things he's done. I know what things he'll do, if I walk away from this. I'm not gonna lie—I don't like those things. But seems I can't walk away now. Already dug myself into it."

Will shifted in his chair. He felt the outline of his thirty-eight snubnose—which he'd tucked into his jeans, on a whim, before leaving the house—pressing against his lower back, warmed by his body heat.

"I do like Doctor Lecter, though," Barney continued, his face brightening. "He's like a friend, almost. Don't know if he has those, really, but he's been one to me. And seein' a man so full of knowledge and dreams, dyin' from the inside out because of what he thinks he's lost..." Barney's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's like watching a shipwreck. Or a house on fire. Just seein' everything collapse and go up in flames... I think about watchin' that for the next ten or twenty years, and it makes my stomach hurt."

He rubbed his thumb over an old stain on the table. Then folded his hands together on the tabletop and stared at Will in a way that suggested resignation.

Will tensed. Now or never. If the river refused to bend, either he or Hannibal would have to dam its flow. He knew, instinctively, that Hannibal would find the thought as distasteful as he did.

"Here's the second but," Barney said quietly. "I don't like the idea of lyin' to Doctor Bloom. She's been nice to me. But—if what you're sayin' about the money is true, and there's a way we can do all'a this under the radar, then yeah. I'll help you. I'll help Doctor Lecter. And then you can both help me."

Will's lip twitched. Something fluttered inside his gut—like moth wings, beating toward the glowing
embers of Barney's words. He clenched his hands to keep from grinning.

Behind them, the barista lugged a bulging trash bag across the café floor. A stream of watery coffee grounds dripped from a hole in the bottom. Barney eyed the silty trail with a frown.

"I don't want Hannibal to burn, either," Will said softly.

The orderly's eyes shifted.

"You said you like things neat and contained. So do I. But there aren't many ways to get him out of the medical ward without alerting the staff or the cameras. We'll need a distraction. A big one."

Barney's brow furrowed. "You mean like a ruse?"

"Something to keep the guards busy and fool the CCTV," Will said, nodding. "Sometimes distractions require destruction… but some things can create as well as destroy."

He paused. A look of anticipation flickered across the orderly's face. He appeared almost excited at the prospect of helping the BSHCI's number-one felon escape. It seemed Barney's loyalties to the hospital were less congruous than Will had suspected.

"Other things may need to burn so Hannibal doesn't have to," Will said carefully. "Do you understand, Barney?"

Barney's eyes widened a fraction. "I think I do, Mister Graham. You got a plan?"

Will allowed himself to relax as he shifted back in his seat. "A solid one. Just needs a little fine-tuning, and some help from you."

"When?"

"Tuesday. Overnight. During the shift change."

Barney tipped his chin. "That's the night before his MRI. Before Doctor Schneider finds out he's not paralyzed. I'm s'posed to get off at eight."

"It'll buy us some time," Will asserted. "As it is, your shift aligns perfectly with what we'll need to do, and how we'll need to do it. We'll both need to do a little homework. Getting Hannibal out of the hospital won't be a problem as long as the guards and nurses are out of the way. No one will know it's him, even if they do see him. But a few things will need to be adjusted first. That's where I need you."

"Dang. You really did think this out." Barney's face was transfixed. "But how're you gonna make sure no one sees him?"

Will smiled. Inside the black well of his imagination, a hot light smoldered in the darkness, gathering strength.

"Camouflage. I'll explain later."

He reached inside the shoulder bag next to his chair and took out a tall gift bag. The neck of a wine bottle peeked above the lip. "A little thank-you gift for the meeting. I hope you like Bordeaux. There's a prepaid phone in the bottom of the bag. My burner cell's already programmed in. Don't take it out until you're back at your apartment."

He passed the bag to Barney, who took it by the handles and tucked it into his lap. He smiled, wide
enough for the security camera to see. "That's kind of you, Mister Graham. I appreciate the wine, and the advice. Won't forget it."

"I'll call you tomorrow afternoon to see how things are going," Will said, briefly returning the smile. "I'll have more to tell you then."

Delight lit on Barney's face. "This feels like a movie," he whispered, his voice tense with excitement. "Shawshank Redemption or somethin'."

"A little, maybe," Will said. "But nothing I'm offering in exchange for Hannibal's redemption is fictional. And everything that happens from this moment on is irreversible. Can you live with that?"

Barney tipped his chin, his expression turning serious again. "I can live with retiring at forty for a single night's worth'a work. I know our necks are gonna be on the line. You can count on me, Mister Graham."

"Good." Will took a sip of his coffee. He winced at the cold lump of honey that rolled over his tongue. Should've asked for a refill. "I'll hold you to that."

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The dogs greeted Will at the door, whining. He knocked the wintry sludge from his boots as they pranced behind the screen, pushing one another out of the way in their eagerness for attention.

Inside, Winston hovered in the kitchen doorway as Will pulled down a glass and poured himself three fingers of whiskey. He planned to drink it slowly. He needed to keep his concentration.

Will knew the catch he and Barney were angling for would be an easy one. The fish was already willing to be caught. The fly knot would need to be an intricate one—strong enough for a seamless reel-in, but easy enough to unravel later.

The idea came to him with equal parts delight and dismay: A blood knot—two halves of a double noose. Overlap and join. Tighten, then trim.

The release would be the tricky part. Hannibal would have to understand.

Would he? A hot tingle rippled across the scar on Will's abdomen, like a kiss from a flame. Tighten, then trim. Cut to the quick.

Will swallowed as he pulled the snubnose from his waistband and set it on the computer desk, and then opened up the browser on his laptop.

It took him less than an hour to locate everything he needed. When he was finished, he pushed his chair back and stood up, wondering grimly how much he'd be able to ferret from his and Molly's joint savings account without her noticing. He'd have to stretch it, but he knew Chiyoh would make up the balance.

She'd been his first call that morning, before heading out to Baltimore. He'd dug out the burner phone he'd stored away in case of emergencies, with a mental note to purchase two more with cash on his way into the city.
When Chiyoh had answered, the first sound that had greeted his ears was the faint scrape of bristles against steel.

_Cleaning her shotgun_, his mind supplied. He could picture her steady hands working the nylon brush through one barrel and then the other, ensuring the weapon's deadly accuracy.

"I thought you might call me." Her soft accent was strangely welcoming.

"I need your help," he said, skipping the greeting. They were well past the need for politeness, he felt, given that she'd put a bullet through his shoulder. "Actually, Hannibal does. I'm going to need access to his money—a lot of it. According to his will, you're the heir to his estate and the trustee for his accounts."

"I am. And he appointed you the trustee for his life. I was glad to hear you made the right choice."

"That choice didn't require any assistance. The next one will."

"I see." Chiyoh paused. The line crackled. In the background, something thumped against a wooden floor—the rifle stock, from the sound of it.

_In her hunting cabin_, Will thought. He closed his eyes. In his mind, he saw a bead of blood sliding down the bent rachis of a feather. It hung for a moment at the tip before dripping into a small puddle beneath a bouquet of hung pheasants.

"So," she said, matter-of-factly. "Are you going to get him out?"

Will's eyes popped open at the candid question. He hesitated. An awareness flooded his consciousness, claustrophobic and cold, that what he said next would alter the course of several dozen—if not hundreds—of lives, including his own. People he knew, people he didn't know. People he cared for. People he despised. And one person to whom he owed an inexplicable debt.

She'd already anticipated his answer, Will knew. _Expected it_. Chiyoh had said it herself, years ago—her voice hushed, yet stoic, as she and Hannibal said their goodbyes on his porch.

_Some beasts shouldn't be caged._

The words had sliced through his sleep like splinters, embedding themselves in his memory.

"That's the plan," he'd said, his voice hollow as a rifle barrel.

In the present, Will stood up from the desk and stretched, satisfied with the day's serendipitous chain of events. He glanced at the chintzy porthole clock—a birthday gift from Molly—on the wall above the desk: 2:18. In roughly three hours, she and Walt would return home, and the normal rhythm of their lives would resume.

With a pang of something that felt less like abandonment than annoyance, Will realized that Molly hadn't texted or called him all day.

_You could've called her yourself—if you'd bothered to think of it_, his inner voice chastised.

_Rather felicitous timing, Will._

Hannibal's voice materialized inside his skull, rising over the jumble of his own thoughts. The image of a toothy smile followed, like some twisted incarnation of the Cheshire cat.

_I see you're hard at work. "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I_
will make him a helper fit for him."' Genesis chapter two, verse eighteen. See? It won't be long now. Soon, neither of us will be alone again.

Will wheezed out a laugh. Hannibal's telepathic cameos were becoming a disturbingly frequent—and disturbingly normal—occurrence.

*If you're not dreaming, then you're definitely going crazy,* his own voice growled inside his head. *Do you understand the difference between dreams and memories? Does it really matter anymore?*

Will shoved his subconscious out of the way. "I'm not your Eve, Hannibal," he said aloud to the room. "Or your Adam. That's *not* what this is about."

From the floor, Winston gave a low whine. Collars clanked from the living room as the other dogs lifted their heads, on alert at his tone.

*Some might argue that we share many of the same parts.* Hannibal's words curled inside the frayed spaces in his brain, licking around the exposed wires, jolting him. *A rib here, a thought there. Breath upon breath, skin against skin, meat into music. And thus man created man. We're conjoined, Will. We always will be.*

"I owe you a *favor,*" Will murmured, gritting his teeth. "It's wrong, I know. But I won't let you go. Not until it's finished."

"Until it's finished?" The smoothness of Hannibal's voice faltered. *'Won't let go, or 'can't,' Will? Think carefully. Look inside yourself. Who do you see beside you in your dreams? Is it Molly? Whose presence do you crave when you awaken in the middle of the night, alone in your thoughts?*

Will grabbed his whiskey glass from the desktop and took a gratuitous swig. He ignored the latter question, instead focusing on the burn of the alcohol as it sliced down his throat. He swallowed hard. It hurt. He knew he'd need to make an effort to rehydrate at some point.

"I said *won't,*" he answered, firm.

*Then it seems our story is changing.* Hannibal's voice hardened. *'For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.' Galatians two-eighteen. Is that what this is about, Will?*

Will shuddered as he gulped down the last of the liquor, drowning out the taste of his own name on Hannibal's imaginary tongue. *Hannibal's voice, Hannibal's presence—always, everywhere.* It ground underneath every thought, like the whirr of a buzzsaw.

It wasn't about guilt, but it wasn't about doing the right thing, either. He knew this, just as intimately as he knew he wouldn't go back on his decision. *Couldn't* go back. The space in his brain reserved for moral reasoning had long since faded to gray.

He thumped the glass on the desktop and closed his eyes. *Stop,* he willed silently. *Please, just stop. I'm trying.*

Hannibal didn't reply.

Will laced his fingers behind his head and rolled his neck, attempting to calm his crawling nerves. The whiskey hum was slogging through his head now, but his plan was starting to materialize into something tangible. *Irreversible.*

A hot impatience danced in his veins. Some cold air would do him, and the dogs, some good, he
decided.

He grabbed his burner phone, leaving the glass behind. Winston pushed up stiffly and followed him through the greatroom, his tail wagging behind him. The other dogs jumped up from their beds and ran to join them. They could sense the impending opportunity for an outdoor romp.

"Okay. Time for some exercise, guys," Will announced. His words were met with enthusiastic panting and an impatient yip from Zoe.

"And gals," he said, smiling at the little Pekingese-pug, who was both the smallest and loudest of the pack.

The dogs pranced around him as he walked through the greatroom, veering by the bookcase on his way to the side door. He glanced down at the spot where the Penguin atlas sat, tucked innocuously into its spot on the third shelf from the bottom. On impulse, he squatted down and pulled out the book. Barney's earlier retelling of Jack and Hannibal's conversation had made him curious.

He tucked the volume under his arm and pushed open the screen door. The dogs bounded into the backyard in a rambunctious blur of brown, black, and white, sliding on the small patches of ice scattered across the ground.

Will stopped at the edge of the porch. He'd forgotten to put on his boots, and the cold was seeping in through his socks. He glanced up at the sky, squinting. A mass of gray cloud, thick with the promise of rain, hung over the sky like an unwashed sheet.

He set the book on the wooden railing and surveyed the wind-bitten backyard and the tree line beyond. Aside from the yapping and wrestling of the dogs, the yard was quiet. Peaceful. Contained. Just like his life in Great Falls. Like the warm, placid balance he and Molly shared.

He could feel the manicured stability of his future stretching out beyond him. Years of stillness echoed in his ears, emptying his mind of the rush and roar of the Atlantic and the blood-slick crush of Hannibal's arms.

Will propped his elbow on the railing as the dogs chased one another around the yard, nipping with playful teeth. He flipped open the textbook. In the chapter titled Hadrian's Travels, between the drawing of the two men and the lion and the page opposite, lay Hannibal's letter.

With a tug of alarm, Will saw that the cursive script was becoming stained with traces of soft black ink. He hadn't folded it the last time he'd put it back, and the old illustration had begun to bleed onto the page, creating a mirror image of itself atop Hannibal's words.

His eyes shifted to the drawing's caption:

_Hadrian, the fourteenth emperor of Rome, and his consort, the Greek youth Antinous, together slew the infamous Marousian lion in Africa's Western Desert in the autumn of 130 AD. A scrap of poetry chronicling the hunt, penned by Hadrian himself, was later found buried in the sand. It is one of the few surviving first-person records of Hadrian and Antinous' time together._

A chill filtered down Will's spine. He knew it wasn't the cold. Lion or dragon, lovers or _nakama—it didn't matter to Hannibal. It was the analogy that tickled his aesthetic sensibilities. Now that Will could see it, he, too, was possessed by an uneasy delight in the parallels.

"What happened to you?" he whispered to the drawing. The caption hadn't explained where Hadrian and Antinous had gone after the hunt.
He turned the page, revealing a large color map of the Nile. The river was labeled on both sides with the names of ancient cities he didn't recognize. *Heliopolis. Beni Hasan. Besa. Hermopolis.* He flipped to the next page, which was entirely covered in text. Then stopped abruptly as he thumbed to the page after that, his eyes arrested by a second illustration.

This time, the drawing showed the emperor and the young man reclining on a couch inside an open-air tent. The tent was positioned at the aft of an ancient Roman warship. The Greek youth was smiling, extending a piece of fruit in offering to the emperor, whose face appeared oddly stern. Two glasses of wine rested on the table beside them.

Will's eyes widened as he scanned the caption below the drawing:

*Emperor Hadrian, accompanied by his military personnel, his attendants, and his companion, Antinous, set sail from Heliopolis (located near modern-day Cairo) in October of 130 AD, shortly before the festival of Osiris. During their journey up the Nile, a tragic accident occurred: Antinous fell overboard and drowned, under mysterious circumstances. The distraught Hadrian remained in Egypt for six months while Antinous' body was embalmed and buried. He later established a city in the youth's honor: Antinopolis. It was located near Besa, where the youth was believed to have drowned.*

The Nile. The Atlantic. They were one and the same. Hannibal had been mourning his death, just as Hadrian had mourned the death of his lover.

Goosebumps prickled Will's skin. Hannibal knew *now* that he was alive—Barney had confirmed as much. What would Hannibal do, knowing that Will had lied to him yet *again?*

The scar across his gut seared with a phantom pain, sharper this time.

In his mind's eye, he saw light glinting off of a curved steel blade as it sliced through the space between his and Hannibal's bodies. Then felt his fingers closing around a carbon-fiber handle as he pulled the linoleum knife's twin from the pillowcase.

"Not again," he whispered, squeezing his eyes closed. "Please not again."

But there *hadn't* been a knife in Hannibal's pillowcase. Only in the kitchen, the night before he and Bedelia had disappeared.

Will breathed, steadying his fluttering heartbeat. His memories of the cliffside house, and everything that had come after, *weren't* real. He and Hannibal hadn't shared a bed. They hadn't eaten Dolarhyde. They hadn't crossed the ocean, or spilled Bedelia's blood, or plunged to their second death.

*Yet.*

Will's head jerked up from the atlas as a low growl sounded from the yard.

Randy and Winston stood at attention at the back of the fence, stiff-legged. Their noses were pointed in the direction of the woods. Randy’s ears were crushed flat against his skull; Winston's, however, were quirked in expectation. The other dogs trotted to and fro behind them, whining and exchanging puzzled glances.

Will frowned, echoing the sentiment of the rest of the pack, as he scanned the tree line. *Nothing.*

Randy growled again. A tremor ran through his bullmastiff’s thick frame. Winston barked and cocked his head.
A large shape slowly emerged from the trees. Black. Four-legged. Will knew what it was even before it stepped out from the shadows.

The feathered stag shuffled into the clearing, at the exact spot where he'd seen it two nights before. This time, however, the beast was neither rearing to charge nor engulfed by flames. Instead, it appeared not to notice Will—or the dogs—at all. Its head was lowered, razor-sharp antlers nearly parallel to the ground, as it nosed at the sparse winter vegetation.

Will didn't blink this time. The stag really was there. The dogs could see it—or at least Winston and Randy could. Winston glanced over his shoulder at Will, panting excitedly. Randy's body remained rigid, his tail extended straight behind him.

Will found his voice. "Randy! Winston! Get over here. Leave it alone."

Winston obeyed, trotting over to the bottom of the porch steps and flopping down. He tracked the stag's idle movements with his eyes, curious but calm. Randy, however, was reluctant to abandon his guard. His ears twitched at the sound of Will's voice, but he didn't move.

"Randy! I said leave it. C'mere!"

The bullmastiff looked back this time, squinting in annoyance. He turned and stared at the invasive, alien creature, nose wrinkling in suspicion before reluctantly padding to the middle of the yard to join the other dogs. Zoe and Bowser sniffed at Randy as he came over, which earned each of them a snap. The puginese squealed.

"Jesus," Will said under his breath. "All right, guys," he called to the rest of the pack. "Stay up here, now!"

He whistled, eliciting a flurry of piqued ears. Randy largely ignored him, instead shuffling to the far side of the fence to plop down in a huff.

Will sighed. Molly was the one who'd intuitively connected with Randy; the dog had never really attempted to bond with Will. In fact, the bullmastiff seemed to view him as simply another dog in the pack—one that occasionally handed out treats.

Will sometimes wondered if Walt viewed him in a similar way. *You shouldn't put this guy in a mental hospital—you should kill him,* he'd snapped after Dolarhyde's attack, his eleven-year-old's face too pale and hard.

Then he'd thrown himself down in one of the hospital waiting room chairs and switched on the baseball game, leaving Will to wonder if anything would be the same between the three of them again.

In truth, it really hadn't.

The black stag snuffed and pawed at the mud underneath its hooves, kicking up a clump of dead, yellow grass. Will watched its antlers bob with the movement. The stag looked thin. Hungry. Its ribcage was visible beneath its black hide—which didn't appear singed in the least. He'd only imagined it bursting into flames and charging at him. Now, though, the stag seemed more frustrated by the clearing's lack of something edible than interested in Will's presence.

He pulled his smartphone from one back pocket and his burner cell from the other, keeping an eye on the grazing animal beyond the fence. He had one call left to make. One more favor; one more truth to wrap into a lie. It was the last spark—one that would stoke the growing flame of his and Hannibal's last reunion to a blaze.
Or possibly a wildfire, he thought dismally.

Will scrolled through his smartphone's address book until he hit the Ws and found the name he was looking for. He tapped out the number on the burner phone's keypad and hit the call button.

"Heyup?" A thick drawl greeted his ears on the third ring.

Will let out the breath he'd been holding, more warmed by the sound of Wally's voice than he'd anticipated.

"Hey, Wally. It's Will Graham."

A beat. Then: "Will! Well goddamn. Nice t'hear yer voice! Didn't recognize yer number."


Wally Oswalt—who never went by "Walt," because he didn't like the sound of the syllable at both ends of his name—had worked alongside Will's father on the Mississippi docks. He was also one of the few people who'd shown up at the senior Graham's memorial service the previous year.

When Will had grown old enough to join them on the boats, the three of them had spent most weekdays together, fixing and scraping and coiling and greasing. Wally had never treated Will like a child, despite his age. Will had liked that.

He knew that Wally had pulled a hefty side income from transporting small cargoes of stolen goods—mostly electronics—between the Gulf Coast and the Caribbean mainland in the late eighties and early nineties. Wally had quit the smuggling business around the same time Will's father had walked away from the docks and taken up bookkeeping for the boatyards on Lake Erie.

Now, Wally was retired in Florida, running an alligator-hunting business out of his house. He'd found a way around the thousand-dollar state permits for non-residents, which meant that his customers were willing to pay more to shoot their own gators. It also put Wally's retirement fund on the less transparent end of the law; but it seemed he'd been successful at keeping a low profile, so far.

Will also knew that if anyone could get him a boat, it would be Wally.

"Well now, it's been a month or some!" the man joked, his tone jovial. "How's that pretty wife'a yours? An' the kiddo? Growin' up fast, I bet."

"They're good," Will said.

The stag snorted and shook its antlers as it ambled alongside the fence. Randy growled low in his throat. Will snapped his fingers and glared at the bullmastiff, silencing him.

"Listen, I have a favor to ask. Sorry for getting right down to it, but it's important. And time-sensitive."

"Hmm." Wally coughed wetly, then cleared his throat. "Al'right, I'll hear ya. Shoot."

"I need a transporter. To Europe. From Chesapeake Bay. Figured you might know somebody up here who can work that kinda thing fast." Will mimicked the casual pattern of Wally's speech, knowing it would put him at ease. Mirroring had always been his most successful survival strategy. Now, it would help ensure Hannibal's.

A pause stretched out on the other end of the line. Will could hear the wheeze of the other man's
breath against the mouthpiece. Like his father, Wally had rolled his own cigarettes.

"You still workin' fer the FBI?" he asked, suspicion darkening his tone.

"Just teaching. Well, was teaching. But not right now."

Wally inhaled and coughed again, louder this time. The sound was alarming.

"Okkie then."

Will heard the sound of a cupboard squeaking open on hinges rusted by the Florida humidity. The clink of a glass on a countertop.

"Might know somebody who kin help ya out. Depends on what yer wantin' to transport, though."

"Human cargo." He paused, then added hurriedly, "Not kids, or girls, or anything like that. It's more of an emigration situation—if you catch my meaning."

"Hmm," Wally hummed again. "An' they can't go by air, so I'm guessin' they done something they ain't supposed to've done."

Will swallowed. In his throat, a fragile bubble of caution arose as he felt around the other man's words. "You... might say that."

"You'n I both know that's gonna take a lotta money, Will." Wally's voice was doubtful. "A lotta money and a lotta guarantees."

"Money's no problem. Guarantees can be made. It'll be clean and trouble-free. I wouldn't be asking if there was any other way—trust me."

Wally sighed. "Al'right. I kin put you in touch with a guy I know, but I can't promise ya nothin'."

"That's good enough, Wally. I appreciate it. And appreciate you sticking your neck out."

Across the yard, the stag poked its snout through the hole in the hog wire above Molly's unplanted vegetable garden and sniffed, its nostrils flaring with curiosity. Will watched the creature lick around the opening with its long, pink tongue, tasting the metal.

Wally huff-laughed on the other end of the line. The sound was like an accordion folding into itself.

"Well, it sounds more int'restin' than 'gators, anyway. Listen, I'll do it fer yer daddy. God rest 'im. He was a good man."

Will swallowed. Frowned. "Yeah."

"So, then." Wally's voice dropped to a businesslike octave. "How many people we talkin'? That's gonna make a big difference."

"Just two."

"Al'right. That's easy enough." Wally paused. Will could hear hesitation thick in the sound. "Uh, if you don't mind me askin'—you gonna be one of 'em?"

Will clenched his jaw. Inside his chest, something hot and coarse and aching bubbled up and threatened to spill over.
"No."

The stag’s head lifted. Its hard, black eyes riveted on Will, sharp as obsidian daggers. He could feel the animal’s heated stare piercing him—twisting through his gut, slicing into his skull.

Without a sound, the creature whirled on its hooves and disappeared into the trees, disintegrating into a blur of shadow and feathers.

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–Sixteen days after the fall, late afternoon–

The cellar was cold. Not as cold as the bite and spray of the Atlantic, but close enough. He’d even zipped a jacket over his sweater, but that hadn’t stopped his shivering. The icy air prickled his flesh, raising goosebumps along his arms and chest, even from inside his memory palace.

Once, the house had been illuminated with gemstone and pastel lights—memories of Abigail and Miriam. Now, its walls were smeared with wine and blood and sea salt. The warmth of Will's body against his—pulling, clutching—permeated everything.

Behind his eyelids, Hannibal saw the muscled expanse of Francis' colorful back laid out beneath his hands. He grazed his palms down the icy flesh, admiring the prominent swell of the upper and middle trapezius. He traced his fingertips along the ridges of the tattooed dragon’s horns, counting the rings.

He would take some fatty loin from the bottom of Francis' Blake portrait and fry it for tomorrow’s breakfast. After the blood loss he and Will had both suffered, they'd need the calories. The rest he would hang and dry cure with honey, sugar, and salt. There was enough room in the cellar—and time, if he survived his gunshot wound—to transform the Dragon into a well-deserved bounty for the two of them.

He picked up the carving knife. Francis had already given up much more than a pound of flesh, but that was all Hannibal would take for now. He smiled to himself as he sliced into the Dragon's webbed right wing, forever grounding his deadly flight.

Then his vision shifted, and he was no longer in the frigid gloom of the cliffside house's cellar.

The knife—a fillet blade, this time—curved easily beneath the flaccid skin of the poet's back, separating the hypodermis from the muscle. The body was soft and cool with algor mortis; the blood vessels absent of the reek of putrefaction as he sliced through them.

The semi-basement of the house he'd rented in Palermo was painted a peculiar shade of grayish-blue—one that exactly matched the color of both Will's and Antony Dimmond's eyes. This alternately intrigued and displeased him. Hannibal turned his thoughts to the rolling, yellow-green Tuscan hills he’d seen from the window of the train, and kept his eyes on his work.

He remembered, with a smirk, the irate look the porter had given him when he’d asked for assistance with the large suitcase.

A small cache of fourteenth-century French longswords, newly restored and cleaned for the Palazzo Abatellis. Would you like to see them? he'd offered, with an obliging smile, in a faultless Florentine
accent.

The snaggle-toothed porter had declined, but commented that the luggage was oddly bulky for containing only a few weapons.

*History is heavy,* Hannibal had replied, nodding.

He'd given the young man a tip for his unknowing assistance in stowing Dimmond's corpse—and the three carefully wrapped longswords from the Forte di Belvedere's collection—in the luggage compartment.

Dense, yellow light glowed suddenly in the darkness behind his eyes, and he could smell candles and perfume. Bedelia was turning for him, asking him to unzip her dress. Her face was still flushed from dancing as she glanced at him over her shoulder. Her eyes were wine-dark; almost dangerous. Almost *beautiful.*

But Bedelia, ever *laissez-faire* in her romantic impulses and complacent in her analytical prowess, had sauntered away as soon as the zipper reached the small of her back.

Unlike Antony, she was a disinterested lover whose touch neither unsettled nor disturbed him. She was careful in that way, and made sure Hannibal was keenly aware of it. He knew she would continue to be careful, which didn't dismay him. *Her* ethics, *his* aesthetics. No skin off his back, at any rate.

He wiped away the blood welling between the Dragon's wings—then peeled the mottled, death-softened skin from Antony's ribs—then spread apart the embroidered fabric of Bedelia's dress—and suddenly, the three were replaced by one. A warm body—a living, *writhing* one.

Hannibal remembered the back of Will's sweat-soaked nightshirt pressing hard against his own chest; the thick scents of spilled champagne and olive oil; Will twisting and bucking against him, *angry.*

He felt his own arms wrap around the front of Will's chest, clutching him closer as he drove into him; breathing into the flushed skin of his neck. For once, he was glad that Will couldn't see his eyes—couldn't see the panic in them.

*You like us like this,* he'd whispered, harsh, into his ear.

The words he couldn't say had caught in his throat, threatening to strangle him: *Don't take yourself away from me.*

The door to his hospital room opened with a click. Hannibal's eyes snapped open, the memory vanishing with the buzzing glare of fluorescent lights.

Barney's face peeked through the doorframe. "Hey, Doctor Lecter," he said cheerfully, upon seeing his patient awake.

"Good evening, Barney," Hannibal said. His eyes shifted to the cardboard container curled in the orderly's hand. "I trust you've had an industrious day?"

The orderly shoved the door closed behind him and came immediately to Hannibal's bedside. "Nah. Uneventful, mostly. But look! I brought you some soup."

His eyes were dancing as he popped off the container's lid and tilted it so Hannibal could see inside.

"It's from the cafeteria," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Chicken noodle soup. I figured,
since you're not feeling good, maybe this oughta help. It's better than Jell-O and oatmeal, anyway."

He handed the container to Hannibal, who wrapped his palms around the smooth, warm cardboard, allowing the heat to leach into his hands. Barney pulled up the visitor's chair and plunked down into it with a grunt.

Hannibal glanced inside the half-quart container at the limp egg noodles flecked with oregano and basil. The overhead lights glinted off the lipids-rich broth and the small chunks of pulled chicken and diced vegetables swimming in it. His stomach gave a weak tug. The soup wouldn't be nearly as rich or complex as the concoction he'd prepared for Will years ago, but it might prove restorative, after a fashion.

He glanced up. "That's very thoughtful of you, Barney."

Barney grinned. "If you wanna eat first, we can get to the other stuff later."

He tipped his head knowingly towards the bathroom. Precious few days remained for Hannibal to relearn the use of his legs; they were both aware that the countdown had begun.

"Oh! Almost forgot," Barney exclaimed, reaching into the front pocket of his lab coat and pulling out a plastic-wrapped spoon. "You're gonna need this." He unwrapped the utensil and handed it to Hannibal, looking pleased with himself.

Hannibal chuckled. "That will help immensely. Grazie."

No sooner had the first spoonful of mostly flavorless—but deliciously warm—broth passed his lips, than the sound of the door handle twisting caused both of their heads to turn.

The door swung open as Alana stepped into the room. She eyed the two men sharply, then cast a narrowed glance at the door as she pushed it closed.

No cane, Hannibal noted. Likely handed to one of the door guards for safekeeping. That doesn't change your wobble, Alana.

"Why wasn't this door locked?"

Barney stood up. The feet of his chair skidded backwards against the linoleum, squealing.

"Evening, Doctor Bloom. Sorry about that—forgot this time. Won't happen again."

"I trust it won't," she answered airily. "You know the protocol."

Hannibal lowered the plastic spoon as Alana turned her ice-blue eyes on him. They seemed brighter in contrast to her blood-red, tailored pantsuit and black silk blouse.

"Barney," she said, not dropping Hannibal's gaze, "I need to speak to Hannibal privately for a few minutes. Would you wait outside?"

"No problem, Doctor Bloom. I'll be in the hallway if you need anything."

"Thank you."

Alana waited until Barney had disappeared into the hall—locking the door behind him this time—before walking over to the bedside. Her heels clicked unevenly on the linoleum, like a deathwatch beetle in the walls.
Hannibal lowered the soup container to his lap, keeping his hands curled around it. He knew he wouldn't be getting any warmth from Alana.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Doctor Bloom? I imagine you'd rather be spending time with your family on this foggy Saturday afternoon." He refrained from injecting too much sarcasm. Now that he'd regained his mobility, the risk of early discovery was too great to chance.

Alana paused at the foot of the electric bed, where she remained standing. Her gaze flickered to the soup container before meeting Hannibal's eyes.

"I spoke with Doctor Schneider earlier today. He said he came to check on you two days ago."

"So he did," Hannibal said, cautious.

If she'd seen the camera footage, it meant she already knew what had happened. But if she hadn't—or if the physician had erased it to keep her from seeing—then it was the good doctor's word against his, which meant that Doctor Schneider's story would automatically trump anything Hannibal said.

Alana fixed him with a critical stare. "He said you were very restless, and that you kept insisting you'd seen Will."

Hannibal's eyebrows lifted. It seemed that Doctor Schneider had invented an even more interesting story than the one that had transpired.

"Restlessness and stasis are closely connected states of being. Being confined to a hospital bed by one's own body is an understandable catalyst for agitation. Wouldn't you agree?" He paused, giving her just enough time to compose a rebuttal in her head. "But as for the other accusation—according to you, Will Graham has been dead for over two weeks. Have you seen Will?"

"No more than you have, I suspect. Though I pity him—and his family—for what happened." She braced her hand against the footboard.

Still unsteady, he observed. And still lying.

Abigail's push out the window, unwilling though it may have been, continued to be unkind to Alana as the years progressed. He had promised her an equal unkindness once the opportunity arose.

"Will wouldn't appreciate being pitied," Hannibal retorted. "But you already know that. Saying the words out loud makes you feel better. Or, perhaps, just conscientious?"

Alana ignored the probe. "Doctor Schneider's recommending antipsychotics. He wants to start you on Quetiapine. I have to decide whether or not to approve his recommendation."

Hannibal returned her stare, unblinking. He stretched his fingers around the soup cup, allowing the warmth to loosen them.

"You're choosing to tell me this because you want something from me. Something that will make you decide not to approve the good doctor's recommendation. Tell me, Doctor Bloom, what is that thing?"

His mouth ticked in a curt smile. The steam curling up from the broth filled his nose, eliciting another unexpected pang of hunger. Ironic how his appetite had returned after days, only to be truncated by another unwelcome interruption.

Someday, he was going to very much enjoy eating Alana. Possibly in a stew.
"It so happens there is something you can do for me," she said, lifting her chin. Her fingers flexed along the top of the footboard, knuckles paling with the pressure. She was dangerously close.

Don't move. Don't flinch. He wouldn't allow himself to be discovered now. Not when Will was waiting for him. Not when he was this close to regaining everything he'd lost.

"Don't try to be Barney's friend," Alana continued. "He's your attendant here, but only out of necessity. Don't try to fool yourself—or him—about that. After your injuries heal, you'll be transferred back to your cell and it'll be the same as before. No more special treatment."

Hannibal squared his jaw. "I'm not so naïve as to think that an asylum is an optimal place for making friends. Though, your point is noted. I'll refrain from extending any overtly amicable gestures to your orderlies, in exchange for not being drugged back into a coma inside your hospital. A deal I can't refuse, it seems."

"Think of it however you want," Alana said, her lips a thin line as she lifted her hands from the footboard and stepped away. "Just remember what'll happen if you don't think of it."

"I'm quite capable of deciphering a threat without additional prodding," he assured her. "As I said, point noted."

She looked at him a moment longer, her crystalline gaze studying his face for answers she couldn't seem to frame. Hannibal didn't look away.

With a sigh, she fetched her keyring from inside her jacket and unlocked the door, holding it open for Barney—who, it appeared, had been standing right outside the door.

"You can take care of whatever else he needs before resuming your rounds," she said, as the orderly shuffled back in.

Barney spared a quick glance at Hannibal's expression. Seeing that their secret remained undiscovered, he clasped his hands behind his back and nodded.

"No worries, Doctor Bloom. I'll be in an' out."

Alana's Louboutins—which weren't in the least orthopedically helpful to her limp, Hannibal noted—made a sharp staccato as she turned in the doorway.

"Please do remember to lock up after I leave. And Barney?"

The orderly's eyebrows lifted in an inquisitive expression.

"Don't bring Doctor Lecter any more food from the cafeteria. He can eat what the kitchen fixes for him."

"Al'right, Doctor Bloom." The orderly's voice deflated like a beach ball.

After the tap-tap of Alana's heels had faded down the hall, Barney diligently locked the door and came back over to the bed. He wavered a moment, seemingly undecided whether to sit or stand. Then he pulled up the plastic chair and sank into it once again, positioning his back to the camera.

Hannibal spooned up a hunk of chicken and carrot—still steaming, he saw with provisional appreciation—and chewed, wincing at the appalling dearth of spice. At the moment, he would've traded even his sketchpad for some soy, ginger, chili sauce, and red pepper. Still, he was determined to eat, however uncooperative his stomach might be at present. He needed the strength to think. To
walk. To kill—when the time came.

"Sorry if I got ya in trouble," Barney said, his voice soft. His expression, however, was rigid. It seemed the orderly had been as unenthused about Alana's spur-of-the-moment visit as Hannibal himself.

"It's quite all right, Barney." He sipped at the broth, allowing his stomach to absorb the fluid between bites of meat and vegetables. "Though it appears that Doctor Bloom would prefer if you and I restricted our conversation to nurse and patient concerns only. Which seems appropriate, given the inverse nature of our relationship inside these walls."

Barney's forehead scrunched. He folded his arms across his barrel-like chest, thinking through the statement. When he spoke again, his voice was lighter.

"Al'right. Then I s'pose I need to know exactly how you're feelin', so I can take care of what you need an' then go, like Doctor Bloom said." A small smile curved onto Barney's face, hidden from the camera's eye.

Hannibal kept his expression neutral. "Not feeling well," he answered, with the barest hint of intonation. "Not very well at all. I'll need some assistance in the bathroom, I think." He set down the soup and folded one hand over his stomach, to make a point. The camera could still see him, after all.

"That's al'right, Doctor Lecter. That's what I'm here for."

The shine was back in Barney's eyes now. The orderly's delight in their unspoken layers of conversation was nearly palpable, Hannibal saw. More importantly, it was becoming easier to steer Barney in precisely the direction he needed to. It was an advantageous turn—and one that Alana's punctilious attentions had likely furthered.

"You get some'a that soup in you," Barney soothed. "Then we'll get you in there to do what needs t'be done. We'll get you feelin' back on top'a things soon, Doctor Lecter—I promise."
Chapter Summary

This story will be posted in nine parts over nine weeks. It can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics, *Of Putrefaction, Saccharine* and *Interlude: Diary of an Incubus*, can be found on this post, *Musical accompaniment* for each chapter of the three-part series *A Thousand Savage Futures* can be enjoyed on YouTube here. Also, the header arts for *Eve of Dreams* contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

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And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof. —Isaiah 5:30

--Nineteen days after the fall—Tuesday evening--

The waxing crescent moon hung overhead like a dead, half-open eye, its cornea flattened to opacity. The gray clouds that floated silently across it made it look like it was blinking.

Will's feet crunched over dead leaves, his breath misting out in sharp bursts ahead of him. The jangle of dog tags echoed on the cold air as the pack wove in and out of the trees, never straying too far ahead or behind. The trees themselves loomed up like gray ghosts, many barren, some still dressed in their evergreen shrouds. No breeze rustled the crisp, deciduous needles still clinging to the branches. It felt like the earth was holding its breath.

He pushed a spindly sycamore branch out of his way as Zoe trotted past on her quick little legs. He could hear Simon, the shepherd-cattle mix, and Delilah, the boxador, sniffing at the dying oak to his left that marked the south end of his and Molly's acreage. Winston and Randy had already run ahead, toward the pond. The two dogs blended easily into the darkness, unseen and unheard except for the clink of Randy's chain.

Will whistled. "Winston, Randy! Get back here!"

The water, he knew, would be freezing and muddy and scummed over with foul-smelling algae. If
one of the dogs accidentally slipped in, it would mean an impromptu bath when they returned to the house—a chore Will didn't have time for. Not tonight.

He pulled off his glove with his teeth and grabbed the burner phone from his back pocket. He pressed the center button on the keypad, illuminating the screen. 8:19. Any minute now…

He whistled again, louder. The dogs came bounding out of the blackness from all sides, like a legion of hellhounds, eyes glinting in the moonlight and tongues lolling between their white-tipped jaws. Bursts of steamy breath evaporated on the air as they ran toward him.

"Let's head back, guys," Will said.

Winston obediently jogged alongside him. Pieces of dead leaves shook from his furred tail. Zoe nipped Randy's flank as she darted between his legs, provoking a play-snarl that sent the puginese running. The bullmastiff quickly gave chase, and the two went crashing delightedly through the underbrush, as the rest of the pack stared up at Will in self-righteous accordance.

Will rolled his eyes. "Fine," he muttered, mostly to himself.

Zoe had always been a shit-stirrer, despite (or perhaps because of) her size, and it wasn't as if Randy listened to him half the time anyway. Besides, they'd come back as soon as they saw that none of the other dogs had followed.

A buzz from his jeans jolted him. Will scrambled into his back pocket and yanked out his smartphone. It was a text from Molly.

Dogs tire themselves out yet?

He stared hard at the small text bubble. It wasn't like Molly to check up on him while he was walking the dogs. It was unexpectedly irritating. And slightly guilt-inducing. But guilt was another thing he didn't have time for tonight.

Will sighed. Tiring ME out, he typed back. Zoe & Randy just ran off. Waiting for them. Maybe they're eloping…

He knew the text would make her smile. She'd probably agree. According to Molly, the puginese and the bullmastiff had been antagonizing each other since she'd brought Randy home. Will hadn't been there for Randy's introduction to the other dogs, and so he'd had to judge how the bullmastiff had settled into the pack weeks after the fact. It had been strange to walk back into his home to a new dog—one he hadn't collected or chosen, or who'd chosen him.

It had been strange to walk back into his home, period.

It was several seconds before the LCD screen lit up again.

Ha. Doubt it'll last. Don't think they're right for each other.

Will's forehead scrunched as he read the message. He could almost hear the sarcasm in her voice through the screen. Sarcasm—and something else. Uncharacteristic for Molly, whose warm, straightforward sense of humor had been his saving grace over the past two years.

He thumbed out a reply: Probably right. Be back soon.

Right then, the burner phone vibrated in his other hand. He shoved his smartphone into his back pocket, and held his breath as he clicked open the message on his other cell.
Left the light on for U. Dishes R in the sink. Kitchens looking messy. See U later.

Will's lips spread, trembling, as he scanned the text once. Twice. The stage was set; they were ready to begin.

Everything that happens from this moment on is irreversible. Can you live with that?

Flashes of anticipation flared inside his ribcage and wove up through the column of his spine, searing and popping like sparks from burning softwood. He closed his eyes, allowing himself one last moment of tranquility.

Randy and Zoe trotted back up, panting from their romp. They exchanged noisy sniffs with the other dogs and whined at Will. He didn't hear them.

Inside the black well of his mind, it was completely silent. A claustrophobic sense of self-awareness hovered there, needful and transparent as breath. Fate, circumstance, and the moment—their moment—were on the cusp of returning. Like a forgotten memory, or a misplaced word. Or a teacup, teetering on the brink of an abyss.

Will opened his eyes and forced his feet over the carpet of dried leaves and twigs. The dogs pranced and whuffed around him, leading him back toward the house.

Through the trees, he could see the yellow pinpricks of light marking the windows, and feel the caress of the moon's strange, milky glow overhead. Both were beacons in his darkness; yet disparate in their hidden truths and savage auguries.

I can't feed you if I can't find you, Hannibal had said to him, in another dream—in another time and world.

In his mind, Will gazed down at Hannibal in his hospital bed. Hawk-bright eyes stared back up at him, expectant. Hungry.

You don't need to, Will told him. His dry lips stretched into a grin. I know exactly where you are—and exactly how I'm going to find you.

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When Will came in with the dogs, the first floor was empty—not unusual, but serendipitous, nonetheless. The pungent scents of garlic, cumin, and ground beef still lingered on the air from the chili they'd made for dinner. Molly liked simple recipes on cold nights so they didn't have to spend too much time waiting around in the kitchen, which was cursed with a draft they hadn't yet bothered to fix. She wasn't one to sacrifice comfort for food. On principle, Will agreed. The meals they cooked were hearty and filling, but hardly elaborate.

He stopped by the fireplace in the greatroom and stooped down. The grate was already loaded with wood, crumpled-up newspaper, and a starter log; he'd seen to that earlier. He stuck his hand up inside the chimney and fished for the handle to the flue damper. His fingers closed around the metal rod and he slid it to the right, sealing off the airflow. His palm came out black. He wiped off the soot on his jeans, and then headed upstairs.

Molly was in the bedroom, combing out her wet hair.
"Hey," he said, stopping in the doorway.

"Hey." She turned in her mint-green cotton nightgown, eyeing him as if searching for some kind of change. There was a slight pause. "Dogs have a good walk?"

She drew the comb down her hair. Water droplets flicked from its teeth onto the carpet.

"Pretty docile, except for the two bad ones," Will joked. "They got more exercise than the rest of us put together."

Molly's mouth jerked in a half-smile. "Those two are double trouble."

"I think Zoe picked it up from Randy. She used to be the boss before he showed up."

Molly feigned a sigh. "Hopefully the next stray one of us takes in won't be such a handful." She set the comb on the dresser and turned to him with an expectant look.

Will opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He decided to brush over the indecipherable comment.

"I'm gonna grab a shower. Then I was thinking—"

"Moo-om!" From the bedroom down the hall came a pleading wail. "I need help with homework!"

Both their heads turned at the sound, which sparked a fond eyeroll from Molly. It had become a near-nightly ritual with Walt since he'd started sixth grade.

"Sure, hon—in a couple minutes, okay?" Molly called.

She glanced back at Will. He could feel the space between them humming like a living thing; dark matter tugging the poles of their world further apart.

"You were saying?"

Will found his voice quicker this time. "I thought maybe we could watch a movie after Walt's done with his homework. Let him pick something." He smiled.

Molly's eyes softened. "That sounds nice."

"Can you start the fire so it's warm downstairs? I'll open some wine when I get out."

Her face brightened. It was the old Molly. The one who'd fixed him cocoa and toast before Vadim Stonys had called; who'd fallen asleep with her arms wrapped around him the first few nights he'd been home from the hospital.

"Are you proposing a family date night, Mister Graham?" The teasing lilt in her voice sent simultaneous pangs of affection and guilt barreling through Will's nervous system.

"I might be, Missus Graham," he replied, walking to her and nuzzling a kiss atop her forehead. Her scalp was moist and fragrant with conditioner. "I'll be out in a few." He grazed his palms down her arms, touching his fingertips briefly to hers before turning to leave. The gesture seemed to put her at ease.

You might also be a lying sonuvabitch, Mister Graham, snarled a voice inside his head as he padded down the hallway.
He pushed it away as he went into the still-steamy bathroom. *No time for that now. Focus.* He knew there was no turning back. The fuse had already been lit, and it was burning.

He left the door open a crack and twisted on the shower taps. *Water only. No soap—not yet.* He stepped in, ducking his head under the spray. The faint creak of Molly's foot on the third step from the bottom reached his ears—loud enough for him to hear. He made a mental note of the sound, for later. *Should probably think about fixing that, too.*

He splashed water across his back and chest, taking little relief in the warmth. He felt as though he were already blazing from the inside out; every nerve ending, every cell simultaneously dancing and shrieking with flame.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, returning; they were followed by the murmur of conversation from Walt's room. Will waited, his skin growing hot and flushed under the spray. Less than a minute later, the expected screech of the smoke alarm pierced his ears, followed by an expletive shout from Molly and a cacophony of barking. He slapped off the taps amid the thundering footsteps on the stairs and threw a towel around his waist, not bothering to dry off.

Downstairs, the greatroom was swimming with thick gray smoke that barreled from the fireplace and threatened to stifle the flames. The dogs were crowded in the doorway to the living room, barking and howling.

Through the haze, Will could see Molly kneeling by the hearth with a dish towel held to her face, squinting and trying to reach the flue damper. Walt was wrestling with the window to the left of the side door, his skinny eleven-year-old's arms trembling with the effort. His eyes darted frantically between the stuck latch and his mother.

"Molly!" Will shouted over the skull-rattling shriek of the smoke alarm. "Get back! Let me do it."

He knotted the bath towel around his waist and ran to the fireplace. She moved back, covering her face with her arm and coughing as she threw the dish towel to him. Will caught it and slapped it over his nose before kneeling down. He reached inside the flue and felt for the handle. After a few seconds of purposeful fumbling, he jerked the metal rod to the side, reopening the airway.

The smoke inside the fireplace instantly whooshed up through the chimney. At the same instant, the window banged against the top of the sill as Walt shoved it open. A burst of frigid fresh air rushed into the room, sucking the smoke outside.

Will stood up and stepped back, dropping the towel from his face and panting. His heart was beating harder than he'd thought it would.

He looked over at Walt, who'd gone to work on prying open the other window. The latches hadn't been turned in months, and the window frames had shrunk and warped with the cold. It made them difficult to open quickly—a scenario Will had been counting on.

"Good thinking, Walt," he called over the wail of the smoke alarm, as he grabbed one of his casting rods off the wall rack. He knocked the smoke detector apart with the handle end, effectively silencing it. With the absence of the noise, the dogs' clamoring quieted to displeased yips and snuffles.

Will tossed the rod onto the couch and went immediately to Molly. She was leaning against the doorway to the kitchen, looking at once frightened and pissed off.

"What the hell happened?" he asked, keeping his voice gentle. Winston and Randy whined as they
circled his and Molly's legs, sniffing.

Molly grimaced. "I guess the flue was closed. I didn't think to check. I... shit. That sucked." She turned her eyes to him, blinking. They were brimming with tears. "Sorry. Now the whole damn house is gonna smell."

"Hey." Will covered her soot-streaked shoulders with his own blackened palms. "Hey—it's okay. It'll air out overnight. We'll just leave the windows cracked. We can shut the doors to the bedrooms so the cold stays out."

A drop rolled down her cheek and she blinked again, wiping it away with the back of her hand.

"It's just the smoke, I'm not crying," she said, trying for a chuckle and sniffling instead. "Dammit."

Will pulled her in, and she let him. She buried her face against his soot-streaked chest like a small bird into a wing. He glanced over his shoulder at Walt, whose chafed hands were being licked by a fretful Bowser and Wilhelmina.

"You okay, buddy?"

Some of the color had returned to Walt's face, which had gone peaked at the sight of the smoke billowing from the fireplace. The near-accident had shaken him and Molly both, badly.

*Please,* Will thought, closing his eyes and nosing Molly's hairline. The scent of shampoo still lingered there. *Please let this be the last time the house is unsafe for them.*

He pulled away and looked at Molly. "Why don't you and Walt get washed off and start on his homework? I'll air things out down here, and then come up and help."

She gave a shaky laugh and wiped her eyes. "Whew. Yeah. Think we might have to skip movie night, though. Unless we want to go to bed smelling like burned chili." She sighed, surveying the still-hazy room with a tired look, her adrenaline ebbing. "I'll still take that glass of wine, though. Hell, now I need one."

Will chuckled, sliding his palm down her bare arm and leaving behind a streak of soot. "Delicious as charred chili sounds, yeah. Tomorrow might be better."

Molly turned to Walt and lifted her arm, gesturing for him to come to her. "Let's get cleaned up and take another look at that geometry stuff, okay?"

"Okay," he said, crossing the room. He allowed his mother to give him a quick squeeze before heading through the kitchen to the second floor, Randy trailing behind him.

Molly mouthed a silent *Thank you* to Will before following after her son and her adopted dog. Will watched them go, breathing in the pungent, slightly pine-scented smoke and trying not to cough.

Walt turned on the second step, his hand hovering above the wooden banister. His eyes locked on Will's.

"Maybe the dogs should go outside. So they don't breathe too much smoke and stuff."

Will nodded. The boy was more practical after a near-disaster than any child he'd met throughout his career in law enforcement. It was why Walt had urged Will to kill the Dragon instead of arresting
I told my dad I'd take care of her, he'd said to him outside of Molly's hospital room. The look in his
tepson's eye had told Will that Walt was well aware of his own powerlessness to do anything about
Dolarhyde—but that his stand-in for a father could, and should.

"I'll send 'em out," Will assured. "I'll leave the side door open so they can come and go. It'll get cold
down here, but that'll make it better."

"Good," Walt said, his voice flat. "We'll close the bedroom door."

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In the dark, Will stared up at the ceiling, wide awake. He'd been trying not to look at his alarm clock
too often. Instead, he'd focused on the deep, rhythmic cadence of Molly's breathing and run through
the checklist in his head for what felt like the hundredth time.

Molly's eyes had started drooping around ten, shortly after they'd finished helping Walt calculate the
surface area between various sets of circles. Will had crawled into bed alongside her twenty minutes
later, after they'd taken turns brushing their teeth at the bathroom sink. She was asleep before she'd
switched off her bedside lamp. Will had reached over and pulled the cord for her, casting the room
into darkness.

The four zolpidem he'd ground up and mixed into Molly's glass of Cabernet Sauvignon would
ensure that she remained asleep until morning. He'd also added two of the pills to the mug of
chamomile tea Walt had requested for his smoke-sore throat.

Like most eleven-year-olds, Walt could sleep through thunderstorms and car alarms and even the
howls of the coyotes that occasionally strayed onto their property. However, Will knew that keeping
Molly and Walt safe meant leaving as little as he could up to chance. The knowledge had done
nothing to assuage the sick feeling in his gut as he'd stood in the kitchen in his pajamas, crushing up
the leftover sedatives from his UMMC stay into a fine, dissolvable powder.

His pulse began to pound as the bright blue numbers on his alarm clock flipped to 11:00. It was time.

A sudden desire to remain nestled in his and Molly's bed rose fierce within him. Warmth, comfort,
and safety—the usual provinces of sleep—tugged at him with insistent arms. He shook off the
embrace with fading reluctance. Will doubted he would sleep soundly again after tonight.

He propped himself on his elbow and snapped his fingers above Molly's ear, twice. She didn't stir.
Her breathing stayed steady. Will slid out of bed and into the hallway, closing the door behind him.
The soles of his feet curled at the draft along the floorboards—a gift from the still-ventilating first
floor. He stopped next to Walt's door and listened for sounds of wakefulness or movement.
Nothing. He continued downstairs to the first-floor office, skipping the squeaky third step from the bottom.

Wedged between the desk and the wall was a black metal storage cabinet. Will pulled the porthole
clock off the wall and retrieved a small aluminum key from its hiding place inside the clock's battery
bay. He slid the key into the lock and took out a ratty pair of jeans, a faded pullover, two mismatched
socks that had long ago lost their partners, and a pair of utility boots.

He quickly shed his nightshirt and shorts and pulled on the clothes, wrinkling his nose at the fabric's
musty smell, and then grabbed the nylon duffel bag hanging at the back of the cabinet and hoisted it over his shoulder. He tossed his abandoned sleeping clothes into the bottom of the cabinet and relocked it. The key went back into its hiding place inside the clock, and the clock went back on the wall. Will stood back and surveyed the room. It appeared undisturbed.

Dark anticipation swelled inside him, overlapping the dread that had been pressing on his ribcage since morning. An imaginary moth fluttered inside his chest, its velvet-scaled wings beating in time to his pulse, as if it, too, were eager for what lie ahead. Will knew that his nerves would quiet soon. Danger soothed them in a way that nothing else could—except for Hannibal's presence.

As he passed through the living room, he motioned for the dogs to be quiet and stay. Winston and Randy tilted their heads, offering quizzical looks. Zoe jumped to her feet and yapped, once, in defiance. Will shot her the sternest look he could summon. The puginese recoiled, sinking back onto her small fleece bed with a whine.

"I'll be back soon," he whispered to the pack from the doorway to the frigid greatroom, which still reeked of charred wood. "Be quiet and don't go wandering around upstairs," he warned. The dogs knew his tone meant business. However, Will doubted that even the most curious of the pack would favor leaving the warmth of the space heaters to explore the house's chilly hallways.

Will slipped out the side door and crunched across the gravel to the Subaru. Overhead, the cadaverous pupil of the moon's slitted eye followed his movements. He slid behind the steering wheel and threw the duffel in the backseat, and then started the engine, praying it wouldn't wake Molly or Walt.

He backed down the drive and turned onto Leigh Mill Road, and then took the Leesburg Pike south, through Wolf Trap. He passed through the outlet shopping mecca of Tysons, where the streetlamps illuminated vast gardens of empty asphalt. Avoiding the toll roads with their cameras would add a few minutes to the drive, but he would still make good time. One quick stop, and then he'd head northeast.

The Beltway dumped him out onto Gallows Road, which wound east through the Holmes Run parklands all the way to Lake Barcroft. From above, the lake appeared as a twisted, arcing V. The arms were spiked with small offshoots that gave it an uncanny resemblance to a jack-o'-lantern's grin—or to a massive rack of antlers.

Will maneuvered onto a series of side streets that intersected with a dimly lit dirt road. The thick pine woods closed in overhead as he turned onto it, darkening his vision and forcing him to flip on his brights. The road ended in a gravel driveway that buttressed against a stone terrace. Will hadn't bothered with landscaping since early summer, and the terrace had become crusted with dirt and dead weeds. A one-story cabin lay nestled beyond the patio. Sturdy walls of Eastern white cedar, weathered by the years, were framed by clusters of river birch, sycamore, and Virginia pine—a picturesque scene, even through the gloom.

The cabin was situated on an under-developed piece of land that jutted out into the south end of the lake, near the Columbia Pike. It offered more privacy than the other lakehouses, in addition to a sizeable backyard with a thirty-foot dock. Will's father had been sold the moment he'd laid eyes on it. The house's previous owners had even thrown in a barely used aluminum rowboat, which had clinched the deal.

Will pulled up alongside the garage and killed the Subaru's engine, then retrieved the duffel bag from the backseat. He'd been to the house twice over the past few days, once earlier that afternoon, and had no need to go back inside. Not yet.
He tapped in the code for the garage door and fetched the keys for the old crew-cab pickup from the inside pocket of the duffel. He’d already switched out the Virginia plates for some Delaware ones he’d found at a junk store. He’d even splashed some mud on the tires and back windows, giving the vehicle a decidedly rural aesthetic.

Will chucked the duffel bag into the backseat and coaxed the pickup’s engine to life. He pulled into the driveway, and left the engine running as he hopped out of the truck and back into the Subaru, and backed it into the garage.

In the pickup, he clicked the remote on the visor and watched the garage door close in the rearview before taking off down the bumpy dirt drive. He headed north to Interstate Three-ninety-five toward Washington, keeping a close lookout for the highway patrol.

Bright white eyes glowed frequently in his headlights on the hour-long drive to Catonsville. The high, round ones belonged to the deer; the blinking ones lower to the ground were usually possums or coyotes. Unlike their daylight-craving cousins, the night creatures had no fear of what might happen in the dark. Their nocturnal vision had gifted them with a unique, inverted picture of the world, allowing them to see clearly where other animals glimpsed only blackness and danger.

It was just after one a.m. when Will switched off his headlights and turned onto Valley Road from Route One-sixty-six. The small artery, bordered on both sides by dense clusters of spruce and pine, curved along the south end of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Will had studied the maps long enough to envision the orientation of every landmark. He knew that the medical ward, the research building, and the disused baseball field met in a circumcenter at the thickest part of the woods. This was where he would park—as far off the road as possible. He would wait. Then, when the moon’s silver eye turned dark with smoke, he would run.

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Roughly twenty minutes later, Will’s burner phone vibrated, startling him awake. His head snapped up from the cracked leather of the driver’s seat headrest. He winced as a cramp shot through his bad shoulder. Too much driving. Too much waiting.

He’d turned off the truck engine, which meant no power and no heat. His breath came out in harsh, icy puffs as his heartbeat skidded high. The turnout coat and trousers underneath his overcoat had kept him warm as he’d dozed, but the temperature was spiraling toward zero as the night darkened, and it was cold inside the pickup’s cab. It didn’t matter. The bunker gear was meant to keep him safe, not comfortable.

He’d purchased the protective clothing—his camouflage—at an army surplus store outside of Baltimore the day before. His shopping disguise had consisted of sunglasses, slicked-back hair, and an all-cash payment. Criminally cliché, but hopefully it would be enough if something went wrong and the FBI decided to go digging.

The uniform was dusky brown with red and silver reflective stripes, exactly like the ones worn by the teams from Catonsville Fire Station Four. On the seat beside him lay a battered yellow helmet, a pair of fireproof gloves, a full-face respirator, and an aluminum tank with forty-five cubic feet of oxygen.
Though heavier than he'd expected, the full turnout gear and breathing mask weren't unmanageable. Lugging the duffel bag with the rest of the supplies would be a different story. It was a sprint of maybe four hundred feet across the baseball diamond to Oak Street. Then he'd hit the medical building. From there, it was three flights up to the intensive care unit. It would be an endurance test—one he'd never imagined taking.

Fitting that it was all for Hannibal.

The burner cell vibrated again as a text notification lit up the screen. Will inhaled deep, and pushed himself up in his seat. Now or never.

He grabbed the phone from the console and tapped open the message screen.

**Be getting hot soon. Listen for alarm & Go when U hear first sirens- maybe 25 min til perimeter. Don't forget about the Sink see U on the other side**

Will thumbed off the message and slipped the burner into the back pocket of his jeans underneath the turnout trousers. He glanced up through the windshield, heart hammering in his chest. Nothing yet. The six-hour candles Barney had lit would be nearly at the ends of their wicks.

The orderly had swiped a key to the basement utilities room earlier in the day—right under the super's nose—and loosened the valve on the fuel oil holding tank to the furnace. He'd also shut off the valve to the medical ward's sprinkler system—the "sink." *Drip drip drip*, his text at 8:26 p.m. had read.

The words had glowed in Will's mind, portentous and nearly poetic. He could imagine Barney grinning as he'd typed them out. The orderly was good at getting things done under the radar, Will had discovered. It was because people trusted him. But once the oil caught flame from the candles, nothing would be able to stop the holding tank—and the ancient furnace to which it piped—from overheating. A two-alarm fire or higher was guaranteed, depending on the spread.

Barney had agreed that it was a well-conceived design.

A distant, droning wail pierced Will's ears from directly beyond the trees. He'd never before heard the hospital's fire alarm. The sound was lower in pitch than the smoke detector at the house, but far more ominous.

His pulse jumped from his chest to his throat as he glanced through the truck windows. Thin fingers of smoke were curling up from behind the tree line, clawing across the cat's eye of the waxing moon. It was watching him through the haze like a predator, daring him to move. To show his face.

*_Now or never, Will. Are you ready?*_

Moments later, a second set of sirens assaulted Will's ears from the northwest. Station Four was the closest—they'd be the first responders. The nearby volunteer units would arrive soon after, followed by the other Baltimore County stations, if necessary.

Will wiped his hand across his forehead. Beads of cold sweat came away on his skin. He exhaled, momentarily drowning out the sound. He had to get in and out before the county units arrived. The fewer eyes that saw them, the better.

Will grabbed the helmet, gloves, and oxygen tank and jumped out of the truck. He strapped on the cylinder first, followed by the mask and the helmet. The window on the respirator fogged as he adjusting the tubing, sparking a brief moment of panic. Then the rubber seal settled into place over his nose, and he could breathe more or less normally.
Before he pulled on the gloves, he slid Barney's key to Hannibal's room inside the Velcro front pocket of the turnout coat. Barney had given it to him before they’d parted ways outside the café.

*Don’t worry, I've got a couple’a copies,* he'd said, with an impish smile. *I figure, if I can't trust you to keep it safe, I can’t trust anybody.*

The duffel hung crosswise over his back, anchoring the oxygen tank to his frame. The absence of the snubnose's bulge—a familiar comfort in recent days—made him feel naked, despite the myriad layers of clothing. Fire and firearms were a dangerous mix, however, and so he'd have to do without it until he got back to the truck.

The sirens were getting closer, drowning out the wail of the smoke alarms. Station Four's engines were nearing the south end of the complex. He could see their glittering lights reflected in the smoke that rose, sheet-like, beyond the trees.

Will stepped forward and immediately stumbled. The combined ninety pounds of gear dragged at his body like an oceanic undertow.

*Steady, Will.* Hannibal's voice in his head—soft, superior, encouraging. *Find your balance. You have thirty minutes of air and twenty minutes until the police arrive to seal off the access roads. Time to go. Hop!*

Gritting his teeth, Will leaned forward, recalibrating his gravity and ensuring that all of his equipment was still in place. He felt like a pack animal.

"You'd better thank me after this is over, you bastard," he muttered. The sound, muffled by the mask, was answered by the imagined curve of Hannibal's Cheshire smile.

Will sucked in a breath, steeling himself with one last full gulp of oxygen. Before he'd released it, he was sprinting toward the tree line and the dark baseball field beyond.

Fire and flood awaited him, along with a demon—one whose hungry, fathomless eyes he never dreamed he'd look into again. Not in this lifetime.

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Oily tendrils of smoke, alarming in their blackness, slithered from the gaps around Hannibal's bathroom door. They curled along the walls, unfurling into thinner, yellow-gray clouds. It looked as if a thunderstorm were gathering along his ceiling.

The sound, however, was nothing like thunder. The bellowing drone of the fire alarm pierced his ears from everywhere, the walls and empty spaces as saturated with it as they were the smog.

Judging by the smoke's path, the fire had started in the basement. It would continue to climb through the building's plumbing chases and ventilation systems, creating more haze and chaos than structural damage—if Catonsville's fire personnel did their jobs correctly, that was. He wondered briefly if Barney's contingency plan had taken into account the opposite scenario.

*Don’t worry, Doctor Lecter. Everything's gonna work out just like it's s'posed to. Wait for him—he'll come.* Barney had purposely refrained from explaining to him the finer details, as though withholding some delightful surprise. But the glint in his eye had sparked more questions than
answers—answers that, at the moment, Hannibal would have liked to have in reserve.

Nonetheless, the ten-minute stretches of time they'd snatched behind the bathroom door over the past two days had proven fruitful. He could now stagger across the seven-foot-square space without help. Flu-weakened or not, he was ready to move—but where?

Hannibal inhaled, and promptly coughed. The sudden rush of smoke sent his adrenal glands pumping. His lungs hitched involuntarily. No—don't pander to panic. Slow it down.

Hannibal closed his eyes, blocking out the dull ivory glow of the emergency lighting system. He envisioned the front door of his memory palace. Rachmaninov's Opus 29 in A Minor played in the background, echoing the undulation of the sea, of breath.

He began counting the locks and keyholes from the bottom. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of various sizes and metals, embedded in the ancient wood. By the time he reached the iron knocker—which was twisted in the shape of viper devouring a man, the biscione of the Visconti crest—his heart rate had momentarily slowed, and the fire alarm's wail had blended into the background. He could hear himself think again.

It was a necessary skill—one he'd taught himself during his first residence at the BSHCI. Despite the glass, the basement cellblock had often been noisy. He'd listened to the dissociative patient, Miggs, belt out self-composed Christian nursery rhymes in a not-wholly-unpleasant tenor for some days, before growing tired of his lyrical monotony.

Just for fun, Hannibal had engaged two of Miggs' personalities in turns. He'd convinced both of them that the human tongue was an unparalleled delicacy when devoured raw. With his last breath, one of the Miggs had gasped It's so delicious, Doctor Lecter through a mouthful of blood, phlegm, and gnawed muscle.

Alana had taken away his toilet and drawing supplies for a week. The memory of Miggs' death rattle—the purest sound he'd heard in years—still made him smile.

He tore the cotton slip from his pillow and pressed it to his face, waiting. Watching. If the smoke began creeping from the air vents, he'd soak the fabric with the water left in his plastic cup. He could steal a few more moments of cleaner oxygen that way.

Therefore, as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust. It was one of Miggs' favorite verses, Hannibal recalled. Do you know the book of Isaiah, Doctor Lecter? Their carcasses were torn in the streets!

Hannibal's throat hitched again. He fought the urge to gasp. A cold sweat was gathering on his chest and forehead, despite the rising heat. Stop. Slow it down. Now wasn't the time to be dissociating, like Miggs. If worse came to worst, he'd cover himself with the blanket, even if it meant he wouldn't be able to see what was coming for him.

He knew that Barney understood the nature of culpability, and how to avoid it. So, too, did Will. Both men had a wiry knack for self-preservation, and both had a weakness for allowing it to slide—unconsciously or otherwise—when it came to Hannibal. In this area, he admired both their efforts and failures immensely. He could only hope their weaknesses would reap grain, and not chaff.

For all this, his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still. Hear me, doctor? The Lord loves even you! He'll find you. He'll save you. He'll rape you. He'll hide you in his bosom and lift you into heaven's darkness!
His eyes burned hot and itching. He blinked, cooling them. Flame had yet to appear within the room; there was still one more layer between him and the fire itself. Smoke could kill quicker than flame, he knew—but it could also conceal.

Hannibal's thoughts skidded to a sudden stop.

Conceal.

It could hide them.

So this was Will's design! Hannibal's lips curved beneath the rough pillowcase. More dramatic and covertly destructive than he'd anticipated, but justifiably so. Will's disdain for the BSHCI was equal to his own. Hannibal did enjoy experimenting with arson, on occasion; it appeared Will was no shyer in this regard. His butterfly had mutated again—this time, into a heat-seeking moth. *Le sphinx à tête de mort*, perhaps—the death's head. A genus famous for infiltrating beehives and stealing the nectar from their combs by mimicking the honeybees' scent. Cunning and elusive—a splendidly macabre aesthetic.

It was, Hannibal thought, a glorious mutation.

The halo around his vision was darkening. Breathe. Don't breathe. Slow it down. Now stop.

But which of the species would Will choose for his metamorphosis? *Acherontia Lachesis*, named for the goddess who measured the thread of life? Or *Acherontia Atropos*, the one who snipped the string? Hannibal had appealed to both deities in the distant past of his dreams and the nightmare of his present. Which one, if either, would answer?

He exhaled slowly. Water streamed from his eyes, blurring the eggshell-colored hell in which he'd squandered for the last nineteen days. The room was growing dim with the rolling haze.

Cut the thread. Not his—mine. He and Will had been measuring each other for years, mere millimeters away from slicing the other's lifeline—then pulling back, just before severing their final tie. For all the deaths they'd witnessed and created, they had yet to bring about each other's.

Except in Paris, a voice inside his head echoed. *It happened there, on the Seine.*

The voice wasn't his own, nor Will's, but a resonant combination of the two. Strong as sharpened steel; clear as the ringing of a high bell.

Together, Will had said, stepping next to him and raising Chiyoh's pistol over Alana's cringing frame. And then, suddenly, pressing close. Too close.

Will you forgive me?

Hannibal sputtered, gagging on the taste of gasified fuel oil. A sharp ache shot through his skull. The gun hadn't been for Alana; it had been for him. Seeing the promise in Will's eyes—Together—had been the only thing that made the knowledge, the lack of intimacy, bearable. Will was coming with him, over the cliff, over the windowsill—and now, presumably, into the fire.

Wait for him—he'll come, Barney had whispered to him that morning. *Might take some time. But he'll be bringin' hell with him.*

Wee-ooh, wee-ooh, wee-ooh... He could hear the alarm again, but it was far away—wailing, less rhythmic. The smoke was filling the room now, no longer contained behind the bathroom door. He fumbled for the cup on the bedside table and knocked it over. The water spilled onto the floor in a
wasted puddle. Too much carbon monoxide in his bloodstream.

He closed his eyes and pushed the pillowslip tight against his nose and mouth. *Shallow breaths*, he told himself. *Think. Don't think. Wait for him. Don't go to sleep.*

There was one more hawkmoth to consider for Will's transformation. In his mind, the warped image of the brown-and-yellow *Acherontia Styx* appeared—an illustration from one of his entomology field guides. The one with the skull pattern on its thorax, named for the dark river separating the Greek underworld from the earth above. Would Will sail to him as Charon and ferry him to safety? Or would he come merely to steal the honey, and leave behind a barren hive?

Hannibal's head swam with the motions of moth wings and waves. He slipped sideways against the bed, clutching at the guardrail. Perhaps he'd been wrong. Perhaps Antinous had never really intended to sacrifice himself to the Nile to save his *erastês*. The boy was both clever and bold; he would snip the emperor's thread himself, and seize the empire with the wave of a slender hand. Rome would burn—and burn, and *burn*—and not because of Nero. No river, not even that of Hades, could quench the inferno the Greek youth had sparked within him. It would be his undoing—just as he'd always known it would.

A sound rose from underneath the din of the fire siren—a pulse like the humming of moth wings, like the roaring of the sea. A flutter of movement caught the corner of Hannibal's eye. He lifted his head, pushing back against the steel rail with his elbow. The door to his room swung wide open, sucking out the air in a heavy *whoosh*.

Then, through the doorway it came: the *Styx* hawkmoth, in a flash of bright ochre and dusky brown, amid swirling black smoke. It was huge, the size of a man. Its wings were tipped in ebony and silver, its proboscis long and slick and uncoiled.

Hannibal's eyes burned as he stared at it, struggling to keep his sight focused. The insect-man halted when it saw him, as if alarmed by the presence of another foreign creature. Then it shot out an arm, flinging the door closed, and promptly ripped off its wings, which were attached by mere strings—and then *rushed* at him.

Hannibal lifted a weak hand, seized by sudden foreboding. *No. Don't come. Don't find me.* He wasn't ready to meet the death's-head, or the young Greek who held his heart between his teeth. Either both were portents, or neither—of that much he was sure.

But the man-moth ignored him, tossing his severed wings on the bed in a heap, and then tore off his canary-yellow epicranium and the front of his head and tongue.

"Hannibal!"

Over the scream of the siren, Will's voice pulsed with equal alarm. Hannibal lifted his head, rolling up his eyes to peer through the skein of black smoke. They met Will's eyes—gray as the sea before a storm; blue as the basement where he'd dismembered the poet.

Hannibal's breath caught in his throat. A surge of adrenaline hit him, infusing his bloodstream with more carbon monoxide. At last, his Antinous had come for him.

A dizzy darkness overwhelmed his vision, and he fell sideways just as Will's hands caught him. One clasped his shoulder, heavy and padded; another pressed the moth-mask—which turned out to be a respirator, his brain informed him, after a few greedy gulps of oxygen—over his nose and mouth.

Above him, Will gave a harsh cough, his head jerking with the movement.
"Hold this—strap it on," he yelled.

The touch of Will's gloved hands suddenly disappeared, and the pillowcase slipped from Hannibal's fingers as he felt for the respirator's fastenings. He slipped them over his head as his consciousness returned in heady, kaleidoscopic waves. The life-giving air from the tank filled his lungs, reviving his consciousness for the second time since his return to the hospital.

He looked over to see Will pulling on an identical mask from the black duffel bag on the bed. Will's own respirator was attached to a second aluminum tank fitted inside a belted harness.

"The door guards?" Hannibal gasped, pleased to find that the respirator was equipped with a speaking diaphragm.

"Gone," Will answered, his voice muffled as he pulled the straps tight on his own mask, sealing out the smoke. "The floor's empty."

Hannibal nodded. The security officers posted outside his door had, it seemed, scattered like rats from a sinking ship. He imagined the rest of the staff had followed suit—effectively leaving him to burn in his locked room, like a trapped animal. While rude, the scenario made for one less hurdle to clear. The smoke billowing along the ceiling hid them from the camera. There would be no record of Will entering the room; only the hazy vision of a firefighter's uniform, in the few seconds the door had been open.

_Elaborate. Risky. Ingenious._ Beneath his thin hospital gown, Hannibal's heart rushed with pride. It was a well-conceived design, indeed.

Suddenly, Will was bending down close to his face, his eyes dark and partially obscured by the shine of the mask's window. The sound of his breathing buzzed against Hannibal's earlobe through the respirator hose.

"You belong in here. But I don't _want_ you to be in here."

The sweet, solid timbre of Will's voice surged with a thousand subtle shades of anger and determination. The sound sent a thrill down Hannibal's bruised spine.

"You need to get dressed. Then we need to get out. Can you walk?"

A vision flickered through Hannibal's mind of Will's small, sad smile; the sizzle of foam-flecked waves receding along the gravel beach. His right arm hanging limply at his side as he'd asked, _Do you think you can walk?_ His blue-gray eyes had shone darker in the night—dark to match the ocean. Will had been there when he'd awoken on the shore of his dreams… but not when he'd clawed back to consciousness inside the BSHCI. Yet he was here _now_—alive, awake, and _aware._

Hannibal nodded, unable to speak. His head swam—then focused—then swam again. He felt drunk with dizziness. This time, he knew, it wasn't from the smoke.

"Good." Will's voice was fainter as he pulled back. He tore off his gloves and unzipped the duffel bag. "One stop on the way out. You're going to lean on me and pretend like you're hurt if we see anyone. Got it?"

Hannibal smirked. _Given my injuries from our last encounter, that shouldn't be difficult_, his brain automatically retorted.

What came out of his mouth was: "I've missed you."
Will's hands stilled. Behind the mask, his eyes flickered, an unreadable emotion hidden within their depths. He bent his head, silent. Braced a hand on the guardrail, as if seeking anchor. He leaned in, pressing his soot-stained forehead against Hannibal's. His fingers stiffened as they lifted and curled. They stopped just short of brushing Hannibal's temple.

"I—." His slick brown curls twisted against Hannibal's shorter fringe. Frustration and heat leaked from his skin in thick, shimmering waves. Hannibal could sense it as keenly as he could feel his own pulse picking up.

He leaned into the unexpected touch, allowing his eyes to slip closed for a moment. If their faces hadn't been covered, he would've tilted his head and allowed whatever restraint was left inside him to evaporate.

Will's hand fell as he stepped back. Hannibal shivered with the disappearance of the warmth.

"We don't have much time. Let's go."

Hannibal assented, blinking. The press of Will's skin had seared him, but there was more than one fire to consider at present.

He pulled on the matching bunker jacket Will pulled from the duffel bag, and slung the tank harness over the back of it. Will helped him settle it over his shoulders, working quickly, his hands fluttering and silent as moth wings.

Hannibal swung his legs over the side of the electric bed and stepped onto the floor. It was the first time he'd done so since reawakening in the BSHCI. The temperature of the linoleum was much warmer than it should've been, he noticed; the building was heating up quickly.

He swayed as he stepped into the turnout trousers Will handed to him, having forgotten the motions of pulling on slacks. His hospital gown hitched over his thigh as he tugged up the left leg. Will eyed the port-colored web of bruises on his kneecap.

"Those look new," Will said, as he rummaged in his bag—presumably for footwear and gloves. His tone was guarded, but his expression was sharp behind the thermoplastic window of his respirator.

Hannibal fastened the trousers and took the offered pair of rubber boots from Will's hands.

"They are," he said. He stepped barefoot into one boot, then the other. The steel-reinforced tips pinched hard against his toes. Will had probably grabbed two pairs of his own size at whatever surplus or thrift store he'd purchased them—less conspicuous that way. "From our dear friend, Doctor Schneider," Hannibal continued. "He has a rather nasty temper, and a deplorable lack of self-restraint. He believed I was still paralyzed when he gave them to me."

Rage flashed in Will's eyes as he handed over a pair of cowhide gloves. He didn't press for details, though his mouth remained a stiff line as he dove back into his duffel. He emerged with a wide-brimmed fire helmet that matched the canary-yellow of his own.

"Put this on," he said, thrusting the helmet into Hannibal's chest. Will looked away as he strapped his own helmet back over his head and pulled his gloves back on. Hannibal did as he was told, knowing that the warring emotions inside Will's head would calm only once they escaped the hospital grounds. Luckily, Hannibal was more than adept at juggling Will's conflicting states of mind. His anger was encouraging—it would help them tear through whatever lay beyond the door.

As Will busied himself with reorganizing what was left in his bag, Hannibal grabbed his sharpened drawing pencil—his only weapon—from the bedside table and slipped it inside his jacket sleeve. He
picked up his sketchbook and thumbed quickly to a page at the front. The statue of Antinous in the Museo Pio Clementino—his earliest sketch. He squinted through his mask, looking for the telltale mark. There it was, dark and unblemished.

He tore out the page, folded it, and tucked it inside his turnout coat, and then laid the sketchbook back on the table. The rest of the drawings would need to be left behind. Like the phoenix in his last illustration, they would go up in smoke along with the medical ward. The knowledge was at least aesthetically satisfying. Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.

Hannibal smiled to himself. What he and Will would create from this act of destruction remained to be seen—but it would certainly make for an enthralling fireworks show. He imagined the flames reflected in Alana's crystal-blue eyes as she watched her beloved penitentiary burn to the ground. Perhaps a tear or two might even escape them. Almost beautiful.

He and Will surveyed each other through the cottony haze. It would be impossible for anyone to tell who they were unless they looked directly into their masks. Will nodded, seemingly satisfied with their camouflage.

"Ready? Once we're out there, lean on me. We need to make it look convincing."

"Delighted to. After you," Hannibal said, tipping his chin.

He felt giddy. He could move. He could breathe. The rooms that had imprisoned him for the last three and a half years were in the process of being reduced to ash. And Will—his Will—had come to lead him out of Hades. Not even Euripides could have devised a sweeter or more justified deus ex machina for his escape.

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Will's heart pumped like a piston as he pulled Hannibal behind him into the hall. He glanced down either side of the corridor. Empty. It seemed the last of the staff had deserted the building, but he knew the fire crews would soon be swarming the third floor.

It had been easy enough to slip into the side entrance as the engines were pulling up. The orderlies were busy hoarding patients into vans for transport to other buildings. Chaos was in full swing. Will had glimpsed the bright-orange flames dancing and twisting behind the smoky basement windows. The glass hadn't yet blown out—but would, in a matter of minutes.

My design.

The thought had stirred something foreboding and thrillingly bad inside him. His veins had pulsed with it as he'd navigated the maze of hallways and stairs to Hannibal's floor. The same doors and rooms he'd glimpsed on his walk with Barney ten days ago stared back at him in silent accusation. The remaining nurses who were fleeing toward the exits had barely spared him a glance, however. They were scared, and more than willing to leave those insane enough to voluntarily enter a burning building to do their jobs.

No one questioned the sight of rescue workers in an emergency. If the cameras caught anything, it would look as though a hurt firefighter were simply being helped out by his partner—an entirely plausible façade.
Not so plausible was the fact that two of them had come out where only one had gone in, though Will was counting on the thick oil smoke to blot out their exit. The chances of any usable footage emerging from the ashes were, he knew, slim.

Hannibal's coincidental escape would undoubtedly become the BSHCI and FBI's joint focus in the days to come. But the Bureau would have no idea where to look for him this time, if all went according to plan. It would mean securing Hannibal's total cooperation, the odds of which were about as good as playing Russian roulette with a five-shooter. But with only one bullet left in the chamber—one he wouldn't reveal until it was time—Will had pegged his chances as pretty good. As good as they'd get, anyway.

Hannibal sagged against Will's shoulder as they turned to the left, toward the disused stairwell that Barney had unlocked for them earlier. Roiling black waves of smoke greeted them. The alarm was screaming several decibels louder in the hallway, battering their eardrums. Talking normally would be next to impossible.

Will swept an arm around Hannibal's back, inviting his full weight. A startling lightness met his grasp. Even through the padded bunker jacket, Will could feel how thin Hannibal had become over the past two and a half weeks. He'd tried not to stare when Hannibal was struggling into the turnout gear, but it was obvious that he hadn't been eating well.

Weak. Hungry. The words stuck like stray fishbones in Will's mind, foreign and unsettling. The man who'd chopped and flambéed his way through countless human lives had barely the strength to pull on a pair of trousers.

Hannibal's mimicry of an injured comrade-in-arms wasn't entirely fake, either. He could walk, as Barney had confirmed—but not quickly, and not well. Then there were the bruises. The sight of them had stoked a hot and alien flare of possessiveness—one Will had pushed out of his head as quickly as it arose. Pity would only defocus him. Anger was easier. If Garret Schneider had attacked a patient—that patient being the BSHCI's resident cannibal—Will knew that nothing in the world would save the doctor from someday ending up on Hannibal's table. He also knew that a part of himself would believe it justified—would relish it, with as much delight and contempt as Hannibal himself.

Sweat trickled down Will's neck inside his turnout jacket. The doorway to the stairwell, half-hidden amidst the swirls of smoke, would take them to the ground floor—and to freedom. Only a few more steps. Hannibal's arm tightened around Will's neck as he wavered. The movement stretched the stab wound in his opposite shoulder, and he could feel the freshly de-stitched flesh threatening to tear. Before he could process the pain, a rasped shout from the hallway made them both freeze.

"Hello! Excuse me! Did you see a man leave this room?"

Will turned, pulling Hannibal with him. He recognized the voice, even at a higher pitch. He could feel Hannibal's body tense beneath the bunker gear as his head snapped in the direction of the sound—a predator's ears piqued by the rustle of prey in the underbrush.

Doctor Schneider hovered outside the door to Hannibal's room, which Will had neglected to lock. He clutched a towel to his face. His lab coat was streaked with soot. Even through his mask, Will could see that the physician's face was violently pale.

"I said, did you see—"

The doctor's cry died in his throat as the two men focused on him. His smoke-reddened eyes
widened as he looked from Hannibal to Will, the familiarity of their figures finally registering. A terrified awareness lit up the doctor's face. Sharp green eyes clashed with stormy blue as he and Will glared at each other.

"I knew it!" Schneider croaked. "I knew you wouldn't be able to stay away, Graham. No matter what bullshit you said in that meeting."

The words were muffled by the towel as he inched backward. A coughing fit seized him, and he mashed the rag harder against his face as he hacked into it. The sound was like a curtain ripping in two.

"Didn't matter what you—ach—told us to tell him, did it?" the doctor continued, struggling for breath. "You still couldn't resist him. But you'll both end up in the same place, I promise you—right back here!"

Will loosened his grip on Hannibal's arm. His fingers curled inside his gloves. They'd been seen. Recognized. That wasn't part of the plan.

Hannibal's voice rose above the din, grating out from his speaking diaphragm. "You lied to me, doctor. You attacked me without reason. Both were unwise. Not to mention very rude."

A growl escaped Hannibal's mouthpiece as he lunged. Will followed without hesitation, without thought. Schneider stumbled backward as Will pinned his shoulders against the wall, his own movements fluidly, perfectly synchronized with Hannibal's. Through the smoke, something thin and pointed flashed in Hannibal's hand. Will shoved the doctor's head to the side with a jerk, exposing his neck.

Before Schneider could cry out, a spray of blood splattered the tile. Will saw one of Hannibal's drawing pencils sticking out from his throat at a sixty-degree angle, drowning in a purple geyser of fluid.

The injured man's body jerked under his hands like a marionette's. But then, you've always enjoyed being someone's puppet, doctor. The two-pronged voice—sharp as hammered steel, clear as a high bell—howled through Will's head. The sound was chortling. Delighting.

Will ripped open the doctor's lab coat—now smeared with both crimson and soot—and groped at the inside pocket, for the keyring he knew would be there. His fingers closed over the jangling metal. Beside him, Hannibal twisted the pencil deeper into Schneider's carotid artery, his eyes blazing behind his mask.

Will wrenched out the keyring as the doctor's head cracked back against the wall, his eyes bulging. The blood now pulsed in a weak stream from his sliced artery. Blood pressure dropping. Heart rate slowing. Soon you won't feel a thing.

Blood dribbled down the sleeve of Will's turnout jacket as he stepped back. "Hannibal!" he called, over the hellish wail of the fire alarm. The other man's head turned at the sound of Will's voice, but his hands remained pinned at Schneider's throat. Will held up the keyring, shaking it so he could see.

Hannibal nodded, sensing Will's urgency. He dropped his hands and stepped back, allowing Will to take his place. Schneider's bloodshot eyes rolled weakly as Will loomed over him.

"No—look at me!" Will grabbed the lapels of the doctor's lab coat, crushing close so that the other man could hear. Blood slid in a slippery stream down the side of the doctor's neck and over Will's glove.
"You weren't wrong—I can't stay away. But it looks like you're going to end up here, instead of us. Going down with your ship while trying to rescue Hannibal? Sounds almost heroic. And we both know that's the kind of recognition you can't resist."

A sound choked from Schneider's throat as his head lolled in disagreement. Will lifted him by the collar, away from the wall. Inside his mind, rage blazed bright and hot; it pulsed in time to the blood hammering through his body, propelling his legs forward.

He dragged Schneider to the doorway of Hannibal's smoke-filled room and, with a single thrust, shoved him inside. The doctor skidded to the floor, limp, his fingers scrabbling uselessly at the pencil lodged in his neck. Will pulled the door closed and locked it from the outside.

When he turned, Hannibal was waiting for him, his body sagging against the blood-smeared tiles. He appeared out of breath. Behind the window of the mask, however, his eyes were glowing as he looked back at Will. Was it pride over what they'd done together—or simply exhaustion?

No time to think. No time to lose. You need to get out—NOW. Will's anger was ebbing, the white-hot bloodlust cooling to a flicker in his brain. No remorse emerged to replace it.

This is our design, the dual voices whispered, in matchless harmony. It began with the Dragon. It won't end with the doctor.

Will shivered, despite the rivulets of sweat pouring down his back and chest.

He tucked Schneider's keyring into his coat. "Let's go," he urged, extending his gloved hand toward Hannibal. The other man clasped it, his grip solid even through his weariness.

Will pulled Hannibal in as before and tugged them toward the stairwell. Beneath his clothes, his skin danced with electricity where their bodies were pressed together, nearly searing him through the thick layers of padding.

A sudden jolt of heat shot to Will's groin as his dream from nearly a week ago charged back into his mind. Hannibal's body sinking down against his own; the hot, tight slide of his flesh more aching and more real than anything he'd felt for Molly in weeks.

No, months. Be honest with yourself, the dual voice inside his head chided. What would it feel like—together, in that way? Do you want to find out?

Will swallowed, his throat raw with smoke. A flush rose along his neck, equal parts desire and chagrin—and then the guilt did come. He knew the answer already, and he knew he wasn't supposed to like it.

He'd left Molly and Walt slumbering at home in Great Falls, unaware of his leaving, unaware that he'd dosed them both to sleep. Will had told himself it was for their own safety. Now, though, he wasn't so sure whom they needed protection from—himsellf, or Hannibal.

You know the answer to that question, too, the voice admonished.

Answers can change, he shot back, as he wrenched open the door to the stairwell.
The heavy door banged shut behind them, quieting the squeal of the alarm. For the first time, Hannibal could hear his ears ringing. They trudged down the stairs together, his own body plastered against Will's side like an extra appendage—a conjoined twin.

When they reached the first-floor landing, Will stopped, disentangling himself from Hannibal's grasp.

"Stay here," Will said, facing him. "I need to go to the basement and turn the sprinklers back on. It'll only take a minute. Then we need to get the hell out of Dodge."

Hannibal shook his head. "I'm coming with you. Just like you came with me, at the end—at all our ends. *Together,* Will—remember?"

Will's eyebrows furrowed. A flash of memory danced across his face, lighting in his somber gray eyes. Perhaps, Hannibal thought, it was the same memory he'd so often seen in his own mind. The window. The gun. Their last embrace. Then—*oblivion.*

"I—." Will paused, interrupting the thought before it could complete; before they could fall again. His expression oscillated between surprise and anguish as Hannibal stared into his face.

*He remembers.* The knowledge pricked a small hole in the place where Hannibal's heart still beat, undrowned and unbroken.

"It's going to be bad down there," Will said, changing tack. "We don't have much oxygen left."

Hannibal grabbed his hand. "Then let's go. Time is our greatest ally, as well as our enemy."

"This really isn't the time or place to be poetic, Hannibal."

From the way Will's cheeks curved, Hannibal could tell he was smiling behind his mouthpiece.

"On the contrary—"

"Shut up."

Hannibal smirked, and allowed himself to be dragged down the last flight of stairs as quickly as his wobbling legs would allow. Black, bilious smoke plumed from the gaps around the tall steel door marked *UTILITIES.*

"Is it unlocked?" he asked, eyeing the door with skepticism.

"Yeah. Thanks to our mutual friend." Will curled his hand around the doorknob. He turned to Hannibal with a strict expression. "Stick close to me. We need to be in and out before the fire crews make it down here."

Hannibal tipped his head in acknowledgement, and tightened his fingers around Will's palm.

Smoke and heat enveloped them like a Venusian eclipse as they stepped inside the hallway. The smells of burning hydrocarbon, wood, and wall plaster tangoed in Hannibal's nasal passages. It was a complex and interesting odor—one he hadn't smelled in a long time. It also stoked his lingering flu-nausea, and he had to swallow several times to keep from gagging.

He followed Will to the right, half-blind in the smoke. According to the maps he'd studied long ago, the sprinkler system should be housed at the opposite end of the hall from the boiler room. He nearly smacked into Will's side as the other man stopped short in front of a low door. Hannibal peered through the fog at the ancient label-plate. *WET SYSTEM,* it read. It appeared Barney had also
unlocked this door for them, as Will turned the knob and ushered them inside.

The sprinkler valve, painted in bright blue, glowed like a beacon across the room. Will dropped Hannibal's hand and crossed to the standpipe. He turned the valve wheel several rotations to the left, the oxygen tank on his back jerking with the movement. Within seconds, a stiff, slightly sulfur-smelling spray came raining from the sprinkler head in the ceiling. The sound of the droplets rattled Hannibal's skull as the water pounded the hard plastic of his helmet.

He remembered, too keenly, the last time rain had washed him clean of blood. This time, however, the blood signified reunion—not separation. Will had declared the night unripe for poetry, but the poetic prophesy Hannibal himself had made on the day he'd drawn Will as the phoenix was coming true. Fire and water had indeed risen to create a new world for them, just as he'd envisioned. And in this one, death was already being visited upon their enemies. Will hadn't watched him attack Doctor Schneider; he'd held him down, and then thrown him inside Hannibal's abandoned prison to suffocate on smoke and his own blood. A fitting end, he thought, for a man so full of vitriol and hot air.

Hannibal smirked inside his mask. If Jack Crawford were here, he might've classified the killing as an escalation. Hannibal wouldn't have minded. In fact, he would've encouraged it. When it came to Will, every escalation presented a new challenge; a new opportunity. He'd missed that learning curve over the past three years. Missed Will's presence. But after the cliff—after their fall—Hannibal knew, in the deepest recesses of his passion, that missing Will was no longer an option.

That was the peculiar thing about desire, Hannibal thought to himself, as Will grabbed his gloved hand in his own, slick now with water. Desire only grew the more it was fed. It was also the most difficult aspect to control, sometimes coming in strangling gasps and sometimes simmering for years underneath the surface. But now you've returned to me, and I to you. We're conjoined, Will. We always have been.

"Lean on me when we get out, but go as fast as you can, no matter who or what we see." Will's voice was hoarse in his ear as they backtracked down the hazy hallway. Hannibal coughed in reply. It was becoming more difficult to breathe.

"I'll help you," Will said. "We need to get past the ballfield, to the road beyond it. I'm parked there. If we get separated, look for a gray pickup. Barney's meeting us."

The door to the utilities hall banged shut behind them, closing out the smoke rolling from the furnace room. Hannibal breathed in deep, preferring the stale reek of the stairwell to the chemically infused stench of combusting oil.

"You've thought of everything. How many nights did you spend awake, planning my escape?"

Will grimaced. "I didn't think we'd run into Doctor Schneider."

The admission smelled faintly of misgiving, but Hannibal decided not to probe. They were running out of time; they could speak about the good doctor later.

They stepped onto the first-floor landing in tandem, dripping with sprinkler water. The door to the outside world—to freedom—stood only a few feet in front of them. When Hannibal had pictured the moment in his mind, it had never materialized quite like this. He found himself thoroughly pleased to be proven wrong.

"Ready when you are," he said, the words tasting fragile on his tongue.
Beside him, Will took a heavy breath. "All right," he said, ducking to sling Hannibal's arm over his neck. Hannibal could feel the heat radiating from his skin in damp pulses of anxious energy. They both knew it was now or never. "Let's gun it."

Outside the building, the frigid late-autumn air hit them with a mercifully cooling blast. Fresh air. Stars. Freedom. Hannibal was seized with the desire to rip off his respirator, although he knew he couldn't—not yet. He and Will needed to maintain their ruse until they were away from the hospital grounds.

The stairwell had spit them out into the dark triangle between the medical ward and the patient research building. Perpendicular to the space lay the hospital's baseball diamond, dark and fuzzed over with yellowed weeds. It was approximately one hundred meters across the field. Then one hundred more through the trees to the cloistered outer road—and to escape.

Dozens of figures—Catonsville's first responders and the hospital orderlies—ran to and fro across the grounds to their left. A small police squad had also arrived. The red and white flashes of their cruisers danced alongside the spinning strobes of the fire engines and EMS units parked on the medical center's wide front lawn. The officers were attempting to hold back the staff, who in turn were attempting to subdue some of the ward's less cooperative patients. The firefighters, meanwhile, appeared to be making little headway with their hoses.

Hannibal's mouth twitched in a grin. Will had created a symphony of utter destruction and disharmony—one seemingly absent of a conductor. And he'd created it solely for him.

Just then, he spied the nurse who'd dropped the teacup—the same one who'd brought his meal the first day Barney had helped him walk—in the crowd of staff clustered near the back. Kat. A nickname, perhaps? He'd never learned her full name. Her hands were clutched against her chest, balled into slender fists against her collarbone. She looked like a nervous doe, ready to bolt at the crack of a twig. He didn't blame her.

Will's body suddenly stiffened beside him. Hannibal looked over to see him freeze at the sight of the police cruisers. He nudged them forward, but Will's feet remained rooted to the ground. Panic catching up, Hannibal observed. Not good.

"Relax," he breathed, urging them another step. "We can make it. We'll stay in the dark."

Will jerked forward with the command. "Okay," he mumbled. His steps faltered, then stilled. He paused. Took another breath. "Okay."

Together, they limped across the empty baseball field, their heartbeats thudding with adrenaline. Nothing stirred or moved to stop them. Hannibal turned his face away from the crowd of emergency workers and hospital personnel, but kept his ears perked for any sound directed towards them.

They'd made it two-thirds of the way across the field before the sharp clap of an explosion rocketed up behind them. They both flinched at the simultaneous tinkle of shattering glass, but didn't turn to look. Still thirty meters of open ground to cross, Hannibal calculated. Still exposed. He had little concern for what was happening behind them. What lay ahead—both for his escape, and for him and Will—had riveted his focus.

"There go the windows," Will muttered. "About time."

In the space between Will's last word and their next step, a colossal, deafening BOOM assaulted their ears. Will stumbled and then ducked, jerking Hannibal down with him. A blast of scorching air whooshed at them from behind, enveloping them in a blistering fury. Hades, it seemed, was
determined to follow them out of the medical ward. Their turnout gear protected them from the full force of it, but Hannibal could feel the sides of his earlobes burning.

Shrieks rose up from their left as the sky brightened. Hannibal halted long enough to throw a glance over his shoulder. The faces of the staff and firefighters were upturned—small, round blobs of color fixated on the flames shooting up from the building. The oil tank connected to the boiler had finally exploded.

Through the charred window frames, Hannibal could see the first floor collapse into the basement in a blaze of rubble and light. The blast had also torn open the corner of the wall bordering the research building. Dark tails of flame leapt from the glassless windows and sucked greedily along the outside brick, spurred on by the backdraft.

The emergency workers rushed about in frenzied blurs of brown and yellow, like bees circling a damaged hive. They would attempt to pacify the hospital staff on the lawn, and then determine who among them—and who among their own ranks—was missing. A paltry, frantic attempt at damage control. *This*, Hannibal thought to himself, was the nature of destruction.

The firefighters who hadn't gotten out in time would either be dead, or in the process of dying. Will's inferno had surpassed the manageable stage. It would soon overtake the research facility, if the firefighters weren't quicker with their hoses. Hannibal took small delight in knowing that Doctor Schneider's body would be well-barbecued before it was recovered—if it was recovered. A pity that the meat would be too charred for anyone to salvage.

Hannibal suddenly realized that the moment had presented them with a serendipitous opportunity. "While they're distracted—hurry!" he hissed, doubling his pace toward the tree line.

Will quickened beside him. They'd nearly reached the diamond's edge, which meant they were close to the hospital's curving entrance road.

*Close now—close enough to taste*, he thought, with an excitement bordering on giddiness.

They scurried the remaining distance between the field's edge and the oak trunks bordering the street. Will unlooped his arm from Hannibal's back as they stepped off the asphalt and onto the muddy, frosted ground. It appeared that no one had noticed the two firefighters struggling towards the thicket enclosing Valley Road.

Under the cover of the towering evergreens, Hannibal jerked loose the straps on his mask. He pulled off the helmet and wrenched the respirator over his head. Beside him, Will did the same. They sucked in greedy mouthfuls of glorious, ice-cold air. The breath rushed from their lungs in visible puffs, a testament to how quickly the temperature had dropped. Hannibal noted how Will's stride loosened under the umbrella of the trees. *Safe now. Alone now. Free.*

They walked the remaining distance to the spur road in silence, their labored breathing and the crunch of dried pine needles faint in their damaged eardrums. Far off, the clamor of the crowd faded to background noise. *One less battle to negotiate,* Hannibal thought to himself.

He spied a charcoal-gray, late-model pickup truck between the trees. *Not Will's or Molly's—whose, then?* It was parked off the side of the road, inconspicuous in the darkness of the pine thicket.

Will braced a gloved hand against the bumper when they reached it, steadying himself. He was still breathing hard, practically doubled over from exertion.

*More stress than smoke,* Hannibal assessed. He briefly considered reminding Will that he'd be more
comfortable if he allowed himself to relax, but decided to refrain. Inopportune timing. The ordeal Will had undertaken to pluck Hannibal from the BSHCI this time was significantly more severe than the one leading up to their dance with the Dragon. Will would learn to calm himself, in his own time.

As the adrenaline began to filter out of his system, Hannibal realized that his legs were shaking. He hadn't walked this much on his own since before he'd awoken, paralyzed, in the medical ward. His left knee—the one Doctor Schneider had attacked—was threatening to buckle.

He folded himself down at the edge of the road, a little ungracefully, before he could fall. He set his helmet and mask on the asphalt and pulled off his gloves. Then turned to Will, who was still crouched over the bumper, eyes squeezed shut. It seemed he hadn't yet regained his wind—or perhaps he was merely avoiding the inevitable conversation.

Hannibal turned his gaze, giving both of them another moment of quiet. He knew Will sometimes needed more than one.

He stared across the dark road that stretched away from them. To their left, a single streetlamp shone across the asphalt, casting it in bright gray shine. His throat was burning and his eyelids stung, and he was fairly sure his body was going to punish him for walking so much so soon—but they'd made it. Together. Hades was behind them. Elysium—or something like it—hovered just beyond.

"You did it!" A cheerful voice boomed from the darkness to their right. Hannibal and Will's heads snapped up to see a tall figure emerge from the trees and stride towards them.

Barney. Hannibal's mouth quirked in a weary smile of welcome, meeting the toothy grin on the orderly's face.

"With a bit of help from the boiler, yes," Hannibal said. "It made for quite a spectacle. The ward's caving in on itself as we speak."

"I saw it through the trees," Barney said, nodding. The pom-pom on the top of his beanie bounced with the movement. "Walked out here an' waited for you. Was hopin' you got out before it went up."

The orderly, towering like a tree himself in his overcoat, looked down at Hannibal with a worried expression. "You all right, Doctor Lecter? Legs holdin' up okay?"

Hannibal smirked. "No worse than usual. Though a little more preparatory exercise beforehand would've been desirable."

Before Barney could reply, Will's voice cut sharply across the night air. "You were away during the fire, right? No one saw you?"

Barney's eyes shifted to Will. "Yep. Went out after dinner. Did a little driving around. Then went over to the multiplex and got a ticket for a midnight show. Watched half of it. Somethin' about miners in South America." He shrugged. "It was okay."

"And then?"

Hannibal looked from Barney to Will. The other man's tone was unusually thorny. His anxiety, it seemed, was kicking back into high gear in the aftermath of his arson. Best not to mention Doctor Schneider to Barney, then. Not unless Will brings it up.

Hannibal pushed himself up from the asphalt, his legs wobbling in protest. He knew that the three of them would need to be on equal footing to navigate their next, uncharted steps.
"Well, then I drove back early an' parked at the golf club over on Hilltop," Barney continued. "Then walked back here an' waited, like I said. That was about thirty minutes ago. Didn't see anyone. Didn't talk to anyone, 'cept in the theater. Made sure they saw me there."

Will exhaled, visibly relieved. "Okay, good—that's good. Thanks."

He dropped his hand from the truck bumper and unfastened his bunker jacket. The Velcro yielded with a loud crunch. Then he unstrapped the duffel from his back and tossed it into the cab, and pulled a black mobile from his turnout trousers.

"I'll call Chiyoh and let her know we're finished."

Hannibal's eyebrows lifted. "I take it Chiyoh is handling the financial end of this conspiracy."

Barney grinned again, his teeth flashing white in the darkness. "Yep. I woulda helped you out somehow, Doctor Lecter. But there's some risks a man can't take without an incentive."

Hannibal nodded. "And you should be rewarded for your services, Barney. You've treated me well, and helped Will pull off an admirable—and no doubt expensive—escape. Soon, you'll be able to live as you like, wherever you like."

Depending on how much Chiyoh and Will promised you, he thought, but didn't say aloud.

If his family's inheritance were any smaller, Hannibal might've worried just how much of his money his surrogate sister and his feisty erōmenos were doling out to Barney and whoever else had been involved. As it was, an amount most people would classify as a small fortune was still only a drop in the proverbial bucket of the Lecter estate's amassed wealth. He would allow Will and Chiyoh to give Barney what he was due.

Barney withdrew a manila folder from inside his coat and held it up so that Will—who was squinting down at his cell—could see. The other man looked up, his eyes shooting to the folder as he lifted the phone to his ear.

"Just some banking stuff," Barney explained. "Don't gotta look at it now. I'll just put it in the truck."

"Thanks," Will said absently, as he turned and lifted the phone to his ear. "Hello? Yeah. It's done."

He began walking down the empty road away from them, his voice floating to Hannibal's ears in hushed, indiscernible syllables as the space between them widened. He watched Will's retreating form as Barney went to the driver's-side door of the pickup to deposit his folder.

Will hadn't looked at him once since they'd reached the truck. Hadn't moved to talk to him or touch him. It seemed almost as though he were afraid to—which didn't bode well for Elysium, Hannibal thought to himself, frowning. Or perhaps Will was simply as smoke-addled and exhausted as Hannibal himself was. Perhaps he was only overthinking Will's aloofness.

Stay with me, he pleaded silently at the retreating shape of Will's back. Don't take yourself away from me. Not again. Not now.

"Don't worry about him."

Barney's voice in his ear was unexpected. Hannibal turned to face the orderly, who reached to unfasten the Velcro snaps of Hannibal's turnout jacket with a harsh riüb.

"He'll settle down once he's feelin' less jumpy," Barney said. "Let me help you outta these clothes so
you don't hafta smell like smoke anymore. Think Mister Graham brought some clothes for ya."

Out of habit, Hannibal relinquished control of his body to Barney. He found himself unexpectedly grateful for the attention. The orderly unstrapped the harness with the oxygen tank from his back, and pulled the cowhide gloves from his hands. Hannibal shivered as Barney eased the bunker jacket from his shoulders, allowing the early-morning breeze to caress his bare arms.

"Might want to fetch the clothes first, Barney," Hannibal said gently, making a mental note to later retrieve his drawing from the turnout jacket's pocket.

"Oops—yeah. Sorry." Barney ducked over to the passenger side of the pickup and bent down, rummaging around on the floor. When he straightened up, he was holding a pair of beige slacks, a white V-neck and a ribbed green sweater that had been washed within an inch of its color. Tube socks and a pair of trainers completed the ensemble Will had chosen for him.

"Here we go," Barney cheerfully announced, carrying the bundle over. Hannibal grimaced at the trainers, but didn't voice his distaste. The rest of the outfit was passable; it would do until he could procure more suitable clothing.

Barney set the clothes on the ground and went about untucking the hospital gown from Hannibal's trousers. He nicked it over his head, leaving Hannibal shirtless in the night air. He scrambled quickly into the t-shirt and sweater Barney handed to him.

"All right, here's the shitty part. Shoes an' pants," the orderly said, bending down to help Hannibal pull off the tight rubber boots. "We'll do it quick."

Over his feet went the socks as Barney popped off the boots one by one. The freezing asphalt leached into his soles, making his toes curl.

"I'll let you do this part yourself," Barney said, stepping back and extending the pair of khakis.

Hannibal gritted his teeth and tore open the Velcro snap on the turnout trousers, and pulled them off as fast as he could. He snatched the pants from Barney's hand, muttering a mild curse in Lithuanian as the frigid air caressed his bare ass and groin. He hoped Will wasn't watching—and if he was, that he'd have the decency to look away. Unlike the other strange and savage scenarios in which he and Will had been exposed to each other, this one was hardly sensual.

"Shoes," he barked. Barney crouched down and slipped the trainers onto Hannibal's socked feet as he braced himself against the tailgate. The trainers, though garish, were cushioned and not altogether bad. Not Will's fit or style, though. Whose, then? he wondered, for the second time.

"Thank you, Barney," Hannibal sighed, as the warmth began to filter back into his body. The orderly stood up and collected the discarded bunker gear from the road.

"No worries," he said, his voice buoyant. "Least I can do." He dumped the pile of sooty clothing into the truck bed and brushed his hands off on his pants. "Told ya everything was gonna work out like it was s'posed to." Barney grinned, seemingly pleased with himself.

The absence of Will's murmured tones permeated both their ears. Hannibal turned to see the other man walking back from the thicket, his head bowed, the burner cell clutched tight in his palm. His bunker outfit was gone. In its place were a pair of dark jeans and a navy blue Henley that hung too loose on his shoulders. It appeared as though Will hadn't been eating adequately as of late, either. Unlike most people, however, the lost weight only made his bone structure appear more breathtaking. From Will's muted expression, it was difficult to tell if the conversation with Chiyoh
had ended on a satisfactory note.

Barney sidled up alongside Hannibal, pulling his attention back with tangible urgency. "I'll be around for a while," he said, his words hushed and rapid. "Not goin' anywhere just yet. After everything else is done, if you need anything, you can call me. I've got one of those phones, too. Don't tell Mister Graham I told you. Can you remember a number?"

Hannibal nodded. Barney's words hovered in his mind like a portent. *Everything 'else?'* Apparently Barney knew—or thought he knew—something Hannibal didn’t.

He watched as Will pocketed his phone and glanced back through the trees at the blur of smoke and light that marked the burning medical ward. Barney leaned in and whispered a ten-digit string of numbers into his ear, and then stepped away right as Will turned his head to look at them.

Hannibal's mind snapped up the numbers, swallowing them whole. Later, he would transcribe them on his favorite Alberto Cozzi stationery and tuck them inside his memory palace’s study for safekeeping. He'd started a filing drawer for Barney there, shortly after emerging from his coma. The mnemonic system had never failed him; he was able to recall a multitude of addresses, recipes, literary passages, and other information without wasting so much as a scrap of actual paper.

"Many thanks for the assistance, Barney," Hannibal said, as Will tossed his own discarded bunker gear in the back of the truck and rejoined them. "I feel warmer now. And much more like a civilized person. I'd nearly forgotten what it felt like to be properly dressed."

Barney chuckled. "No problem, Doctor Lecter. Hope you'll get somewhere warmer real soon."

Will's mouth flitted into a lopsided, uncomfortable smile—the *I-don't-feel-like-talking-anymore* one that was more grimace than grin. Hannibal had seen it emerge often at the BAU headquarters and at crime scenes. Soon, he knew, they would need to take their leave of Barney and head to whatever destination Will had planned for them next.

"It's all there," Will said, facing Barney. "You can check the Cayman account anytime you want. Should be ready for withdrawal in less than twenty-four hours."

Barney's mouth flattened to a smile. "I do appreciate it, Mister Graham. Thanks for the opportunity." He nodded a goodbye, apparently already familiar with Will's disdain for hand-shaking.

The orderly turned to Hannibal and stuck out his palm. "You too, Doctor Lecter. It's been a pleasure meetin' you—on the inside and the outside. Good luck."

Hannibal shook the offered hand, which had helped dress and clean and intimately care for his broken body over the last three weeks. For the first time since he'd woken to Barney's caretaking, he felt no loss of dignity in knowing that he'd needed the help. Barney had provided it with both patience and kindness. He'd even offered his assistance beyond the hospital, should Hannibal require it. What kind of service that might entail, Hannibal couldn't say—though it seemed the orderly already had an idea.

He cradled the numbers inside the mouth of his memory palace, prodding them with his taste buds. Obtusely sweet and somewhat salty at the outset, but with a thick reserve of umami underneath—the code for Barney. For *friend*. However, like the palate, the nature of friendship could change depending on the sweetness or bitterness with which it was infused. Hannibal was very much looking forward to unraveling the complex taste of Barney's friendship.

"We should go," Will said, his voice prickling. "It's getting late. We still have a drive ahead of us."
Hannibal tilted his head, penetrating Will's tetchiness with a stare. "And where are we driving?"

"I'll explain on the way," he said, dropping his eyes and pulling open the driver's-side door. He grabbed a canvas jacket from the front seat and shrugged it on with his back to them.

"Well, bet you're ready to sit down for a bit. Lotta walkin' for one night. And now you're on the run."

Hannibal turned back to the orderly, who stood with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his overcoat. He was grinning.

"A few minutes' rest will be welcome, yes," he agreed. He watched from the corner of his eye as Will reached across the front of the cab. There was an audible click—the glove box. Then the blunt silver barrel of his thirty-eight snubnose flashed in the moonlight as he tucked it into the back of his jeans. Hannibal's eyebrow twitched. Interesting.

"Goodbye, Barney," he said, shifting his attention back as Will slid into the front seat. "Good luck to you, also."

Barney nodded again, solemn now. He remained standing at the side of the road, like a sentry, as Hannibal crossed to the passenger side of the pickup and pulled open the door.

Will glanced over, his eyes hooded beneath the brim of the ballcap he'd pulled down over his forehead. He tipped his chin towards the backseat.

"Sorry, but you'll have to lay down on the floor. It's the only way the traffic cameras won't catch you. Or if we get stopped…"

He left the sentence unfinished. Hannibal sighed, but didn't protest; he knew Will was right. He flipped the front seat forward and squeezed into the back of the crew cab, twisting until he managed to fold his limbs into a not-entirely-uncomfortable position.

Will flipped the passenger seat back and started the truck. The engine sputtered for a few seconds before reluctantly chugging to life. Then, suddenly, they were moving. From the floor, Hannibal could feel the road grinding underneath as the tires bumped over the lip of the asphalt and back onto the street.

Hannibal glanced between the front seats at the rearview mirror. He could see Barney in his puffy overcoat, reflected in the dark rectangle of glass as they pulled away. White puffs of air drifted from the mouth of the tall, solitary figure, who seemed to become smaller and smaller as the road unfolded behind them.

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Will drove at law-abiding speed to Route One-sixty-six, fighting the urge to slam all of his weight on the gas pedal. Every one of his nerve endings was frayed and sizzling with adrenaline aftershocks. The numbers on the truck's dash read 2:47 a.m. He had exactly enough time to take Hannibal to Lake Barcroft, and then drive back home to slip into bed before Molly awoke.

As long as we don't get pulled over, it'll be okay, he told himself. Hold it together—just a couple more hours. Then you can breathe.
A perimeter check was unlikely this far out, he knew. It was possible that Hannibal's disappearance hadn't been noted amid the chaos of the fire. Not yet, anyway.

He cracked the passenger window an inch, allowing the fresh night air to filter in through the cab. The steel-toed boots—which Will hadn't bothered to take off—still reeked of smoke and squeaked against his socks every time he stepped on the clutch. He could change them for his regular shoes once they reached the cabin. For now, he'd have to put up with the smell—and the silence.

No sound had come from the backseat since they'd driven away. A surprise, considering that Hannibal wasn't usually one to refrain from talking. Not when all of his engines of thought were chugging. His silence would almost be disappointing, Will thought, if not for the dread of what Hannibal might say. The questions he might ask. There were still too many Will couldn't answer.

As he curved south onto the Parkway near the BWI airport, the sound of limbs shifting reached his ears beneath the whirr of the wind. A small cough came from the floor.

"You wanted me to believe you were dead," Hannibal said. Restrained exhaustion hovered underneath the implicit question: Why?

Will swallowed. He knew Hannibal had already grasped at the answer; the statement was as much a formality as it was an icebreaker.

"I'd rather talk about that face to face." He paused, giving space for Hannibal to protest, to push back. Nothing. "Wouldn't you?"

"As you wish," the other man replied, after a moment.

Will could almost hear the thoughts shifting inside Hannibal's head, as if they were his own. I've waited nineteen days, Will. But I suppose another hour won't hurt.

"May I ask where you're taking us?"

Will eyed the neon-pink skylights from the Maryland casino to their left. They cast a garish shine across the sky. The parkway itself was illuminated by tall lampposts positioned at hundred-foot intervals, blocking out the stars overhead. Too much light pollution out here. That was one thing he liked about Great Falls, and about his father's cabin—you could see the stars. Faintly, but they were there.

"I'm taking you somewhere safe," he said. "Somewhere out of the way."

Hannibal's next question came quicker. "And after the ash settles?"

Will tried not to envision the expression on Hannibal's soot-streaked face—still too pale, too gaunt, all sharp cheekbones and haunted eyes.

He bit his lip as he answered, "That's another thing we should talk about face to face."

Hannibal fell silent. In his mind's eye, Will saw the other man's eyes shift in the weak afternoon sunlight of his living-room-cum-bedroom in Wolf Trap. Saw Hannibal's throat working to speak, as he sat slumped in the chair he'd pulled to Will's beside, a notebook open on his lap. Do we talk about teacups and time, and the rules of disorder?

Not yet, Will thought, blinking. His eyes felt suddenly hot. He forced himself to focus on the road. Not like that.
"Later, then." Hannibal's voice was almost agreeable. He knew he wasn't going to get his way—not right now, when his freedom and safety remained both precarious and wholly in Will's hands. Will suspected a part of him might even be *enjoying* the surrender.

It also seemed that neither of them was going to bring up Garret Schneider—an omission for which he was silently grateful. He knew the fire would destroy any trace evidence of the killing. But the fact remained that he and Hannibal *had* killed again, together.

It had been impulsive and necessary; a means to an end. *That* knowledge didn't move him. The way he'd *enjoyed* it—had relished the electrifying rush of moving in deadly sync with Hannibal, like two wolves taking down an unruly buck—still simmered in his veins with an almost post-coital calm. Bodies and minds united in a vivid invocation of death. *Creation from destruction.*

*We're alive again. Awake again. Aware. Both of us—together,* the fork-tongued voice in his head soothed, layer upon layer, seductively saccharine.

"Did Vadim Stonys deliver my letter?" Hannibal's voice drifted up from the backseat, slicing through Will's thoughts. His tone was polite. Inquisitive.

Something inside Will's chest jerked. His hand nearly slipped on the steering wheel.

"Yeah."

He pictured the shelf on the bookcase where he'd tucked the Penguin atlas, inside of which Hannibal's note lay captive.

"Actually, Barney did. Vadim gave it to him to give to me."

"Ah." A hint of smugness beneath the tired syllable. "And did you read it?"

Will's eyebrows lifted. Hannibal was toying with him now, he knew. Somehow, though, it didn't bother him as much—not with the other man lying on the floor of the truck, weak and willing to go wherever Will deigned to take him. Still, Hannibal *had* to know how the calligraphied words had wrapped themselves around Will's mind like a tourniquet, cinching the bloodflow to the reasoning part of his brain. He could still feel their squeeze.

Had he *read* Hannibal's letter? He'd *memorized* the damn thing.

"I did," Will replied. "And in case you're wondering, I didn't burn it."

"Not this time."

"No."

"You burned down Alana's medical ward, instead."

A hint of disparaging humor in the statement. Will smirked. His care for Alana didn't extend to her oversight of the BSHCI. Hannibal knew, just as well as Alana did, how little affection Will held for the place.

"Yes," he answered. *Pas de touché,* he thought to himself.

A moment passed. Will rubbed his thumb along the worn leather of the steering wheel. The wind whistled through the cracked window, numbing the scar on his cheek.

"Good," Hannibal said finally. "Very good." He sighed and fell silent, seemingly finished with
talking for the moment.

The glow of Annapolis Junction gave way to the dense, lightless vert of the wildlife refuge that sprawled out ahead of them. They were halfway to D.C., the last major metropolis they’d have to cross before entering the quiet, rural darkness of Virginia. Though a more heavily trafficked route, Will knew that passing through Capitol Hill and over the Potomac was preferable to being captured on camera at the Beltway toll through Bethesda. If someone had told him three weeks ago that he’d be transporting a felon through the heart of the nation's capital after setting fire to a state penitentiary, he might've laughed. Might've, if it had been for anyone other than Hannibal.

This, he knew, was the awareness that demanded juggling. Was it a weakness? Maybe. But it was also a compulsion—a need he couldn't shut out. Both Hannibal and Bedelia had urged him to be intimate with his instincts. Against Bedelia's advice, he'd helped the wounded bird. But he couldn't keep it, and he couldn't crush it, either. He could only follow through with his design, and hope that Hannibal would see his last, extreme act as one of empathy rather than cruelty.

As he approached the junction of the Parkway and Four-ninety-five, Will realized he hadn't heard a sound from the backseat in nearly ten minutes. He glanced over his shoulder. Hannibal was settled onto his left side, arms curled loosely around himself, his spine curved over the hump of the transmission tunnel. The streetlamps illuminated his haggard face in brief, yellow flashes, bathing his closed eyelids in light.

Hannibal, it appeared, was dead asleep.

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The pickup's tires bumped off the dirt road and onto the driveway to the cabin, grating over the gravel. From the backseat, the sound of shifting was followed by a long, languorous exhale. Then silence. Still asleep, then, Will thought to himself.

He felt a spark of pity as it occurred to him that Hannibal was likely physically exhausted. Aside from his healing gunshot wound, concussion, and spinal injury, he hadn't looked well. There was the obvious weight loss—but it was more than that. He had the soft, opaque look of a person who had been ill for weeks. Slightly blurred around the edges.

Will hadn't allowed himself to imagine how Hannibal might've felt upon reawakening. Now, though, he could see it through Hannibal's eyes as easily as if the memories were his own. The last thing he would've remembered was falling. The cliff, the window; the sea, the street. Clutching tight, silently assenting to the deaths dealt by Will's own hand.

Then darkness. Long drifts of days and nights, borne on the breezes of dreamscapes and nightmares—until a rent was made in the blackness of his mind as awareness tore through, and his coma-darkened vision came screaming back in a painful burst of white walls and the frantic blipping of machines.

Then the slow, cold creep of realization that not only was he alone, but also incapacitated and re-incarcerated. A captive of both the BSHCI and his own body.

Will shuddered. He pulled up at the edge of the stone terrace, leaving room to switch out the pickup for his SUV, and then killed the engine. He glanced behind him at the back of the cab, which was
mostly dark except for a small strip of light that fell across Hannibal's hands from the porch lamp. His fingers were twitching in his sleep, nails digging into the folds of the faded wool sweater, which had belonged to Will's father. It wasn't a pleasant dream, by the looks of it.

*A killer, dressed in a ghost's clothing,* Will thought darkly. He sighed and glanced at the dash—3:52 a.m. Still enough time to stow Hannibal away and make it back to Great Falls before sunrise, if he hurried.

He jumped out of the truck, boots crunching on the gravel. The breeze was cold and sluggish, seemingly awaiting direction. He went to the passenger side and triggered the front seat release, and folded it forward with a snap.

"Hannibal, wake up. We're here," he said, keeping his voice low.

The house had no neighbors within a quarter-mile, but that didn't mean they were safe. Hannibal would need to stay inside while he was away. Both of their freedoms—and Will's carefully crafted alibi—rested on Hannibal's cooperation in not being discovered. In his mind, Will heard a click as the revolver's hammer cocked. *Time to play.*

When Hannibal didn't stir, Will bent down and nudged his shoulder.

"Hannibal," he said again. "Wake up."

Hannibal's hands stilled. His eyes slid open soundlessly, like a reptile's. They rolled up to meet Will's.

"We're here. You need to get inside."

Hannibal stared at Will for a long moment, unblinking, as though drinking in some kind of unexpected vision. Then he unfolded his arms and pushed himself up from the floor of the truck, grimacing as his limbs protested.

"How long were we on the road?" His voice was rough and sleep-slurred. He looked into Will's face, eyes alight with a warm, drowsy glow. Will felt a pang of something unnamable tighten in his chest. The ways in which Hannibal's softness manifested were often as unexpected as his cruelty.

*Focus,* he chastised himself, for what seemed like the tenth time that evening. *The danger's not over. Still vulnerable out here.*

"About an hour," Will said, as he helped Hannibal out of the backseat. The other man's knees wobbled with fatigue. "You dropped off around twenty minutes in."

Hannibal didn't reply. He followed Will across the weed-dotted terrace to the house, which was dark except for the single lamp Will had left on in the front window. From the corner of his eye, Will saw Hannibal's head swivel as he surveyed the one-story cabin and detached garage with its hanging rowboat. He peered beyond the dark clusters of evergreens and bare sycamores, to where the moonlight reflected off the rippling surface of Lake Barcroft.

"A much more pleasant vision to wake to than the medical ward," Hannibal said, stopping on the porch as Will dug out his keys. "I almost feel as if I'm on holiday."

Will turned the lock and pushed open the door, gesturing for Hannibal to go in. "Don't get too attached. You'll be safe here, but you can't stay. This is just to keep you hidden for now."

He pulled the door shut behind them, closing out the crisp, early-morning air. Will instantly felt his
skin prickle with warmth underneath his jacket. Unlike his and Molly's house, the cabin had a fairly new and efficient heating system—another legacy from the previous homeowners.

He thought about taking off his jacket—and then thought about the time, about the impending daybreak, and about how he wasn't staying. Not tonight.

_Not any night_, his own voice chastened him. _As much as he might want you to._

Will wrung the thought from his mind and watched Hannibal's eyes sweep the front room with curious politeness. He stood with his hands at his sides, taking in the simple modern furnishings, the taxidermied largemouth bass over the fireplace, and the fishing rods lined up in a neat row along the wall. An eyebrow lifted as his gaze swept over the compound bow hanging in the corner by the flat screen TV.

"And whose house am I occupying?"

"Mine. I'll explain later," Will said, brusque. "There's a burner phone in the kitchen drawer. I'm taking the truck keys with me. _Don't_ try to hotwire it, and don't call anyone, unless it's me—and not unless you need to. Not even your lawyer."

Hannibal's lips twitched, stopping short of a smile. "Auto theft seems like a particularly rude way to repay a rescue. And Vadim Stonys is both an old friend and a trustworthy attorney. I wouldn't make the mistake of putting him in a difficult position. Tell me, Will, how did _you_ find his acquaintance? Helpful?"

"He chased down my acquaintance. You made that kind of unavoidable." Will paused, biting his lip. "You could say he made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

A grin broke onto Hannibal's face, and Will felt the sudden urge to wrap his soot-smeared hands around his malnourished neck and strangle him. It passed.

"There's food, clothes, a first aid kit. Just stay here until I can come back. I have to go before Molly wakes up."

At that, Hannibal's smirk faded. He smoothed his hands along the sides of the borrowed khakis.

"It wouldn't make for a very good alibi if your wife woke to find you missing, and then learned of my escape." His voice was tense. "So, in that case, I certainly hope you sedated her before you left."

Will threw him a dark look. How did Hannibal always _know_? The answer came instantly and in his own voice: _Because it's what he would do._

He thought of the zolpidem he'd crushed up and mixed into Molly's wine, and hated himself with every ounce of rational thought left in his brain.

"So I'm meant to be on the run, it seems," Hannibal added, casting another look around the room and then focusing his gaze on Will. "But _you_ aren't."

Will shook his head. "You're out of the hospital, that's what's important. No one will find you here. Like I said, we'll talk over everything when I can make it back. This is the best I can do for now."

Hannibal clasped his hands behind his back. It brought back a bizarre image of the man behind the glass, standing stiff and upright in his cell, speaking to him from a place he didn't belong.

_Some beasts shouldn't be caged._ Chiyoh's words—words that Will had seemingly adopted as his
own. Memories of muted winter sunlight, murmured voices, and the relentless aching of a thousand wounds chased one another inside his mind.

"Since you're leaving me without a vehicle or funds, I assume you've concocted a second part to this plan?"

"Yes."

Will turned, without clarifying. He knew if he didn't leave soon, he wouldn't make it home in time.

He pulled open the door. A cold burst of air blew in from the lake, carrying a flurry of delicate snowflakes with it. When did it start snowing? The forecast hadn't called for it. The crystals settled on the hardwood floor and instantly began to melt.

"Will."

Hannibal crossed the floor in two strides, stopping a foot away from where he stood. He laid his hand on Will's arm. The touch sent a shiver down his spine. Will turned his head, enough to let Hannibal see that he was listening.

"Thank you."

Hannibal dropped his hand and stepped back. The gesture was genteel; almost deferential. Will wordlessly stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind him. Then shoved his key into the deadbolt and locked it.

His heart was beating dull and hard, the way it had been when Stonys had called him. The man had given him the pretense of a choice—one that Hannibal had already made for Will a long time ago. He'd tried to walk away and failed, yet again. But he couldn't cut out what was already inside of him. What was already a part of him. And Hannibal knew it.

He went to the truck, breathing in deep lungfuls of ice-tinged air. Hannibal's gratitude had been genuine; the cabin would serve as an adequate safe house for the time being. The revolver's first chamber had come up empty.

One bullet dodged.

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Half an hour later, Will pulled onto his driveway in Great Falls, Hannibal's touch still lingering on his arm. He prayed to the ends of the universe and everything in between that Molly and Walt were still asleep. Fortunately, morning light was still two hours away, giving him adequate time to shower off the sweat and smoke and slip into bed.

The windshield and the hood of the Subaru were wet with melted snow. Like Doctor Schneider's untimely appearance in the medical ward, the weather shift was another phenomenon he hadn't foreseen. He was thankful it hadn't snowed harder on his drive back; it would've only slowed him down.

At the cabin, Barney's manila envelope had caught his eye from the driver's-side map pocket of the truck. Now it lay beside him on the passenger seat of the Subaru, a bent rectangular glow of orange
in the darkness.

*Just some banking stuff,* Barney had said. Will hadn't asked him for any paperwork. The financial arrangements among himself, Barney, and Chiyoh had been made anonymously, online. The absence of paperwork and in-person consults were part of the attractiveness of opening an account in the Cayman Islands. So what clandestine documents had Barney passed to him this time?

Will glanced at the dash clock. 4:35 a.m. He had a few minutes to find out.

He clicked on the SUV's reading light, and slid his finger under the sealed lip of the envelope. He fished around inside, fingers closing on what felt like several loose sheets of paper. He pulled them out, holding his breath.

Maybe Barney had given him and Hannibal over to the FBI after all, and had chosen to inform him via letter. Or maybe he'd simply decided to provide Will with unnecessary accounting information, after all. The orderly was more difficult to draw a bead on than most people assumed; either action wouldn't have been entirely surprising.

Will's brow furrowed as he stared down at the top page in his hand. It looked like a photocopy of a charcoal drawing—one crafted with obvious skill and attention to detail. He peered closer.

The figure, he thought, looked familiar. It was a sketch of a young man with curly hair and downcast eyes. A circlet of ivy and grapes crowned his head, and a staff rested upright in his hand, in a victorious gesture. It reminded Will of the classical Greek statuary he'd glimpsed during his infrequent visits to the Smithsonian. But the face wasn't entirely classical—nor was the intended likeness difficult to guess.

He glanced down at the small, looping signature at the corner of the page: *Hannibal Lecter,* the scrawl proclaimed. Underneath it, in even smaller letters, was penned: *La Braschi Antinous, Museo Pio Clementino.*

*Antinous. The Greek youth—the emperor's favorite. The one who helped slay the lion.*

Will stared. His stomach gave a fluttery jerk as he allowed the sheet to slide from his hand. A second drawing lay underneath. This one, penned in similar detail but more fanciful in composition, showed what appeared to be a phoenix, lifting a dying man up into the sky. In place of a bird's head was Will's own face; or perhaps Antinous'. Their likeness, he could now see, was similar enough that it didn't matter—not to Hannibal, anyway.

The man-phoenix's eyes were focused directly on the viewer. A fiercely protective look shone from their gray depths. Will tossed the drawing on the floor, unsettled by the image. Desperate to see the next.

He gasped as an elaborate scene jumped up from the third page. The drawing was a near-exact reproduction of the illustration from Molly's textbook. Two men circled an enraged lion in the middle of a vast desert, lances poised to strike, their eyes riveted on each other's. This beast, however, was adorned with horns and monstrous black wings that spread out around him like an unholy fire.

Likewise, the faces of the men were altered to match Hannibal's reimagined scenario—Will's features in place of the Greek youth's, and Hannibal's own fair hair and beardless face in place of the emperor's.

It wasn't the differences that arrested him, however. It was the way the men's eyes were locked in heated, murderous lust as the lion-dragon reared up between them.
Will snatched up the first two drawings from the floor of the SUV. He folded them atop the slender stack, not bothering to leaf through the rest. He shoved the pages back into the envelope and threw it on the passenger seat, hands shaking.

This was what Barney had wanted him to see? The wistful imaginings of a caged man with nothing to lose and no one left to love? Or, even more damaging—the revelation of Hannibal's muse, and the truth Will had known all along? The orderly, it seemed, had glimpsed it also.

You've given me my life, yes, but not my freedom... because you've taken yourself away from me.

Will glared out the windshield at the snowflakes gathering on the cooling glass, his breaths coming in quick, frosty succession. Not fair. He'd done everything he could—and far beyond anything he should—to help Hannibal, and to ensure that Barney was rewarded for his part in the plan. For Barney to give Will this taste of Hannibal's pain—his aching, as Bedelia had termed it—when the orderly already knew that their currents were destined to divide, seemed careless and cruel. Almost manipulative.

Maybe Barney had learned a thing or two from Hannibal, Will thought dismally.

Or perhaps he simply wished to provide you with the opportunity to see yourself as I see you. Hannibal's voice, soft this time. There's no cruelty in that, Will. Only perspective.

"So I should be flattered?" Will muttered, gathering up his phones and the envelope and shoving open the SUV door. "Thanks for the perspective. But I'm fucking tired, and done with playing hero for the night. So how about getting out of my head and letting me have a couple hours of peace."

Hannibal's voice quieted. It was quickly replaced by Will's own. Drugged your wife and stepson, then burned down the med ward to break Hannibal Lecter out of prison. Now talking to him in your head, instead of in person. Craziness confirmed.

He trudged up the porch steps and let himself inside the house. The greatroom was freezing; the windows were still open to filter out the smoke from the fireplace. A preemptive jangle of chains met his ears. He slid the deadbolt into place and quickly hushed the dogs before they could welcome him with their usual flurry of yips and whines.

"Quiet," he growled, holding his index finger to his mouth. Winston, who was already halfway up from his pillow, shrank back. Will knew the dogs could tell it was an order and not a request. Only Randy lifted his head and whuffed, his wet nostrils working as he sought Will's scent from across the room.

Will ignored the bullmastiff's probing and went to the windows. Small pools of melted snow glistened on the floor beneath them. He tucked Barney's envelope under his arm and pulled the windows closed, and slid the sash locks back into place. They were surprisingly stiff; it was a wonder Walt had been able to open them at all. He didn't bother to mop up the water. He didn't have the energy to care whether the hardwood stained.

He skipped the squeaky third step on his way to the second floor. His muscles moved in numb, rhythmic obedience to the commands of his depleted brain: Shower. Pajamas. Bed.

In the hall bathroom, he took off his clothes and hung them over the towel rack to air out, then turned on the old pewter taps as quietly as he could.

He stood under the spray for what seemed like a long time, scrubbing the charred, oily stench from
his skin until it was pink and raw. He tried not to think about Hannibal. About his thin eyelids sealed in sleep, brightened by the amber glow of the highway lights; his hand on Will's arm as he'd turned to leave, the touch as light as a whisper, as soft as silk. Will knew the time would come to pull the trigger again, and soon. When it did, he desperately hoped that Hannibal wouldn't be gentle, like tonight—nor vengeful, like so many other nights. Both, though, were equally likely, and equally destructive.

He'd already experienced the particular combination of Hannibal's wrath and affection in one. That time had ended with Abigail bleeding out on the kitchen floor and a linoleum knife in his gut. This time, he would have to find a balancing ground beforehand—a shore safe from the burning, blood-red tide of need that forever threatened to consume them.

Will exhaled, shaking the water from his hair as he stepped out of the shower. He knew he would have to wrestle Hannibal to reason. He also knew that it would require unorthodox methods.

He wiped his palm across the fogged mirror. His own face reflected back at him, hollow-eyed and haggard. A low murmur curled through his brain.

But do you ache for him?

Will shivered. He chose not to answer.

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Will slipped into bed beside Molly at a quarter past five, lifting the patchwork quilt carefully. She didn't stir. He'd stuffed Barney's envelope, along with his burner phone, under a pile of old t-shirts in the dresser. He'd find a better hiding spot later in the morning. At the moment, however, all he could think about was sleep.

He settled on his back, hands folded across his chest, and focused on Molly's deep, slow breathing. In, out. In, out. The rhythm of tides; the rhythm of life. He didn't think about Hannibal, and whether he was sleeping. He didn't think about Barney, or the fire, or what would be left of Doctor Schneider's corpse after the embers of the medical ward faded to ash. And he certainly didn't think about Chiyoh, or the boat, or the many calls he'd have to make over the next few days.

Sleep would find him as long as he didn't think.

His brain was so busy not chasing its own tails of thought that it shut itself down out of pure exhaustion, before his consciousness could protest. Blessed blackness overtook him. He didn't dream.

No time to dream. The shrill brrring of the house phone jerked Will awake before deep sleep could claim him.

At first, his anxiety-addled brain registered it as the smoke alarm. But I shut it off, he protested. I got him out I let them sleep I locked him in they're safe now.

Panic sprang wild in his chest as he grappled at his disordered thoughts. They slipped from his fingertips like flakes of ash on the wind. Then it was Molly shifting next to him, rousing with a sharp breath and a muttered expletive, fumbling for the cordless phone on her nightstand.
Will commanded his heartbeat to still. He blinked. His eyes were so dry, he could actually hear his eyelids moving in the space between Molly's sluggish "Hello?" and her next words.

"Of course he's here," she said, her voice turning sharp. Will turned to look at her, trying his best to appear freshly awakened. "We were asleep."

Molly propped an elbow on her pillow and rubbed her eyes with her free hand. Disheveled blonde strands hung over the end of the receiver cradled against her face. A voice, faint yet perceptibly baritone, buzzed from the speaker.

She glanced over at Will, eyes bleary with sleep and annoyance. And zolpidem, Will's brain pointedly reminded him.

"Yeah. Sure," she said, and handed the phone to Will. "It's Jack."

Will furrowed his brow in questioning. Molly shrugged and lifted her eyebrows. Don't ask me. Something else in her face—worry. She could tell something was very wrong.

Will tucked the receiver between his chin and the pillow.

"Yeah." He didn't have to roughen his voice to feign sleepiness; the smoke from the fire had already done that for him.

"Will, it's Jack. Couldn't reach your cell. Have you turned on the news." Deadpan. Not even a hint of apology for the early hour.

The fire, he thought. They know Hannibal's out.

Will crossed his other arm over his chest to quiet his quickening heartbeat. He kept his voice steady as he glanced at the alarm clock on his bedside table.

"It's quarter to six. We haven't even gotten out of bed yet. What's going on?"

"There's been a fire at the state hospital. Medical ward burned down. Looks like an accident, like the fuel tank was leaking. Took out half the building. One firefighter confirmed dead, another critical."

Will closed his eyes. His chest constricted as a rush of guilt flooded him.

One dead. One critical. Not part of the plan.

"There's a second body they don't have a positive ID on yet," Jack continued. "But they think it might be Doctor Schneider. He's missing."

Jack paused, giving room for Will to speak. To ask the question.

He swallowed. Say something. If Jack had any inkling that Will had known about the fire, it hadn't shown in his voice. But Will knew if he didn't choose the right words now, it could make him look like he was hiding something. He knew how quickly seeds of doubt could take root once planted in Jack's brain.

"When did this happen? Did Alana call you?" Will pushed himself to a sitting position, provoking a curious glance from Molly. The response was adequate, he thought. Surprise and concern, but not panic or pity. The latter weren't part of his emotional makeup for dealing with death—something Jack already knew. Don't ask about Doctor Schneider. Wait for Jack to mention Hannibal.

"Just a few hours ago. I hung up with Doctor Bloom right before I called. But there's a bigger
One problem—you need to be aware of." He paused. "Doctor Schneider isn't the only person missing from the hospital."

Will gritted his teeth. Careful, he told himself.

"If you're calling this early to tell me about it, then I assume it's not some random employee."

"You're correct in that assumption." Jack's voice rolled deeper as a spark of ire crept in. "Hannibal's out, Will. He escaped at some point during the whole mess. No telling how. Alana said he was still paralyzed, as far as the staff knew. Forensics found the second body on the third floor. If it is Doctor Schneider, it's possible he was trying to get to Hannibal during the fire. We don't know for sure yet."

"So it wouldn't be going out on a limb to also assume that no one knows where he is, or where he might be headed." Will feigned a trace of anxiety beneath his sarcasm. Good if Jack thinks I'm worried. "That's why I'm calling. Both you and I know there's a good chance he'll be headed your way, once he finds out you're not dead."

"Also a fair assumption." Will blinked, bringing some moisture back to his eyes. The touch of Molly's hand on his arm startled him. He met her expression with an impassive shake of his head. Swallowed. His throat and nasal passages were raw and sore. A dull headache had started to throb at the back of his skull. All he wanted to do was sleep.

"I know you can take care of yourself," Jack went on. His words stuck like pins in Will's brain. "But you've got to think about your wife and son, Will. Remember the Dragon. Even if you're there, they're still in danger. Hannibal's a loose cannon—you know that as well as anyone. I'm sending a detail over to your house right after we end this call. And I'd strongly advise that you get Molly and Walt out of town for a while, as soon as they can leave."

"Thanks, Jack," Will said. "But you can skip the detail. It'll just put everyone on edge. Too much like Dol—like the last time." He caught himself, for Molly's sake, before he said the name aloud.

He sucked in a breath, waiting for Jack to pounce on his refusal. To insist. Surprisingly, it didn't come.

"I'll make sure he can't find them," Will continued, filling Jack's silence. "They'll be somewhere safe. Soon. That's all anyone needs to know."

Pressure on his arm again. Molly's hand, tugging at him now—insistent, worried. He laid his hand over her knuckles to soothe her, but didn't turn to look at her. Not yet.

"I know you don't want to think about Hannibal anymore," Jack said. "And it's not your job to hunt him down. Foster's people are putting together a task force. The Bureau's going to do everything it can to find him. But no one knows Hannibal's mind better than you, Will."

Jack paused. Will could hear him silently debating with himself on the other end of the line. He decided not to be generous this time. Let him ask.

"If I wanted to borrow your imagination—to get an idea of where you might go, if you were Hannibal…" His voice trailed off, infuriatingly beseeching.

Will sighed. "You can call me, Jack. I'll try to help you. But speculating is the most I'll do. I'll come up to Quantico. But no field kabuki."

"Understood."

"I'll get Molly and Walt out by tomorrow. We'll be fine here for now.">

*And then I won't have to worry about your bloodhounds following me anywhere*, Will thought to himself. He'd foreseen the warnings and precautions; had known that either Alana or Jack would be calling him, would want to help and would likely *ask* for help. But the idea of a twenty-four-hour police presence at the house was unwelcome, and possibly bordering on *dangerous*. He wouldn't allow the FBI to interfere with his design. Not *this* time.

"We'll talk," Jack said. "Keep me updated, and let me know if you think of anything. I'll be in touch."

"Yep."

"And Will—stay safe."

Will grimaced. The old, condescending concern belying Jack's greater interest: *Help me catch him.* He hadn't missed *that*. Not at all.

"Thanks, Jack." His sleep-deprived brain almost added *You too*, before he realized how nonsensical it would sound. He pushed the talk button on the receiver, ending the call, and handed the phone back to Molly. She held it gingerly in her hands, like an injured snake.

"What the hell was *that* about?" Her gray-green eyes, stormy with anxiety and fatigue and irritation at being left out, were piercing in the half-light of the bedroom. Her floral-print nightshirt hung loosely over one shoulder, revealing the bare curve of her collarbone.

The sight filled Will with a sudden pang of something between foreboding and remorse. Slender bones beneath silken skin. So vulnerable. So easily broken.

*Molly… oh Molly. I'm sorry. Please don't look. Please stay blind.*

The wish hung bitter in the back of his throat. He couldn't swallow it.

"Total chaos," he answered. "One of the buildings at the Baltimore State Hospital caught fire overnight. They think it was the oil furnace. A couple people dead, another hur—"

"That's *not* why Jack called you this early in the morning," Molly interrupted. Her fingers clenched around the receiver. "He woke up, didn't he? *Hannibal*. And now he's escaped. Jack thinks he's going to come after you. After *us*."

Will nodded, keeping his expression grave. "Jack doesn't have much authority at the Bureau, but they'll ask him to consult informally on this one. He wants my help."

Molly's eyes narrowed as her mouth opened in protest.

Before she could speak, Will assured, "In a *limited* capacity. No real field work. Just consultation. It's got to be off the books, since neither of us officially works for the FBI right now."

Molly's eyes flickered down. He could read her thoughts. *You always get dragged into these things—officially or unofficially. I know why they want you. But why do you want to go this time?*

Will swallowed. He decided not to pick up on her train of thought. He wouldn't—*couldn't*—answer that question. Not now. Not for Molly.
"He also suggested getting out of Great Falls," he continued. "Specifically you and Walt. Just until they find him."

"Hannibal knows where we live." She nodded, more to herself, looking dazed as she said it.

Will smoothed his hands down Molly's shoulders. He could feel a scream perched on the back of his tongue, threatening to break loose.

"It'll be okay. Hannibal doesn't know you have parents in Harrisburg. See if Theresa can take over running the shop for a little while. Walt can make up school over the summer, if it comes to that. And there's the Thanksgiving break next week. That means less lost time for everyone." He paused. Rubbed his knuckles along the smooth inner curve of her elbow. "I'll drive up and join you over the weekend, after I deal with Jack and the Bureau."

A tear dripped down Molly's cheek, glistening in the pre-dawn light. It seemed to surprise her as much as it did Will. She rubbed it away with the back of her hand, swallowing hard.

He reached up and smoothed a strand of hair behind her ear, then wiped away the remaining moisture from her cheek.

"I thought this stuff—this nightmare—was behind us," Molly said, her voice thickening. "But it just keeps coming back. He keeps coming back. Like a damn stray cat from hell. Feed it once, and it never leaves you alone."

"I'm sorry," Will said, too quickly. He paused. The emotions roiling and clashing within him had collapsed into a kind of dense, disorganized blankness. His mind felt entirely wiped of feeling. White. Like the remnants of a dead star, drifting through empty space. "I thought it was behind us, too."

Molly sniffed. She reigned in her composure with a shaky exhale. "I'll tell Walt we're going to stay with Gram and Pop while you get this sorted out. I know you have to do what you have to do. Just promise me something."

Will looked into her face, silent, inviting her to continue. He rubbed his thumb along her forearm.

_The touch of others makes us who we are. It builds trust._ Bedelia's words echoed back at him again, from the hallways of his memory.

_It can also inspire compliance, _he thought to himself. _Even from the most savage beast._

"Promise me," Molly said, her eyes darkening, "if he comes looking for you, don't let him walk away this time."

Will folded her into his arms and rested his chin atop her head. A bleak, feral sense of surreality bloomed inside his chest as she clung back, nuzzling against his shoulder. Molly was talking about _killing_. That in itself was inscrutable—and faintly arousing, in some horrific way. But the way she'd phrased it—the words she'd used—had ripped through him like a live current. _Don't let him walk away alive? Or don't let go of him?_

He knew what the words meant in Molly's mind. He wasn't entirely sure about his own.

Through the fabric of his t-shirt, Will felt her nose wrinkle against his shoulder.

"We still stink," she sighed. "And I feel like total crap." She sniffed, and for a second Will thought she was going to start crying again. Then, unexpectedly, she chuckled. "All that smoke. The whole
damn *house* stinks. It's like fire's the theme of the week."

"It'll air out." Will closed his eyes as visions of swirling ash and ancient desert sands and Hannibal's paper-thin eyelids sifted through his mind. "Besides, nothing caught fire. The house is still here. *We're* still here." He hoped the reek of oil smoke lingering in his pores wasn't strong enough for Molly's nose to detect.

She was silent for a long moment. Outside the bedroom windows, a chorus of winter wrens trilled sleepily from the trees. Soon, they would shake out their feathers and brave the cold to visit the birdfeeders. The squirrels would follow afterward, scavenging for dropped seeds.

"Sometimes it feels like everything could go up in flames at any second," Molly said, after a while. Her voice, muffled by his t-shirt, was doleful. "No matter how careful you are with the matches. And then you just get to watch it all burn down."

Will curled his arm tighter around her back.

"We won't," he said, without qualifying the statement.
Song of Memnon

Chapter Notes

This story will be posted in nine parts over nine weeks. It can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics, Of Putrefaction, Saccharine and Interlude: Diary of an Incubus, can be found on this post. Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series A Thousand Savage Futures can be enjoyed on YouTube here. Also, the header arts for Eve of Dreams contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

–Twenty days after the fall—Early Wednesday morning–

At the click of the cabin door's deadbolt, Hannibal sank down against the back of the couch in the front room. He exhaled, wheezing. The oxygen tingled in his irritated nasal passages and scorched throat. His leg muscles were starting to cramp. He hadn't felt this drained since his wrestling match with Jack in the Forte di Belvedere. He needed water. Food. A shower. He needed Will.

But Will was going home to Molly and her son. Despite everything he'd done to free Hannibal from the BSHCI, Will had chosen his old family over Hannibal, yet again.

Hannibal tilted his head back against the couch. He allowed his eyelids to slip closed. Will you ever understand? It won't be same. It's never going to be the same. Not for you. Not for them. Not for us.

"Everything's changed, Will." The words slurried, jumbling together in monochromatic shades of exhaustion. They seemed to echo in the empty room. "It's not going to change back."

Don't turn your face from us. Don't take yourself away from me.

But the silence was his only answer, stretching out before him in a sempiternus arc of hunger and devouring, desire and death—the conventions of his appetite that simultaneously enraptured and
isolated him. Will had understood these things, had seen them in the Chesapeake Ripper's art before he’d ever truly seen Hannibal. The forbidden aspects of palate for which Will possessed the gustatory perception, but chose to suppress the hunger—until Hannibal had stoked his appetite.

In another world, it might have ended with the Dragon. It hadn't, in this one. Nor would it end with the doctor. Killing Garret Schneider had been compulsory. It wasn't the way Hannibal would've preferred to savor the man's ending; but with Will by his side, the death had become so much more. In that moment, the doctor had transcended flesh—had become light and air and color, amidst the flame and smoke of Will's design.

He and Will, too, had transcended their physical selves, joining as one in a gale storm of force and fury. A blood tsunami—one whose shadow darkened and widened the higher it rose over the shoreline. The sea had taken something from them, but they had also taken something from the sea.

Are you going to let it go to waste, Will?

Hannibal sighed and opened his eyes. Will's tide was ebbing for now, leaving behind a seafloor glittering with the remnants of crushed shells and dying coral. But Hannibal would be patient; he would wait for the tide to come back in, and then he would renegotiate their gravities. He'd learned that a careful tug was more effective than a hard pull, when it came to Will.

He blinked, focusing on what he could see from the floor. Something here would tell him where he was—and, more importantly, why.

His eyes roamed over the mix of modern farmhouse and mid-twentieth-century furniture. Comfortable, but not overly so. A Spartan, masculine sensibility in the older pieces. Some of them had been moved to make room for newer, more functional furnishings. A meticulously aligned row of casting rods graced the far wall, just as in Will's old house in Wolf Trap. The disused river stone fireplace along the back wall was similarly reminiscent. A wide copper basket sat next to the hearth, stacked with logs. Summer home? Fishing cabin? He inhaled. Eastern white cedar—a lingering fragrance in the old walls.

The look of the cabin suggested a family place. He knew Will wouldn't have kept up a second home for only himself. Great Falls had adequate streams and lakes for fishing, as it was; he wouldn't have needed to come out here. Hannibal's eyes shifted to the compound bow propped against the wall. Nor did Will hunt game—but someone he knew did.

It appeared the front room had been revamped not long ago by an aesthetically inclined pair of eyes and hands. There was an artificial hominess in the arrangement of the furniture and the few pieces of mass-produced wall art. Nail marks from old frames were still visible in the wood, spaced at uneven intervals. Someone other than Will and his family had lived here, and recently.

Hannibal pushed himself up from the floor, grunting. Time to find out who.

He pulled off the worn ribbed sweater and draped it over the back of the couch. The cabin was warm, much warmer than his hospital room—until Will had set it on fire, of course. He smirked at the memory of the screams, the sudden upturn of faces as the boiler exploded and the medical ward caved in on itself. Garret Schneider wouldn't be the only casualty of Will's prison break. He found the thought vaguely gratifying.

He wandered into the open kitchen to the left of the fireplace. The cooking area was small, but courteously so. Not much room to compose a feast; but Will had made a point of emphasizing that the stay would be temporary. The time for feasting would come later—but it would come.
He peered outside the whitewashed back window. Through the wispy snowflakes, Hannibal could see the moonlight reflected in a silky blur atop the rippling lake water. It reminded him of Lithuania's Aukštaitijan countryside, of the small clusters of lakes and ponds bracketing the highway to Panevėžys.

In his half-remembered visions of another future, he and Will had glimpsed those silver waters on their nighttime drive from the Vilnius airport. The spruce-covered hills along the river had swallowed the two of them whole, rising up in glossy black waves as they sped silently towards Lecter Castle in the rental Mulsanne.

He flipped on the overhead kitchen light. The energy-saving bulbs buzzed slowly to life, bathing the space in soft white light.

Would Will remember Lithuania and the days they'd spent languishing in Hannibal's childhood home, hiding from each other? Or would he refuse to acknowledge them as anything but a shared hallucination? They were no strangers to *folie à deux*; but the memory was too intricate to be merely a delusion. From the cliffside house in Maryland to Panama City to Aukštaitija to Paris, the intermittent details of his and Will's rollercoaster renaissance were etched in Hannibal's mind with as much detail as he gave to his drawings. Was that remembered future already behind them, or did it lay ahead of them still? He didn't know. He didn't like not knowing.

Hannibal surveyed the countertops with dismay. A cheap drip coffeemaker, a decades-old toaster, a wooden dish brush. A white cordless phone on the wall by the window. Essentials only. He slid open the top drawer near the sink. A disposable cell phone—new, by the look of it—lay atop the flatware holder. He pulled it out and pressed the power button. A plain blue screen jumped to life, pronouncing 4:47 AM in block numbers. No missed calls or texts.

He thumbed to the address book. One number, no name—simply a "0" to designate the number's owner. *Will's burner phone.* Hannibal's thumb hovered over the number, considering. 4:47 a.m. Will was likely still driving; Hannibal knew he wouldn't have stowed him anywhere too close to home.

He stared hard at the digits. They seemed to swim in front of his eyes. *No,* he thought. *Not yet.* Will would come back when he was ready. *This* time, at least, he wouldn't have to wait three years. Perhaps not even three days.

An unexpected pang of bitterness rose on Hannibal's tongue at the thought. He swallowed, and slipped the burner cell into his pocket. He peered back into the drawer. *What else?* Rust-spotted silverware and roughly a dozen packets of restaurant matches. Nothing overly telling—although it appeared the PaperMoon Gentlemen's Club wasn't far away. Judging by the number of matchbooks, the cabin's owner was a frequent visitor. Definitely not Will's own house, then; but he'd inferred that already.

The next drawer down held several empty mason jars and a jumble of mismatched cooking utensils. Hannibal shoved the drawer shut on the sight. He could read the contents of a kitchen like he could a psyche, or the remnants of a homicide—but *this* one's story was as uninspiring as it was truncated. That in itself said something, although he would've preferred a bit more information, more quickly. Between his exhaustion and his lingering flu, Hannibal wasn't in the mood for a scavenger hunt.

The contents of the cabinets were as dull as the rest of the kitchen. White ceramic discount-retailer dishes, half a sleeve of plastic cups, and a four-piece Ravenscroft decanter set—crystal, and the most expensive accessory in the entire kitchen. No liquor inside the decanter. No liquor anywhere in the kitchen or front room, it seemed. *Curious.* Either the previous owner had run out, or Will had chosen not to keep his second home stocked.
Hannibal pressed his palms to his stinging eyes. Nothing to be gleaned from the kitchen, except for the fact that it wasn't well-cared for. He'd investigate the contents of the refrigerator and pantry later. He was curious what Will had left for him to eat; however, at the moment, he was more interested in finding out exactly where Will had thrown him into hiding.

He flicked off the light and crossed to the hallway. A bathroom jutted off immediately to the left. He peeked in. Pale blue tile; cheap, cucumber-scented bar soap he could smell from the doorway; and new terrycloth towels hanging from the rack. Gray, embroidered with a kitschy design of a wolf howling beneath a full moon. Either Will's wife or her son had picked them out. Or perhaps Molly had brought them home from her boutique because they hadn't sold. Not difficult to guess why, Hannibal thought with distaste.

Without warning, a rush of wooziness slapped him like a hot wave. He braced himself against the bathroom doorway, white spots dancing before his eyes. He blinked and swallowed back the parched ache in his throat. Too much smoke. He needed to rehydrate. Not yet. Later.

He straightened up, determined, as the nausea ebbed. The penultimate question remained: Whose ghosts have you left me with, Will?

Directly across from the bathroom was a small bedroom-cum-study. A daybed sat against the long corner, its antiqued metal rungs casting barred shadows against the wall. A ceiling fan whirled lazily overhead. The ball chain bounced with the movement, as though trying to bring some cheer to the space. A poster for a sci-fi movie was pinned to the wall with thumbtacks, and a child-sized pair of black galoshes was tucked between the daybed and a wooden desk. The boy’s holiday bedroom.

Atop the dusty desk, a stack of twentieth-century American novels was bookended by the Fly Fishing Virginia Guide and a hardcover about the Mississippi River. Will's? His stepson's? Or perhaps the previous owner's. He spied a thin break in the dust—something recently moved. No filing cabinets or drawers likely to hide documents, though.

Hannibal turned and knelt beside the mission-style armoire, and pulled open the bottom drawer. It slid forward with a squeak. His eyes brightened as they combed the far side, where the corner of a picture frame peeked out from between carefully folded layers of boy's clothing. Finally, something hidden.

He slid the five-by-seven standing frame out from the drawer. Old, circular scratches on the wooden back. Someone had replaced the photo.

He turned it over. A family portrait glared up at him in nauseating shades of pine and sky: Will, Molly, and Walter, clustered together in fishing gear at the edge of a tree-lined lake. Stepfather and stepson's fingers were hooked into the guts of an approximately sixteen-inch smallmouth bass; Molly's arm rested loosely around her son's shoulder. Will's smile was wide and genuine, his eyes crinkled at the edges.

Virginia is for lovers, Hannibal thought, with a smirk—or was. Even the fish's life, prior to capture, had spanned twice the length of Will and Molly's marriage—a thing that could also be filleted and devoured in its relative infancy. Francis had tried and failed; Molly's tenacity had usurped the Dragon's vengeance. It had been the wrong approach. Hannibal could see that now. A careful tug was better—it would allow Will to destroy, on his own, what he'd recently attempted to rebuild. He would become his own transgressor.

Hannibal flipped the frame over and popped off the back. Two photographs lay inside, the bottom one invisible from the front. On the yellowed back was scrawled Oswalt homestead, Bay Marine Works yard, 1989 in scratchy handwriting.
He flicked it up with his nail and turned it around. A teenage Will stared up at him from the deck of a houseboat, his eyes the same dark blue as the river that buoyed it. He was flanked by two men in rubber muck boots, one wearing grease-stained overalls and a grin, and the other in canvas pants and a shirt with *Ole Miss* printed on it.

Will's jeans were worn to white at the knees. His long-sleeve shirt hung from his boy’s bony shoulders like a drape. The man in the *Ole Miss* shirt was smiling, one hand clasped at the back of Will's neck, mid-squeeze; in the other, a hand-rolled cigarette. Will's expression was distant. An air of teenage awkwardness hung in the tense slouch of his shoulders. It was still easy to see how he'd grown into his beauty—gangling limbs had thickened to slender muscle; long, sun-bleached curls had given way to darker waves.

1989. Will would've been fourteen. Hannibal swallowed. An unfamiliar feeling tugged at him, pulling his memory to a place he didn't want to go. Riding on his own father's shoulders, catching the yellow-orange maple leaves as they danced on the autumn breeze. Mischa stumbling around them on her stubby toddler's legs, watched over by their mother. *Family.* That had been many years before someone had captured Will and his father on camera; and Hannibal had been much younger than Will in the photo. Young enough to remember the Aukštaitijan autumn as idyllic. But the memory was etched on the surface of his mind, like an itch he couldn't scratch—just as were Will's memories of working on the river.

*We were poor,* Will had said, seated across from him in his office, the day after he'd returned from reconstructing the Turner family's last meal in Bangor. *I followed my father from the boat yards in Biloxi and Greenville to lake boats on Erie.*

*Always the new boy at school? Always the stranger?*

*Yes.*

Hannibal tucked the photo back inside the frame, behind the family portrait at the lake. He slid the frame underneath Molly’s son's clothes and pushed the drawer shut. This time, it didn't squeak.

He stood up, quadriceps groaning. His skin prickled underneath his borrowed t-shirt and khaki pants. It seemed Will *had* left him with a ghost. Had even dressed him in its clothing. More intriguing, however, was the discovery of the photos. Unlikely that Will's stepson had hidden a family portrait in his dresser drawer—which meant that *Will* had put it there.

*What didn't you want me to see, Will?*

Will *knew* Hannibal was aware of his homecoming, of his decision to go back to Molly and Walter.

*Did you not want Molly and Walter to see me—to see us?*

Hannibal frowned, thinking of the break in the dust line atop the desk. *Something moved.* *Sequestered.*

*This is just to keep you hidden for now,* Will had said.

He bit his lip, eyes roaming the bedroom of the boy Will had taken in as his own, as family. Hannibal, it seemed, was only a stray.

His gut clenched with twin pangs of nausea and thirst as the bitterness grew stronger on his tongue. His eyes fell upon the row of books on the desk. From this angle, he could see a rift between the pages of the hardcover. Something tucked inside—*something else* hidden.
He pulled out the volume. The dust jacket was printed with an illustration of two steamboats chugging up the Mississippi, their twin funnels puffing with black smoke.

He flipped open the book to the middle. A small square of paper fell to the floor. Hannibal ignored it, his eyes instantly riveting to the printed card tucked into the binding.

*Celebrating the life and spirit of William "Bill" Graham, Senior*, the heading read. *April 11, 1949 – July 27, 2014*. Underneath it, in looping type, was the summary of the day Will had said goodbye to his father:

*August 5, 2014, 2:00 p.m. Everly Funeral Home, 6161 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, Virginia. Please join Bill's son, Will Graham, and his family in remembering Bill—beloved father, friend, and lifelong riverman.*

Hannibal's eyebrows lifted. If he remembered correctly, Falls Church was close to one of the quiet, park-hemmed lake communities that dotted rural Virginia. *Not so far away, then*. What was the name?

He closed his eyes, navigating to the library in his memory palace. He pulled down the Virginia state map. Traced the highways from the northern end of the Potomac near Arlington, to where they intersected with the irregular green spaces. He stopped when he hit a jagged slash of water. *Lake Barcroft*. He'd driven past it before on the Colombia Pike.

*In your father's house, then. Your father's clothes. When did he move to Virginia, Will? Before or after you took Molly as your wife?*

Another flash of nausea—this one low and greasy and rolling, like oil smoke. Hannibal inhaled deep, willing his drained body to cooperate. The answers to those questions would be better explained by Will than by the house, he suspected. He would wait for Will to return. In the meantime, he would regain his strength.

He glanced at the floor, to where the square of paper had fallen. He squinted. Not paper—a business card. He picked it up. A smiling cartoon alligator graced the top right side in glossy green ink. On the left, in bold type, was printed:

**TAIL GATOR EXCURSIONS. Wally Oswalt, Owner. 4000 Torry Island Rd., Belle Glade, Fla. 561-996-3775.**

Underneath, in small capital letters, was a quote: "*Never insult an alligator until after you have crossed the river*" —*Cordell Hull*

Hannibal's eyebrow quirked. *Oswalt*. The other man in the photo—the houseboat owner. He'd known Will as a child; had known his father. A Graham family friend? A fellow riverman? Maybe both. Either way, it appeared the man had attended the senior Graham's memorial service the year before.

Hannibal tucked the card in against the memorial pamphlet, filing away the name and address in his memory palace alongside Barney's number. He slid the book back into place and went to the hallway. He glanced to his right, toward the dark end. Only one room remained in the one-story cabin—the master. Will and Molly had slept there, had made love there—perhaps even on the night they'd captured the smallmouth bass, as their son dreamed soundlessly in the bedroom down the hall.

He walked to the closed door. This room, it seemed, was the only one in the house not immediately open to him. *Also curious.*
He twisted the doorknob. Felt for the switch. A flat slider met his fingertips—a dimmer. He nudged it upward, and as the room was illuminated by a low, golden light, he knew instantly why Will had left the door shut.

It was the same bedroom—the same bed—from his dream in the hospital. He'd woken that night to his body on fire. The reawakened vision danced behind his eyelids, heat slamming him as it had then. His weakened legs trembled. He could almost feel Will's pale body underneath him, rolling in the darkness like a storm, filling him. Making him whole.

Hannibal bit his lip and slid his palm down the wooden doorframe. Smooth as skin. The scent of cedar was stronger in here, just as in his dream. Together, he and Will had awoken from one fantasy into another—and not only in his own mind. Will had dreamt it, too. Had been there with him—not in body, but in spirit, sharing the same heat, the same insatiable desire.

Vertigo wrenched him as his left knee prickled with sudden, stinging pain. He stumbled, lurching towards the bed.

*Since when has pain bothered you?* Will's imaginary voice chewed across his consciousness, spiteful in its sensibility. *It seems you've been changed after all, Doctor Lecter.*

Hannibal's palms hit the mattress, catching him just before he fell. His knee had finally given out.

Another vision—another room, another bed, another dream. It howled across his memory, blinding him. Crimson handprints on satin. The thick, coppery slide of blood on skin. Hannibal moving inside Will this time, burying himself inch by slow inch, delicious and deliberate; every one of his senses on fire.

*Heat, need, now...* His leg had been throbbing then, too—but it had been from the sting of Bedelia's oyster fork. Before the window, before Will's final act of vengeance and their second fall, he and Will had consummated Bedelia's death with their bodies, smeared in blood, surrounded by mirrors. A dream—a memory? Or did a new death wait for them, like a savage thing in the underbrush of their uncertain future?

Hannibal clambered weakly atop the queen-size mattress. *Too many questions. Not enough time.* His stomach lurched with the movement—which from thirst or flu or exhaustion, he couldn't discern. How many more layers of dream awaited them? How many futures, and how many more endings?

*Flesh is sweeter when the lamb is willing. Breath upon breath; skin against skin, meat into music... Stay with me, Will.*

He curled onto his side, dropping his head onto the mercifully soft pillow, limbs and guts and brain buzzing. Too little nourishment, too many dreams. *Sleep. Don't breathe. Slow it down.*

He swallowed against the dry throb in the back of his throat. Closed his eyes. He saw Will bending over him in the darkness, one hand pressed to his chest, the other gripping a serrated steak knife.

*Will you forgive me?* Will murmured, his voice breaking. He pressed the tip of the blade to the skin just below Hannibal's sternum, angling it towards his heart.

*Let me find you again,* Hannibal pleaded. *Let me feed you.*

Sadness hung in Will's eyes, like the color of the sea after a storm. He shook his head.

*We're not conjoined anymore, Hannibal—we were never meant to be.*
A hot, piercing pressure seized him as the knife gouged into the fleshy spot between his bones, parting skin and muscle. His breath jerked as the blade sawed through his cardiac vein, snipping his body’s lifeline, his mortal thread—just as Diana and Artemis had promised him, nearly a moon ago.

Then his mind went black.

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–Twenty days after the fall, late afternoon–

Will shifted from foot to foot, trying to keep his blood cycling as Jack passed him photographs of Garret Schneider’s charred body. The revolver tucked inside the waistband of his jeans shifted with him. It pressed cold on his back. The corpse was curled in on itself atop the steel medical examiner’s table, dressed in tatters of black and red skin, barely recognizable.

The two men’s breaths mingled with the lingering smoke haze as Will assessed the photos and Jack assessed him, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his trench coat.

Will looked up. He squinted through the wet snowflakes at the ash-coated rubble of the medical ward. A handful of FBI fire investigators and forensic specialists were still picking through the debris. They clambered carefully over the charred beams and piles of cracked concrete that looked like some bizarre installation of modern sculpture. The snowfall had picked up over the course of the morning, turning the crime scene—his design—into a pasty gray mess.

He blinked against the weak winter sunlight. It hurt. Even the day felt piercing. His head was pounding, and his eyes were red-rimmed and dry. He’d remembered at the last minute to bring his glasses. If Jack suspected anything, he hadn’t alluded to it. Yet.

"The dental records confirmed it’s Doctor Schneider," Jack was saying. "No telling why he was in Doctor Lecter’s room. Foster’s guys think he was trying to get him out. Lecter could’ve attacked him. Taken his key and locked him in."

A shiver ran down Will’s spine. The scenario Jack had described wasn’t merely theoretical. He pulled his jacket tighter around himself, feigning chilliness.

"That sounds like Hannibal, but it doesn’t sound like Garret Schneider," he said, keeping his voice level. Detached. "We both heard how fondly he spoke about Hannibal when he was in his coma. Schneider wouldn’t have tried to rescue him. Too charitable. If anything, he went up there to make sure Hannibal wouldn’t be able to get out."

Jack was silent. He gazed across the dead lawn to the capsized building, his breath puffing between the gap in his front teeth. "Doctor Bloom doesn’t think so, either."

Will handed the photos back to Jack. He didn’t want to look at them anymore.

"Doctor Bloom knew Doctor Schneider pretty well," he said. "He’d been working there since before she took over for Frederick Chilton. She inherited him. Along with the hospital."

"Before Doctor Lecter was a patient there," Jack agreed. "Before you were."

The words stung, despite being fact. He knew Jack hadn’t meant them to—not overtly.
"She also knew Hannibal pretty well," Will said. "She spoke to him more than anyone during his incarceration. Before that, too, if you remember." He let the words hang on the air, unspoken. *Alana shared a bed with him, Jack. Why don't you pick her brain?"

"Not as well as you," Jack said, firmly but gently. "If anyone can draw a bead on where Doctor Lecter might've gone, it's you. I believe that. Maybe more than you do."

Will gazed across the grounds at the snow-dusted baseball diamond. He and Hannibal had crossed it to safety less than twelve hours before. Any footprints they'd left in the mud were now covered by slush. The brief letup in the snowfall had allowed him and Jack to trek out to the BSHCI to survey the rubble, but the forecast was calling for four more inches overnight. Soon, the dying embers would be frozen in their blackened, smoldering decadence—an icy monument for a tomb.

He could feel Jack's eyes on him, studying his silence. "This isn't *field kabuki*, Will," he said curtly. "I'm not going to ask you to go anywhere else. Especially since neither of us are here in an official capacity." He sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. "I'm just asking you to tell me what you see right here, right now."

Will privately disagreed on the *kabuki*, but decided not to voice the thought. Jack had dragged him to yet another crime scene—albeit one of his own making—to look for clues as to why both of them were standing there. Which was exactly what Hannibal was probably doing in his father's house at the moment.

"If he's on foot, then he's somewhere nearby," Will heard himself saying. He needed to plug the silence, the unspoken questions. The implications, too—whether they were actually there or not. He could feel paranoia creeping in through the back of his skull. He needed to focus. Hannibal's freedom, and his own, depended on it.

"If he's stolen a car, then he's at least two states away by now. But Foster can tell you that. Hannibal doesn't have many friends. Where else would he go? Bedelia was with him last time. Have you talked to her?"

Will halted, reigning in the anger bubbling up in the back of his throat. *Don't lose your composure, Will,* Hannibal's voice soothed inside his head. *Don't let Uncle Jack hear your frustration."

"Might be good to have someone look in on Reba McClane," he said, quieter. "Hannibal and Dolarhyde were talking about her at the house."

"Doctor du Maurier's been made aware of the situation. And Reba McClane's already been taken into protective custody." Jack glanced at him from under the brim of his fedora. His expression was flat. "But both you and I know Reba's *not* the person Doctor Lecter's interested in."

Will shoved his hands into his coat pockets. "You still think he's going to come after us. After Molly and Walt."

"I do," Jack said. "But mostly after you." He paused, allowing the words to penetrate the smoke-scented air, then asked, "Are they out of Virginia yet?"

Shadows swirled in Will's mind as he recalled the resentment in Molly's eyes from earlier that morning. The way she'd slammed her palm on the counter. *Theresa's mom is sick, Will, you know that. She can't take over the shop 'til Friday. And Walt needs to finish as much of the school week as he can before the holiday. Are you trying to get rid of us?"

Neither he nor Molly had been able to go back to sleep after Jack's call. A groggy early breakfast had
somehow segued into a harried morning where everyone was late but him. Walt had slogged out of bed twenty minutes after Molly had woken him, complaining that he was too tired to go to school. It had taken everything in Will's power to shove down the wave of guilt that rose up in him at the sight of his stepson's bleary expression and smoke-reddened eyes. Then Molly had knocked over her coffee in the bathroom, giving rise to a volley of cursing and frantic towel-swabbing, which Will took over so she could finish getting ready for work.

He knew, instinctively, that he shouldn't have mentioned going up to Harrisburg until later. Knew it, but decided to ignore his instinct. He had to get them out of Virginia as soon as possible—for their own safety, as well as Hannibal's. Molly had been in the middle of grabbing her purse and coat and trying to hustle Walt back up to his room for his backpack. At Will's words, what was left of her composure had crumbled. Anger had flared in her eyes as she'd turned to stare at him. Even from the breakfast table, the unexpected boom of Molly's voice was as loud as if she'd yelled straight into his ear. Are you trying to get rid of us? The words still rung in Will's head.

"I asked Molly to, but she won't leave until her co-owner can take over their shop."

Jack's eyebrows lifted in seeming surprise—or disparagement; it was hard to tell. Will could imagine every plausible thought running through the other man's head. He didn't like any of them.

"They'll be out by tomorrow night," he lied.

Jack turned to gaze out over the smoking rubble, his eyes combing the agents in their navy blue thermal coats and turnout trousers. At this distance, they looked like ants skittering across a ruined formicary.

"See that they are," he said, voice grave. "Neither of us would be able to forgive ourselves if something else happened to Molly and Walt because of Hannibal."

Will blinked. Jack's use of Hannibal's first name wasn't lost on him. No more 'Doctor Lecter'—intimate now. Dangerous. Jack was warning him. Stay sharp, Will. Do the right thing.

"No," he agreed. "No one's going to get hurt this time. I'll make sure of it."

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–Twenty-one days after the fall, evening–

Snow. Mounds of it, piled around the trunks of the spindly birches and sycamores shrouding the cabin. Blanketing the backyard all the way to the dock. Printless, pristine.

The ice had frozen in crystal patches along the windowsills, encasing the cabin in a vision of impending winter—an illusion of suspended time. Hannibal had watched it fall in stretches over the past two days. First in lazy whorls, then in a frenzy of white that gave way to a steady rain of fat, oblong flakes. He could see it now through the back windows of the greatroom, disappearing into the black mirror of Lake Barcroft as the fireplace crackled and popped.

He hadn't called Will. Will hadn't called him. Gray morning glow had faded twice to afternoon haze, then to twilight, then to murky dusk. As Doctor Schneider's prescribed sedatives had wormed their way out of his system, his sleep had grown lighter. Shallower. The pains in his legs and stomach had faded, but a deeper ache had taken hold of his body. Withdrawal atop withdrawal. He was
determined to wait. To be patient. Will was coming back; he'd said so. He had to.

He hadn't slept in the bed, with the exception of the morning before, when he'd quite literally passed out atop the blanket. He'd awoken five hours later, skin saturated with sweat and smoke, his throat screaming raw and coated in an oily film that made him gag.

He'd stumbled to the bathroom and promptly thrown up all the soot-tinged fluid left in his stomach. Then ducked his head under the faucet and drank and drank and drank, until his abdomen was swollen.

It had taken him several minutes to pull himself up from the bathroom floor and into the shower, where he'd disrobed under the spray, tossing the senior Graham's soaked clothing onto the floor in a sopping pile. The foul reek of cucumber soap still clung to his skin, making his nose wrinkle whenever he caught a whiff of it. Such is life on the lam.

The clack of the deadbolt startled him out of his snow-blurred reverie. Hannibal peered over the back of the couch.

The front door opened and Will ducked inside, elbowing the door shut behind him. His curls were peppered with snowflakes, and he carried a paper sack in one arm. The tight, tented line of his shoulders was visible beneath his coat.

Will's eyes met Hannibal's, lighting briefly before combing over the front room and the fire glowing inside the hearth. It reminded Hannibal, oddly, of Barney's perimeter assessments of his room.

"Not to worry. I haven't gone foraging," Hannibal said, gesturing towards the fireplace. "Although I'm afraid I've used most of the logs. Are there more?"

Will sighed, pocketing his keys. "Did you find the burner phone?" he asked, ignoring Hannibal's question as he shucked out of his boots. He didn't look at Hannibal. Will knew he was being scrutinized.

Hannibal smiled inwardly. Perhaps Will had expected—no, wanted—him to call, after all. "I did," he said. "Right where you left it. Thank you. It came in handy for ordering a pizza."

Will's mouth dropped open. "You ordered a—"

"Will." Hannibal cocked his head in mock reproval. "It was a joke."

Will blew out through his nose. His brow unknotted, although his shoulders remained tense. "I should've known. You would never order a pizza."

He shrugged off his jacket and hung it on the hook rack by the door, then brushed through the front room and into the kitchen. Hannibal stood up, surveying the other man over the couch fort dividing them.

"That's true. I'd make it myself." He paused, considering. "If I had the correct ingredients, I could grill one for the two of us. Dough charred for two minutes on an open flame, topped with scratch sauce, Prosciutto, blue cheese, walnuts, arugula. Or anything you'd like. Simple. Comforting."

Will set the paper bag on the counter. He took down two tumblers from the cabinet above the sink. "I'm not hungry."

He withdrew a bottle of Laphroaig single-malt scotch, three-quarters full, and rolled up the sleeves of his hickory-colored pullover. Hannibal raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. The fabric hung
loose on his arms and shoulders. *Too thin,* he thought to himself. *You are hungry. You just won't allow yourself to feel it.*

Hannibal cleared his throat. Will's sense of humor had obviously deserted him tonight. "It appears you haven't been hungry in some time. You've lost weight, Will."

"So've you," Will shot back. He looked over, his eyes clashing with Hannibal's. Two storms flared inside them—roiling, dark, and dangerous.

A spike of heat bolted through Hannibal's body. He could feel it tingling in the tips of his fingers. *Lightning and snow—the rarest of all storm combinations.*

"Comas aren't conducive to proper nutrition," Hannibal said.

Will threw him a look that said, *You've been awake for over a week. You had time to eat.*

Hannibal tilted his head. He could sense it was time to change tack. "Is it guilt that's weighing on you tonight? Or anxiety?"

"Straight or on the rocks?" Will retorted. He rinsed the glasses under the faucet and shook them off. *Dusty from disuse.* Hannibal sensed his father's home wasn't the only thing Will had been neglecting as of late. The other man was practically *vibrating* with pent-up energy. It shimmered from him in waves, like a mirage.

Before Hannibal could answer, a buzz sounded from Will's pocket. The other man clanked the glasses on the counter and wrenched his smartphone from the back of his jeans. He frowned at the screen.

Hannibal watched as Will's index finger hovered over the lighted rectangle, hesitating. Then he tapped in his passcode. Although he couldn't see the screen, in his mind Hannibal envisioned the movement of Will's fingertip over the numbers; could see the brief pattern they drew. *A telling combination.*

Hannibal looked away as Will finished typing. Waited as he thumbed off the phone and tucked it back in his pocket.

"So," Will said, glancing over. "Straight, or on the rocks?"

"Straight." Hannibal paused. "Like the truth."

Will didn't respond. He poured an even measure of the amber liquid into each glass—nearly three fingers' worth.

"You didn't free me to satisfy your own curiosity," Hannibal continued, filling Will's silence. "Or to help yourself—or your family. Then why?"

"I did it to get you out," Will said, jaw tight. He screwed the cap back on the bottle, wrist jerking with the movement. "Isn't that enough?"

"A sense of obligation, then. You've asked for nothing from me."

Hannibal straightened as Will walked around the couch, carrying a glass in each hand. His curls were matted wetly to his forehead from the melted snowflakes, giving him a boyish look despite the hollowness under his eyes.
*One last libation*, Hannibal thought to himself, as he took the glass from Will's hand.

"What's left for you to give me? Except another bad ending."

The tip of Will's index finger brushed against his own, feather-light, as Hannibal closed his hand around the barrel. He barely registered the touch. The words had cut deep, far deeper than any blade Hannibal had ever put to Will's body.

He brought the glass to his lips and took a sip, swallowing the wounding question along with the scotch's burn.

Will sank onto the couch. Hannibal glimpsed the shape of Will's revolver poking through the tail of his sweater as he leaned back. He rolled his glass between his fingertips, warming the whiskey. Hannibal sat down next to him, leaving a courteous foot of space. They fell silent, each contemplating the sting of Will's words.

Hannibal licked his lips and set his glass on the coffee table. The unbroached subject loomed loud in his mind, tainting the air between them.

"When I took your hand," he said, low, "I knew that you would kill me. I was certain the moment you embraced me on the cliff."

He paused. Swallowed. Decided to chance it.

"Even at the window—in the apartment on the Seine—I knew. You asked for my forgiveness. I didn't want to die without you."

The fire hissed and popped, licking the logs with bright, hungry tongues, as if accenting the statement with their radiance. It seemed flame was destined to drive their fates this time, Hannibal thought to himself. Water, too. The Atlantic, the Seine, the Nile. And now, the half-frozen lake outside. From earth they'd tumbled, through air, and then to water—and now into the hungry fires of unfed desire. Empedocles' four roots, strung together in an arguably odd fashion—but one that left them no less tethered to the earth from which they'd started.

Will stared hard at his glass, his eyes faraway. "That's not a memory, Hannibal," he said slowly. "It never happened. It wasn't real."

Inside his breast, Hannibal's heart quickened. "But you remember it. Just as keenly as I do."

"I—" Will opened his mouth, then closed it. He blinked. "I don't want to talk about it. There isn't any point."

"As you wish," Hannibal sighed. He lifted his glass from the coffee table, but didn't drink. He could tell by the curve of Will's mouth that the subject of their shared memory—just one of perhaps a thousand possible savage futures—was closed. "We'll talk about something else."

"Not the hospital. Not Garret Schneider."

"Fine," Hannibal assented. A beat. "You own another home. Or is that you and Molly?"

Will exhaled. He scrubbed a hand through the fringe at the nape of his neck as he straightened up against the couch cushions. "This place was my dad's. He moved up from Louisiana after Molly and I got married. I think he liked the idea of having a grandkid. Even if Walt wasn't actually mine."

He paused. Hannibal could almost taste the memories drifting thick through the other man's mind.
"They got along, though," Will continued. "Walt's really into baseball. His father was playing for the Cardinals when he died. My dad was a big fan, too—Cubs, mostly. I never was. And Molly only watches it when she's upset. So my dad would hole up in front of the TV with Walt while Molly and I took the boat out. It was... good."

"It sounds as if your father had more in common with your stepson than you do." Hannibal sat up against the couch, mimicking Will's posture.

Will tipped his glass to his lips. His shoulders twitched as he swallowed.

"Probably."

"You and your father must've shared some interests. And I assume he's no longer living, since you're hiding me in his house and referring to him in past tense."


"You must miss him. Or at least the things he provided to your family."

"Miss him? Not really. Pretty sure he saw me as more of an apprentice than a son. I started working in the boatyards with him when I was twelve. As soon as school was out, I was down at the docks. Homework at night. He said I needed to learn a real trade in case I didn't pick up anything else."

"He wanted you to be self-sufficient."

"He wanted me to be just like him." Will's laugh was low. Bitter. "Seems to be a recurring theme with people in my life."

Hannibal took another swallow. The Laphroaig was strong, and his body was both malnourished and not yet fully recovered from its illness. Although Will had left him with a more-than-adequate selection of basic foodstuffs, he'd eaten little over the past two days. He could feel the alcohol humming at the edges of his mind. It wasn't a wholly unwelcome sensation.

"Guess I met him halfway," Will said, sarcastic. "He was dead for six days before anyone down here noticed. Then the mail carrier reported a smell. You could say he wasn't overly social."

Beneath the bitterness, Hannibal detected a plea—a flicker of worry. He considered the statement. The taste of Will's vulnerability. He decided to dip his tongue in.

"That won't happen to you, Will. You're not going to become your father. Not unless you want to become him."

Will's head snapped up. "I know I won't." His eyes, like his tone, were sharp.

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. The curtain of Will's defenses was threatening to drop. In his mind, he slid his hand between the pale gingham folds, staying the part. They were rough and warm against his skin. Infused with the memory of hazy winter sunlight, the morning he'd carried Will home from Muskrat Farm.

"Then you also have a reason why. Place that reason at the forefront of your memory, Will. It will keep you strong."

Hannibal paused, weighing his next words on his tongue.
"I want you to be strong. To feel love. And, in being loved, to return that strength."

Will's eyes darted to the side. He brought the tumbler to his lips and swallowed slow, allowing the whiskey sear to suffuse his throat. He grimaced. It was several moments before he spoke.

"You said you were in love. With me. In your letter."

The words were almost too soft for Hannibal to hear.

Hannibal twined his fingers loosely around his glass, propping his elbows on his knees. He stared at the fire from the corner of his eye. Flames curled around the blackened, heat-warped logs, shrinking them—transforming them, as he and Will had transformed the dying. Light and air and color. Their truth was one born of flame and swallowed by the sea—and then stoked again by fire. An endless, elemental cycle.

He shifted his gaze to Will's. For the first time since the other man had stalked through the door, he looked more apprehensive than irritated.

"Are," Hannibal said truthfully. "I never stopped."

The shape of Will's eyes changed. They seemed to deepen, growing dark as two scrying mirrors. Hannibal's breath caught in his throat at the grief he saw etched there.

"You wrote—" Will halted. Tried again. "You wrote that you'd hoped I'd feel the same, the night you turned yourself in."

Hannibal opened his mouth, but Will rushed on before he could form the question.

"You wrote those things before you knew I'd come to see you about Dolarhyde. Before we killed the Dragon. Before—the cliff." His voice cracked on the last word. A slight flush had risen in his face. "You knew I'd read them if anything happened. That they might be the last words you ever said to me."

"I was fully aware of the circumstances under which you might receive the letter, yes. As I implied, it was not intended as emotional manipulation. Merely a straightforward expression of my thoughts."

A pause. "Hannibal."

He glanced up at the imploring tone. Inside his breast, Hannibal's heart thudded dully.

"You didn't leave only your life with me."

Will's voice was soft, his face surprisingly calm. Hannibal could feel his pulse hanging on the lilt of Will's words.

"You left me your heart, hoping I would find my way back to it. Like in Palermo."

Hannibal swallowed. He shifted, bringing his elbow to rest on the arm of the couch.

"I did say wholly." His mouth formed the words as though someone else were speaking them. He brought his glass to his lips. Swallowed. Set it on the table and pushed it away with his thumb. Empty.

He was seized with the sudden desire to push all of it away. It could work; he'd done it before. Now that he was free, he could go anywhere. Become anyone. He could disappear, without Bedelia, without Will. Just another ghost among the invisible creatures stalking the night, marked for death.
The thought stoked a faint rumble of memory. Everything he'd abandoned when he'd walked out into the Baltimore rain—before Florence, before the BSHCI, before the Dragon—was now sharpened to an infinitesimally small point of light. Of possibility.

For the first time since his rescue, he found himself unable to meet Will's eyes.

Pheromone-heavy heat seeped from the other man's skin as he twisted to face Hannibal. Will was close now—closer than he should be. Hannibal forced himself to look over. Will's eyes seemed moonlit in the wake of their whiskey shine; a different blue than in the light.

In his mind's eye, Hannibal saw Will standing in front of him in the dimly lit kitchen. He reached out to touch the other man's face, to push away the rain dripping from his curls.

In the present, Hannibal lifted his hand, copying the movement. No knife this time. No defense. His fingers were terrifyingly unsteady. He laid the tips of them aside Will's cheek with a touch as delicate as a whisper.

Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment, when the teacup shatters. I forgive you, Will.

Will went very still. His pupils widened. Hannibal moved his fingers up, over his cheekbone, across the impossibly soft skin of his temple. Through the thin, silken curls at his hairline. There was an almost imperceptible quiver in Will's bottom lip.

Hannibal's eyes dropped to his mouth, then back up. He swallowed. Hoped that Will would read the words written in his hesitance and on his face.

If you take of me now, take only what you mean to keep.

A ragged breath escaped Will's lips. His entire being seemed to sink with it. Then his eyes slipped closed and his body stretched forward, and Hannibal's fingers tightened against Will's skull as their mouths met in a scorching burst.

I need you. Words Hannibal had never before known as truth. A thought he'd never voiced. Saliva and scotch, fever-warm lips—and a taste that was Will, only Will. Thick in his mouth, rolling along his tongue, yielding to his lips, his teeth, in a way that both shook and satisfied him more than his ricette speciali. Now this was food.

No—more than that. This was fire.

Hannibal registered the sound of glass scraping against wood as Will shoved his tumbler onto the table, not breaking away. His other hand curled around Hannibal's shoulder, gripping at the bones underneath, pulling then pushing. The pushing won out, just as it had atop the cliff. They sank back together, Hannibal against the arm of the couch, his spine curving to fit the press of Will's body.

Heat seemed to leach from the other man's fingertips, seeping into Hannibal's skin through his clothing, leaving marks like invisible bruises. Hannibal tilted his head, drinking the same heat from Will's mouth. The taste was overwhelming. His head spun with it, want thickening hot in his throat, tightening in his chest. Will—Will, his lamb and lion, his hunter, his erômenos, his prodigal son—was kissing him back, fierce and consuming; his body brimming with a desire Hannibal could never have entirely predicted.

He felt the rigid outline of Will's cock pressing against his thigh. Hannibal shifted his leg in unspoken invitation. It was what Will needed tonight; what Molly had been unable to inspire. Hannibal would give it to him. And Will would become the first—the only—to whom he'd willingly yield.
Will's hips instinctively tugged towards him—then stopped. A burst of ocean gray as his eyes slide open, unfocused. He broke away, bracing himself against the cushions, lips swollen and shining.

"Han—Hannibal." A hot exhale. The muscles of Will's forearm flexed against the couch. "This isn't a good idea."

Will's protest was silenced by Hannibal's lips against his jaw, his neck. A weak moan buzzed against Hannibal's mouth.

"For you, or for me?" he murmured against Will's skin. He thought about the fragile layers of muscle and membrane and cartilage beneath his lips, about the sound and air and blood that flowed between and through them. Words, breath, a heartbeat—life.

Hannibal pressed his hand to the curve of Will's back, grinding upwards as he pushed down. He was careful not to let Will know he knew the gun was there.

Will sucked in a breath. "For—um, for either of us." Voice faint, barely above a whisper. His hips moved back against Hannibal's, disobeying his brain and stoking the sensitive friction between their bodies.

Hannibal caressed the shell of Will's ear with his thumb, tilting his head back. "If this is both the first and last time you plan to kiss me, then yes. It's not a good idea."

Glassy ocean eyes, storm-dark with desire and imploring, stared back at him with a nakedness he hadn't glimpsed since the night of their fall.

"However," he continued, silkening his voice, "that depends largely on intention. And context."

With his other hand, Hannibal worked the top button and zip on Will's jeans, stroking him through the fabric as he did so.

"The night we fell, you embraced me. Then you buried your face against me, and hid your eyes. I would have liked to enjoy the beauty of your gaze a little longer, Will, before plunging to my death."

He nudged down the other man's boxer briefs just enough. Slid his hand inside. Will gasped.

"I don't—uhn—I don't have any intentions." Will's body sank an inch, then another, magnetized by Hannibal's touch. Trembling now.

"No motive?" Hannibal purred, his lips grazing Will's earlobe. "Hard to believe, with such an elaborate design. Your taste is more addictive than I imagined." Hannibal stroked, firm and steady, his eyes never leaving the other man's face. Will groaned in reply—a low, animalistic sound.

_Heat-drunk; dizzy with lust_, Hannibal thought. _Forgetting yourself already. Forgetting Molly. Be drunk with me, Will. Drunk on us._

Will shivered. He turned his forehead to rest against Hannibal's own. His skin was feverishly hot. Will's eyes crinkled at the corners, as if in pain. "That's—that's not a basis for choice," he murmured weakly. "Or intention."

Fingers came to rest on the hand wrapped around his cock—slowing but not stilling Hannibal's movement.

Hannibal scoffed. "Your skin is screaming with it, Will."

As if to prove his point, an involuntary tremor raced through the other man's body, down into his fingertips, and up into Hannibal's own. Will's shoulders shook as his breath hitched.
"So what—" Hannibal said, stroking again, harder, "—is—" Will's fingers tightened, as Hannibal pressed a kiss to his jaw, "—the context?"

Hannibal paused, allowing the words to sink into Will's consciousness. He ran his thumb over the head of his cock, spreading the dribble of silky fluid he found there. Slickening him. Judging by his body's response, it had been several days since Will and Molly had shared a bed, in the marital sense—just as Hannibal had suspected.

"You did say you wanted to talk face to face," he added, politely.

Will's eyes flashed opened, then narrowed. "There isn't a context." His lip curled. He tipped his chin forward, meeting Hannibal's mouth in a wet clash that sent a jolt of electricity through both of their bodies.

Will's hand moved from Hannibal's own then, and in the space of an instant, Hannibal could feel the other man's body finally relenting, succumbing as a fractured ship capsizes into the sea. Will's palm moved to cup Hannibal's hardness, his thumb flicking at the loose buttons on the borrowed trousers.

"There doesn't need to be," he breathed. His voice was rough now. "Stop trying to make one."

Hannibal grinned inwardly. _Answer enough. Flesh is sweeter when the lamb is willing._

"As you wish," he assented, dropping his voice to a gravelly whisper. "But first, tell me—_how many nights?_" He nipped at the corner of Will's mouth as their fingers yanked at waistbands and belt loops, pushing fabric down over thighs and knees in a frenzied scramble for flesh, for closeness. Skin craving skin.

"How many nights did you dream of _me_, instead of the one you slept beside?" He grazed his teeth across Will's jaw, up to his mouth. "How often did you wake, hot and tense with longing for what you'd _forsaken_?"

Will sank his teeth into Hannibal's bottom lip in reply, drawing an unguarded gasp. _No longer a lamb, then._ He licked at Will's mouth, drawing the other man's tongue back to his own with a swift suck.

He tugged Will's pullover and t-shirt over his back, bunching the revolver into the fabric with a flick of his wrist. Hannibal broke away long enough to pull the cumbersome garments over Will's head, the gun swaddled inside. Will didn't appear to notice. Goosebumps rose along the other man's bare arms and chest, stippling his heat-flushed skin. Hannibal dropped the clothing in a tight ball on the floor.

He pulled Will close. Inhaled. Underneath the traces of honey-infused soap and fresh snow, he could smell the drowsy aroma of perfume—far fainter than expected. Transferred through a brisk embrace, perhaps, or the lingering press of bed linens. Not skin on skin, like _this_. Molly's scent, now replaced with Hannibal's own, was dissolving rapidly into the sweat-slick crush of _their_ embrace.

Then Will's hands were pushing at Hannibal's hips, his scent turning sharp and bestial as he shoved down Hannibal's trousers and boxer shorts the rest of the way.

The senior Graham's shawl-collared cardigan caught on his chin as Will wrenched it off. A twinge of pain shot through Hannibal's spine at the motion, and he snarled. Will wanted roughness now to assuage his anger; needed to hurt Hannibal to keep his own guilt at bay. Hannibal would allow the hurt, but not the shame or ire. He'd waited too long for Will's touch for it to be tainted by fear.

Will ground down between his thighs, impatient, unsteady; teeth sliding against Hannibal's neck as
though seeking a place to bite. Then his knee slipped.

Couch abruptly became floor, and floor became mercilessly hard, slamming them together the wrong way around. Soreness cracked though Hannibal's spine as Will pushed against the hardwood, rolling them onto the rug and righting himself.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Hannibal sighed. "You keep doing that."

The burst of laughter from Will's throat surprised them both. Hannibal smiled at the sound, at the brief softness in Will's face, as the tension was temporarily abated. Tiny pinpricks of firelight danced along Will's stubbled jaw. Then his smile faded, and his eyes turned uneasy again.

Will reached up to push away a stray curl. Hannibal caught his wrist and held it. With the other hand, he brushed away the hair with the back of his knuckle. Will's eyes closed like a wounded animal's at the touch.

"If you'd like to apologize for further bruising my spine, perhaps you can take us someplace softer."

Will's eyes slipped open at the words. Hannibal widened his thighs in suggestion, then lowered his hand to graze the scar on Will's stomach—*his* scar—with the back of his hand.

Will shivered. His eyes flickered downward as he seemed to become aware, for the first time, that they were both completely naked—and both very, very hard.

His erection strained against Hannibal's belly, shining dark and moist at the head. Not nearly slick enough for proper lubrication. *Not yet."

Will sucked in a breath. "Then what?"

"Then," Hannibal said, pulling him down for another kiss—one that made Hannibal himself reel so strongly, he nearly forgot to finish his sentence. "Then, perhaps, we can be a little *rounder.*"

Will exhaled. Whiskey-sweet breath brushed Hannibal's upturned face. His eyes fluttered closed at the feathery sensation.

*Why, when I touch you, does it feel like the first time, every time? Why do you make me feel this way, to my own ruin? Stay with me, Will... Stay.*

It seemed an eternity before Will answered. When he did, it was with neither resignation nor determination, but something in between.

"All right," he said. "All right."

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Will's skin was hot against his own as Hannibal slid over him in the dark. The dusky, cedar-scented walls arched around them, fragrant and sheltering, just as in his dream in the hospital. *Their* dream.

Hannibal was sure now that Will had shared the same vision. A look of mixed trepidation and familiarity had sprung to his face when he'd pushed open the door to the bedroom. Hannibal had
taken Will's wrist gently in his hand. Lifted it. Kissed his palm.

*A new night,* he'd told him, as he'd raised his eyes to the other man's face. *A new life. We make our dreams, Will. Not the other way around.*

Will had nodded. *Not a mirage this time—real,* he'd said quietly, echoing his own dream-words. His eyes had been solemn as they'd met Hannibal's own. The snowfall had momentarily abated, allowing the light from the rising quarter moon to pierce through the clouds and spill over Will's shoulders, bathing his skin in silver.

Hannibal had answered with his mouth, kissing Will to the bed. To *their* bed. Until this moment, the shared room inside their memory palaces had been locked from within.

*No more peeking through the keyhole,* Hannibal had thought to himself, as he'd straddled Will's hips and silenced his ensuing gasp with his tongue.

Now, the moon was nearly at the zenith of its meridian, glowing wan and watchful outside the bedroom window. The cabin's overzealous heating system had made the room warm—as warm as in their dream. Will's forehead was already dotted with sweat.

Hannibal let the bottle of lubricant slide to the floor and reached behind him to circle Will's cock, slickening him. He'd found the bottle in the nightstand drawer the previous day. It was mostly full, which had brought a small measure of satisfaction.

Will grimaced at the sensation. *Not just the chill of the oil,* Hannibal thought. *Something else. Guilt, or anxiety?* He would allow neither.

With his other hand, he grasped Will's fingers in his own. Nudged his thumb along the smooth, still-shiny gold of Will's wedding band. Without leaving space for protest, Hannibal took Will's ring finger in his mouth and sucked around the metal, lubricating the skin beneath.

Will inhaled, squeezing his eyes closed. A pained expression crossed his face as Hannibal withdrew the finger from his mouth and slid off the jewelry with ease. He set it on the nightstand with a quiet clink. Neither of them spoke.

A memory came to Hannibal suddenly, of the tiny, glass-fronted jewelry shop along the Champs-Élysées where he and Bedelia had picked out their wedding bands.

Bedelia had taken little time to select a two-carat, princess-cut diamond set in a white-gold double band. Her selection was both luxurious and efficient—an appropriate representation of their evolving relationship.

When it had come time for Hannibal to choose his own, however, he'd found himself unable to feign enjoyment at the process. His hesitation hadn't escaped Bedelia's notice.

*People wear armor on this finger for many reasons,* she'd said, resting her hand over his own. *Whatever your reason is today, let that dictate your choice.*

He'd picked a plain, twenty-four-carat, yellow-gold band. Authentic, yet anonymous. Bedelia had lifted an eyebrow at him, her smile flickering for only an instant. *A discretionary reason, then,* her expression had seemed to say.

In the present, Hannibal leaned over, brushing his lips against Will's sandpapery jaw. He shifted his hips, nudging back *just* enough. Will's erection jolted as it grazed Hannibal's sensitive flesh.
"When I allowed myself to imagine you like this," Hannibal said huskily, "I imagined I'd have first cooked for you." He nipped at Will's cheek, at the pink ridge of scar tissue crossing in a vertical slash from jaw to cheekbone. "I would have poured you a glass of wine and watched you drink it, thinking of the way your lips would taste with traces of blackberry and pear."

Will dug his fingertips into the sides of Hannibal's thighs as Hannibal kissed him, the crush of their mouths now warmer, more familiar, more comfortable. He sucked at Will's lower lip, relishing the flavor of blood-swollen flesh—and then broke away, with a flick of tongue.

"You would have swirled the glass in your hand," he continued, leaning into Will's ear and grinding back against his cock, "with your fingertips pressed against the curve of the bowl—just as they press my skin now."

Hannibal's own erection throbbed at the feel of Will's stiff, silky flesh brushing against his entrance. He shivered as the other man's hips wriggled beneath him, pinned.

"We would have eaten, savoring the flesh we'd chosen together. The shape of your mouth would change as you reminisced how we'd hunted. How we'd killed."

Hannibal curved his thumb over the shell of Will's ear, smoothing back the moist curls. He could feel the other man's heartbeat through his own breast, thudding hard. Picking up speed.

He moved back again, spreading as much of the lube onto himself as he could. Will's nails dug harder into the sides of his ass. In the back of Hannibal's mind, a thought flitted vaguely through his consciousness. This is going to hurt. His own words, from Doctor Sogliato's apartment, echoing back to him.

And then, from the recesses of his memory, a different voice—a reprimand, in his native tongue: Quiet, now! It's not going to hurt.

A sound he hadn't heard in forty years. A memory that still made him go cold.

He shoved aside the intruding thoughts. "The thrill of that stuttering heart winding down between our two living bodies," he inhaled, "—and then flickering out, like a candle flame. Can you imagine it, Will?"

Hannibal allowed his eyelids to slide closed, gathering himself. He'd become numb to the feeling as a boy. Had it hurt? He couldn't remember.

Will groaned. His lips parted as he twisted his cheek to the pillow, fists balled into the quilt. A dark flush crept along his neck, coloring him rosy with heat and blood. Hannibal could feel Will's cock straining against his entrance. Soon...

"Afterwards, I would have pinched out the candles, covering us in darkness," Hannibal said, lowering his voice another octave. He pressed his own heat-swollen mouth to Will's neck, marveling at the throbbing life of the other man's pulse—life he'd almost snuffed out, so many times. Will's hips jerked in reply.

"You would have turned to me in questioning," he breathed, the scent and taste of Will's skin thick in his nose, his mouth, "and I would have pressed you back against the table, kissing you through the dark, through the wine, to the marrow of your bones. You would feel me pressed against you, like this, and your body would strain against mine with renewed hunger."

"Hannibal." Will's voice was hoarse. His eyes cracked open. "I'm—I don't know how long I can—with you talking like that…" He trailed off, pausing. "And you're not—um. Ready."
"I'm aware."

Will's brow furrowed. "But that's going to hur—"

"Yes. It may."

Will stared up with a look of mixed incredulity and naked desire, his hips stilling. Hannibal gazed back, piercing through the other man's hesitation into the deepest, most secret part of him—the part he himself had unleashed, years ago. The place where Will's heightened empathy and his bloodlust and his starved understanding of love joined and ached in a gutting, grotesque knot. It was a place Hannibal knew he could make his home, could stretch out forever inside, if only…

"I want you to make me yours, Will." His voice caught on the other man's name and hardened in his throat. How many times had his lips formed the single syllable—in peace, in penance, or in prayer? Now, finally, in passion—their bodies primed to fuse in a way that, in this suspended moment, seemed to Hannibal more binding than even death.

"Hannibal…"

His own name died on Will's lips as Hannibal lifted himself, bracing against Will's chest with a trembling hand. He reached around and took Will's cock in the other. The other man's heartbeat fluttered like a caged bird beneath his fingertips.

Stay with me, Will… Stay.

Will inhaled sharp as Hannibal lowered himself down. The movement was slow. Unhurried. Hannibal could hear his own heartbeat thundering in his ears. Years without touch, without physical kindness of any kind. And then, suddenly, Will's body had molded to his own in a bloody embrace, only to be shattered by gravity and a rush of ice-cold air. And now—this. Seconds stretching to moments; the length of a breath, the space between heartbeats, between ocean waves.

Hannibal's thighs strained as he took Will in, allowing both of them to feel every curve, every shift in pressure. Time seemed to twist backward, then forward—through sea and smoke, through rivers and deserts, all sensation sharpening to a single, smoldering point of contact as Hannibal's body opened to Will's. Pain like stars, sharp and hot, then fading around the edges. Fading to the dull ache of memory, of time. I give myself to you, wholly.

Will's hands tightened protectively around Hannibal's hipbones as he shifted, easing the angle. His thumb grazed against the place where the Dragon's bullet had exited his body and Hannibal shivered, remembering the fragrance of spilled wine.

Will gazed up, eyes dark. I'll move when you do. Hannibal could hear the thought as if the other man had spoken it aloud.

Hannibal exhaled low. The sound seemed to hang on the air as muscle by muscle, his body began to relax.

"After I'd snuffed out the candles," he continued, his voice straining, "and pressed you up against the table and kissed you for the very first time, I would have lifted you up and carried you to my bed."

An experimental, upward shift of his hips brought more stars, and a stuttered gasp from Will.

"Or perhaps you would have led me to yours, like tonight." He lifted again, feeling the tight slide of Will's cock inside his own body, anchoring them to each other. "A last course, and the first of many."

Hannibal sank back down, taking Will's entire length as deeply as he could—and then, then, the
glorious press of flesh against flesh, whole and hard and full, as he leaned down for a claiming kiss, their bodies now completely joined.

Will's mouth lifted to meet his, one hand clutching the curve of Hannibal's ribcage. Their tongues moved in heady, heat-drunk circles, sensation welling within their bodies like hot springs below a geyser, as the initial shock of their union segued into pleasure.

"You okay?" Will murmured, his voice unsteady. He smoothed his hand along Hannibal's side, a touch so light it made him shiver.

Hannibal ground his hips in a slow circle, sparking a mixed flurry of pleasure and pain.

"Always, with you. But I won't break, Will." He thrust down, harder this time, coaxing a shallow cry from the other man's throat.

Will tipped his head. His eyes narrowed, wicked and playful, and Hannibal could see in them a hint of his earlier, frustration-fueled passion. He would draw it out of him, like poison from a wound—leaving a clean, bone-deep slice to mark their consummation.

He straightened back, taking Will at a sharper angle. Will's hips bucked against him, quickening in rhythm, stoking bright flares of pleasure behind Hannibal's eyelids. He moaned, unabashed, tipping his head back. Breath upon breath; skin against skin, meat into music… His hamstrings lifted and contracted, bringing Will deeper into himself each time.

Hannibal opened his eyes and looked down, wallowing in the warm, moonlit sea of Will's body. This was Will as he'd only ever dreamed him, face glowing with desire, skin flushed with heat, hands grasping Hannibal's body with as much need and aching as on the night of their fall.

Will's throat bobbed as he swallowed, then gasped—not from pain this time, but from the pleasure of being inside Hannibal.

"How do I feel to you?" Hannibal whispered, bending to brace his arms along either side of Will's head. Inches away from Will's mouth, each thrust bringing him closer to his lips. We're conjoined, Will. We always will be. So why, when I kiss you, does it feel like it's the last time, every time?

Will gritted his teeth. "Like—like home," he gasped. He shook his head, eyes squeezed closed.

"One where you live? Or one you can't go back to?" Hannibal grazed his lips across Will's own in a silent plea. Don't take yourself away from me.

Will moaned in reply. His eyes flashed open, pupils dark as ink stains.

"I want to feel you on your knees. Come in you like that. I'm—I'm close."

The heat between them seemed to shimmer, suddenly escalating, as the command whipped through Hannibal's brain and straight to his groin. He pulled up, allowing Will to slide out. Before he could move from the other man's body, Will planted his hand on his hip, rolling him over—and then rolled over him.

There was a moment of tangled limbs and breathless grunts. Then Will was taking himself in his hand behind him. Hannibal arched his spine at the tight, tense press of flesh as Will pushed back in, impatient now. A fresh burn bloomed inside his belly with the new angle. He closed his eyes. I give myself to you, wholly… Make me yours.

Will snarled and drove upward, high inside his body. Hannibal's stomach quivered as a hot, liquid
burst of pleasure melted through him. Then, suddenly, there was a hard palm on his back, shoving him down. His face crushed against the bump of the pillow, knees slipping on the cotton. A flash of decades-old memory raced through his head, terrifying and thrilling; and then merging and repairing, in a way only Will's touch could command.

He slammed back against Will's body, his pulse racing wild; relishing the hard snap of Will's hips against his ass, the mounting pressure in his groin—and the sharp slide of Will's nails against his skin, poised to tear the fabric of their memories and dreams in two.

A sear of heady sensation flashed down Hannibal's spine, into his limbs and belly. Not even death could separate us. The thought came to him from nowhere. He grabbed onto it, clutching it like a prayer—a prophecy. He knew it was true.

Will's knuckles ground along his vertebrae, kneading the bones. His other hand slipped under Hannibal's body to grasp his cock in his hand—firm, possessive. Hannibal hissed at the touch, heat now rising from every angle of his body. The swift movement of Will's wrist matched the thrust of his hips and flung Hannibal to the brink of climax before he could reign himself back in.

Above him, Will gave a shallow heave, then another—then stilled.

"Come with me, Will," Hannibal choked.

A guttural cry from Will's throat—and then the spring inside Hannibal's body snapped, and they were falling together again, tumbling head over feet—except, this time, they crashed before they hit the water.

A blinding wave of pleasure tore through Hannibal's body with the combined forces of their orgasms, scattering stars across his vision. A thousand brilliant points of light, a thousand jagged ceramic shards. They cut and shaped and brightened the universe, at once changing its form and illuminating its endless, deadly beauty. Mine. Only mine. Your breath, your flesh, your mind—give me everything.

Will collapsed on top of him, thighs quivering against the backs of Hannibal's own.

They stayed like that for a long moment as their lungs caught up with their need for breath. Hot fluid dribbled down the insides of Hannibal's thighs when Will slid out, one hand braced against the ridges and whorls of Mason's brand—a gentle touch, followed by a stinging barrenness. At one time in Hannibal's life, the sensation had signaled relief. Now, he found it left him feeling oddly empty.

"Christ." Will sank down on his back in a loose heap of arms and legs. Hannibal shifted onto his side, facing him. The scar on Will's abdomen, and the whorls of dark hair below it, were sticky with sweat and semen. Hannibal pressed his palm to Will's stomach, calming the shaking breaths that rippled through his belly.

Will turned to him, eyes heavy and moist, lips flushed dark with blood. "That was. Um."

Hannibal slid his hand to Will's cheek. Cupped it. "It was," he said, trying and failing to keep his voice steady. "And I would remember this time, too, Will. Even if I saw you every day, forever. We're conjoined—in a new way."

A flash of something unreadable in Will's eyes. They darted to the side, then back. Unsure.

Hannibal lowered his hand to the blanket. The quilted fabric was cold compared to the blazing vibrance of Will's body.
The other man sighed. He closed his eyes and rubbed them. Then twisted onto his side, stretching out his hand. His fingertips brushed against Hannibal's, just as they had when he'd handed him the glass of scotch.

Hannibal settled his head against the neighboring pillow and watched as Will's eyes drooped, then slid closed. Then opened again, slightly unfocused. Will nuzzled his cheek against his own pillow with a tired exhale, and Hannibal suddenly wondered if Will had slept at all in the past two nights. He'd looked unusually tired when he'd walked in earlier. It was doubtful he'd slept the night of the fire—and possibly not the night after, for a multitude of reasons. Anxiety, or guilt? Or something else?

His musing evaporated at the sound of Will's drowsy voice. "Can you—would you kiss me? Again?"

Hannibal's brow wrinkled. Something in his chest flip-flopped—then shuddered and went still, leaving a coarse aching in its wake.

"Because you asked me to, I will," he said, the words coming out hollow, despite the tenderness of the request.

He stretched closer, circling the back of Will's head with his palm, his thumb caressing the tender skin of his temple as he pressed his lips to the other man's. Their mouths parted enough to taste, but not enough to invite more. Hannibal's eyes slipped closed as the smooth fullness of Will's mouth aligned perfectly with his own, seeking and finding exactly what was needed.

Will's eyes remained closed when Hannibal broke away moments later. His face was calm, features slackened in the rapid onset of sleep. His ribcage gently expanded and contracted as his breaths began to deepen.

Hannibal lay still for several minutes, watching him doze. If you were any less beautiful, my φílátatos, I'd have you flogged for insolence.

The words—not his own, but those of the emperor in his dreams—rose up from his memory, unbidden. They pressed against the inside of his skull like a bruise. Antinous had tempted his erastês with the gift of prized Egyptian honey, in an effort to comfort him. To calm him. Just before—including what? Had the youth chosen to drown himself to save the emperor's life? Or had it simply been a terrible accident—a miscalculation? Worse still, had the emperor's erômenos conspired to betray him, out of some rare twist of cruelty? The historians had never been able to agree.

However, it was clear that the portents had been there, both beforehand and afterward. First Secundus the philosopher, then Pachrates the magician, had spoken to Hadrian of a great, impending sorrow. After Antinous' death, Hadrian and the empress, Sabina, had traveled to Thebes to see the Colossi of Memnon. The warrior-king of the Ethiopians, Memnon had been slain by Achilles during the Trojan War in revenge for Patroclus' death. His monument was later mislabeled by the Greeks as the guardian of Amenophis' mortuary temple. Memnon's crumbling statues were said to whistle at dawn as the rising sun spread over the stone, bringing health and good fortune to those who heard their song.

Sabina had risen early and paid a visit to the Colossi with her handmaiden. She was in luck, for Memnon saw fit to grace her with his melody that day. However, for as many days and nights as Hadrian waited at the Colossi, ill and in mourning for his lost erômenos, Memnon refused to sing to him. The emperor had left Thebes a broken man, one week before what would have been Antinous' nineteenth birthday.
Hannibal gazed at Will's sleeping form, his eyes traveling the strong, slender curves of his body. His eyelashes appeared black against his cheeks in the moonlit glow of the room, and his shoulders sagged with the rhythm of his too-thin chest.

And does this shadow fall upon yourself only, my φιλάτατος? Or do you see its shade hovering over me, as well?

I do, Augustus... I feel it hovering over both of us. I pray morning and night for your comfort. Your happiness.

It seemed that Will, who walked in shadow as Hannibal himself did, had foreseen something even darker racing towards them—something black and rolling that would blot out the light of their reunion. Hannibal could hear it, could smell it; but remained blind to its precise shape and speed.

Too many questions. Not enough time. The thought was irritating in its veracity.

Against the odds, the pieces of their lives they'd scattered to the wind had returned, weather-worn and faded. How he and Will chose to reassemble them would depend on the picture each of them sought to create. Judging by Will's ambivalence, the chances of a shared projection appeared low. Unacceptably low.

Hannibal blinked, squeezing the afterimages of pain and pleasure from his eyes. He rolled over and eased himself off the bed, taking care not to wake Will. He pulled up the side of the cotton quilt and draped it over the other man's body.

"Sleep, my φιλάτατος," he said quietly. "The empress must hear Memnon sing one more time."

He walked to the front room, barely registering the cold hardwood beneath his feet or the lingering ache between his thighs. The fire had nearly burned itself out. Dull orange tongues of flame licked along the undersides of the charred wood, offering little warmth. In the bottom of the grate, embers hissed hot and red—the last of the light to die.

He bent down in front of the couch and unwound the bundle of Will's clothing. The snubnose was there, buried in the folds of the pullover. The steel was chilly against his palm as he straightened up and glanced around the room, considering.

His eyes stopped on the taxidermied largemouth bass above the fireplace. It was a trophy catch—nearly twenty-two inches, by the look of it. He wondered briefly if Will had been there when the senior Graham had reeled it in.

Doubtful, he thought, recalling the acerbity in Will's voice. Miss him? Not really... He wanted me to be just like him.

Hannibal crossed to the fireplace, stepping onto the stone hearth. The bass' mouth was frozen wide in a glazed $O$ of surrender—hollow, and large enough to accommodate the small revolver. He poked the gun inside, wedging it into the fish's belly.

After ensuring that no part of the weapon could be seen from the outside, he went back to retrieve Will's crumpled jeans from the floor. Inside the back right pocket, Hannibal found Will's cell phone—the one that had interrupted their earlier conversation.

The lock screen flashed on with a tap of his thumb, demanding a passcode. He typed in the precise sequence Will had entered as he'd stood at the kitchen sink, too distracted to notice Hannibal watching. 7-2-7-1-4. July twenty-seventh, two-thousand-fourteen—the day of the senior Graham's passing.
He was dead for six days before anyone down here noticed, Will had said. Although the other man had denied any trepidation about meeting the same fate, Hannibal thought the bitterness of his tone had suggested otherwise.

A white message screen popped into view, punctuated by blue and gray text bubbles. The name at the top read Molly Foster. Will hadn't bothered to close out of the message before putting his phone away.

Hannibal's eyebrows lifted as he scanned the conversation.

*How's it going? Jack gonna be keeping you late?*

*Not too late. Be back before midnight. Tell Walt goodnight for me.*

Hannibal glanced at the time at the top of the screen. 11:47 PM. The last blue bubble, sent only fifteen minutes prior, had not yet been seen by Will.

*I'm sorry about yesterday… we can make it up to each other when you get home. see you soon :)*

A chill wound around Hannibal's naked body, cooling the drying cum between his thighs. He closed his eyes. His nostrils flared as he caught the small, sour scent of Molly's hidden grief from nearly twenty miles away. Dying peonies in a copper vase, rotting beneath the waterline, the mimicry of the rose's smell long vanished. Wilted, plum-brown heads reminiscent of the blood-swollen labia she planned to present to Will upon his return. *Roses by other names; the blooms of lust long dry.*

It would have been a victory for Molly if her husband had returned home unmarked, but that possibility had already been shattered. Should Will return to Great Falls tonight, Hannibal sorely hoped that Molly would offer love on her knees before he had time to wash.

He tapped the menu link next to Molly's name, which brought up a screen with her address book entry. The first listing was for her mobile, the second and third for her office and the home line.

Hannibal went to the kitchen, to the cordless phone on the wall near the window. He lifted the receiver and punched in the first number—the one that would connect him directly to Molly. He tucked the handset between his ear and shoulder, waiting.

On the third ring, a burst of static crackled in his ear. Then a voice—somewhat husky and nasal in timbre, but curved at the corners, like a bell.

"Hel—*Hello?*" A startled pause. "Um… Will?" Another pause, one that segued quickly into stern suspicion. "*Will? Who is this?*

Hannibal inhaled sharply, and then hung up. He unplugged the cord from the jack, silencing the phone should Molly call back. She would've heard his breath. That, and the caller ID, would be enough to spark her curiosity.

He thumbed back to Will and Molly's text conversation as he walked out of the kitchen, and then tucked the phone back into the pocket of Will's jeans. He left their clothing exactly where it had landed when they'd torn it from each other's bodies earlier.

Hannibal shivered as another draft of cold air caressed his skin. Despite his benzodiazepine withdrawal, he, too, was fatigued; he could feel his eyelids growing heavy with the volley of prolactin his orgasm had unleashed into his blood.

The hallway was dark compared to the fire-lit front room, and it took Hannibal's eyes a moment to
He pushed open the bedroom door and crept back into the room. Will had shifted in his sleep. He lay on his back, with one arm curled around the edge of the pillow and the other draped across his chest, breathing soundlessly.

He'd somehow managed to shove the quilt down around his shins, leaving most of his body bare. *Runs hot in his sleep.* Another dream-memory from the cliffside house: Will pushing the thick Moroccan coverlet off both of them in the middle of the night, then settling back against Hannibal's chest—unawake, unaware. Hannibal had clutched him close in the wide king bed, relishing the press of Will's sweat-damp t-shirt against his chest and the occasional, unconscious grind of Will's ass against his groin. He remembered how Will had once moaned in his sleep when he'd done it, several nights before they'd first kissed. It had taken every ounce of Hannibal's restraint not to touch him then. To *feel* him.

Tonight, he had *lived* that first kiss—their first touch—all over again, but in a new way; in a different place and time. Consummation and resurrection—forged, it seemed, by the finicky forces of fortune and chance.

With a sigh, Hannibal climbed onto the bed, wrestling the quilt from under Will's feet. Sleep was tugging hard at him now. He glanced through the filmy curtains at the sky. The moon's ivory outline had been replaced by a murky glow that crept in through the window like a fog. Dense, cottony clouds hung low over the evergreens, heralding more snow.

He pulled the blanket over himself and spread half of it on Will, leaving the other man's torso bare. The scent of their sex still hung heavy on the bedding and on their skin, warm and dense and pungent—as familiar as it was *new.* In the dark, it made them indistinguishable from each other.

Hannibal closed his eyes. He wrapped his arm around the curve of Will's chest, grazing his fingers across the ridge of still-healing tissue below his collarbone. Scars upon scars they'd traded and collected since their meeting, like maidens with wildflowers. Each bloom of blood had left a story in its wake; a picture of betrayal, or vengeance, or forgiveness. They flowed like songs beneath their fingertips, stretching through the night and into the dawn. Violent melodies that warmed the cornerstones upon which their new foundation was being constructed.

Like the Colossi, he and Will would rise to the sky—but they would sing only to each other.

*We're conjoined, Will. We are each other's only home. Sing to me... Stay with me.*

---

Pale beams of light danced across Will's eyelids, warming them. Almost immediately, the stinging pain in his cheek awoke. In the back of his head, a low grind quickly cascaded to nausea.

*Where am I?*

Visions flashed across his consciousness in quick succession: the buzzing glare of fluorescent lights; Cordell's bandaged face leering down at him; the bright flash of a scalpel as it was lowered to his cheek. Then, the splintering crack of a door—a growl that shook him to his bones—a cut-off scream.

*Muskrat Farm.* Cordell was going to cut off his face and sew it onto Mason's. Before that, it had been Hannibal in Florence with a buzzsaw to his forehead, slicing with cold precision. Jack's eyes had been wide and frantic as he'd bellowed at Hannibal down the long table.
Then his mind had fallen to blackness—until he and Hannibal had awoken, swinging by their ankles in the back of a livestock truck.

Round and round again, a ring of memories circling like a venomous ouroboros.

Will wrenched his eyes open. He was going to vomit. He pushed himself up, swallowing hard and blinking against the weak winter glow. His stomach calmed as it was righted—a small mercy. He lifted his head to see Hannibal walking through the door of his farmhouse, dressed in someone else's coat. His eyes brightened when he saw Will was awake.

Will gingerly pushed himself to a sitting position. He didn't feel like talking. Hannibal's eyes fell at Will's silence, the delight vanishing from his face as quickly as it had arisen.

He closed the door and crossed to Will's bedside, to the chair he'd drawn up next to it. A notebook lay open on the cushion, covered in what looked like mathematical equations. Will's memory jolted at the sight of the numbers and Greek letters. A spark—a flash of missing time.

Time. His head spun with the realization. Oh God. It's happening again.

Hannibal seemed to pick up on his thought. He eyed Will with caution as he settled into the chair with a pained sigh and placed the notebook on his lap.

"Please don't—" Will started, the sound of his own voice too loud in his ears. A wash of blood pounded through his head. He swallowed back against the nausea, fighting for several seconds to keep his stomach from rebelling. When it passed, he spoke again, lowering his voice. "Please don't start talking about teacups."

Hannibal's lips lifted in a faint smile, distorting the gash on the side of his chin. "We've been here before. You remember."

"I remember how it ends." Will leaned back against the windowsill, wincing at the soreness in his back. As it turned out, being trussed up like a freshly dressed pig hadn't done any wonders for his body.

"Would you prefer a different ending?"

For once, Hannibal sounded more curious than obtusely polite.

"I…" Will faltered. He cleared his throat. "I don't know. It's—it's difficult to judge, when every choice seems to invite a thousand possible endings."

"Sometimes a thousand choices may all lead to the same path. We are always driven by our needs and desires. And by our intentions." Hannibal paused, his eyes shifting. "However hidden those may be, at times."

Will chuckled faintly and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "That doesn't leave much room for chance. Or acts of God."

"Fortune and fate may appear as spontaneous artifacts, but they also follow rules," Hannibal replied. "So does coincidence."

"I suppose entropy has its own rules, too."

"Increasing disorder is what distinguishes the past from the future." Hannibal tilted his head, eyeing him. "It gives a direction to time. Without time, life and death no longer have context. Even
equilibrium requires it."

Hannibal glanced down at his notebook, his brow wrinkling. He shifted stiffly in the chair. Will could see the motion had pained him. Hannibal's posture was uncharacteristically slumped, as though too much movement might hurt. And his face was paler than Will remembered—not just from the contrast of his wounds.

*How did you get me back here?* he wondered suddenly. The question that came out of his mouth instead was: "What were you writing?"

Hannibal was silent for a long moment, his eyes studying the numbers and symbols scattered across the pages. When he spoke, his voice was strangely soft.

"Calculating, in fact. A few ideas for a Lagrangian approach to entropy correction for static black holes. I didn't want to wake you."

Will stared. "That… makes absolutely no sense. In English?"

"Quantum mechanics," Hannibal sighed. "And the paradoxes of past and future. You didn't ask me last time. Why now?"

Will opened his mouth to reply—and then, without warning, an impossible vision reared up before his eyes: the feathered stag, charging at him through the winter blackness, horns ablaze. Hannibal's voice rumbled through his head: *None of the others would have needed saving if the teacup had never shattered. Do you understand, Will? You read my letter. Did you decipher the notebook?*

Will raised his arms in a frantic attempt to shield himself from the invisible specter. Behind his eyelids, the creature's thundering hooves propelled its black bulk toward him, feathers flying, horns poised to impale. *Every act of creation is first an act of destruction. How will you destroy us this time, Will?*

*Entropy,* Will answered, in a voice that wasn't his own. *The earth turned inside out. Waves and wind and fire, and a thousand savage futures caught within a dream.*

"Will?" Hannibal's voice, no longer in his head. Right next to him. "Will—open your eyes! *Look at me!*

He did, shoulders shaking, eyes burning with the afterimage of the flaming stag. He lowered his arms. Looked around. Hannibal and his notebook had vanished, leaving him alone in the room.

"Will?"

No—*not* alone. And *not* Hannibal's voice.

Will whipped his head toward the direction of the sound. Molly strode in through the living room doorway, carrying her keys and coat. Randy trotted at her side.

"I've been calling you for hours!" Molly complained, as she dumped her keys in the dish on the counter and threw her coat over Hannibal's chair. "Where've you been?"

Will gaped. The sensation of time ripping, of future and past bleeding into each other, swept through his body with a cold and claustrophobic awareness. He felt like he'd been locked inside an airtight box and thrown into the sea. Left to sink down into the dim, icy depths until he reached the bottom—if there was one.
"Molly, I—" he started, but his words were arrested by the look of terror on Molly's face.

"What's **he** doing here?" A croaked whisper. Molly raised her hand and pointed, a gesture that seemed to unfold in slow motion, as though Will were watching her from underwater.

He followed her gaze across the room, to the porch door. Outside the rectangular panes of glass loomed a tall, dark figure. Its face was shrouded in shadow, but its glowing eyes were riveted on Molly.

**Hannibal.**

"No—**no!**" Will cried, springing up from the bed.

Molly screamed, and Randy barked as the door banged open—and then the **stag**, not Hannibal, blazed through. Its eyes were glinting red, its dagged antlers rippling with flame and pointed straight at Molly.

Will's voice caught in his throat as he tried to call out—tried to move—but the water was dragging him down, filling his mouth. Crushing his lungs, his windpipe.

*One last breath,* he thought, as his brain began to drown with the rest of him. He reached out, blind, not knowing whose arms he would find, or if anyone would catch him.

*One last breath... I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?*

---

Hannibal's eyes flew open as a yelp struck his ears. Then, out of nowhere, a fist.

He threw his arm over his face, ducking as a sudden pain radiated from his temple. White spots spun across his sleep-blurred vision, dizzying him.

**Will.** The thought rushed to him immediately, like a seashell carried by a wave. *Dreaming again. A nightmare.*

He rolled over and pushed himself to his knees. Beside him, Will was thrashing and moaning in his sleep, his arms waving wildly as if trying to fend off an invisible attacker. His forehead and chest were glistening with sweat.

"Will!" Hannibal shouted. He clamped his hands over Will's biceps, pinning them to the mattress. "Will—open your eyes! **Look at me!**"

A hoarse cry, and then Will's eyes snapped open, rolling white and wild. He struggled against Hannibal's grasp, disoriented, his shoulders heaving.

"Will," Hannibal said, lowering his voice, "Stop! It's all right. You were having a dream. You're awake now."

"I—" Will's eyes rolled dazedly around the room, taking in the midnight glow of clouds and moon outside the window, the solid log walls, the whitewashed double dresser opposite the bed. Then his gaze shot to Hannibal, bending over him in the darkness. "We—we're not in Wolf Trap."
Hannibal's brow wrinkled. "No. We're at your father's cabin, fifteen miles south of Wolf Trap." He paused. "Approximately, from what I've gathered."

Will's eyes widened as the memory of the night seemed to slam back to his consciousness all at once. His eyes combed Hannibal's naked form, a flush creeping into his face. Then his eyebrows shot up, and he whipped his head to the side, searching for something on the nightstand that wasn't there.

"Shit—what time is it? Did I fall asleep?"

Hannibal sighed. Will's skin was hot underneath his hands, sending tingles up his fingertips and into his arms. He fought the heady urge to lean over and press his mouth against Will's once again.

My compassion for you is increasingly inconvenient, he thought.

"I don't know," he answered. "We both dropped off. I woke when you cried out in your sleep. I'm worried about you."

Will exhaled, the sound bordering on scorn. He stared up at Hannibal through the gloom, curls sticking in wet ringlets to his forehead, his lips pressed in a flat line. His eyes were like flint.

"I need to go." His biceps flexed beneath Hannibal's hands. "Let me up."


Was that what he was doing now? Surrendering? But it was Will who wanted to lock him away this time—not Jack.

"Hannibal. Let. Me. Up."

Hannibal moved back as if stung, lifting his hands from the other man's arms.

Will pushed himself off the bed and stood, scrubbing his hands through his hair in agitation. He shot a glance at the curtain of soft, cottony snowflakes that had begun to fall outside the window. A noise of irritation sounded from his throat. Then he stalked out of the bedroom and down the hallway, without a word.

Hannibal gathered the discarded quilt around his shoulders. His body felt suddenly cold; his chest, hollow. He clambered off the bed and padded down the hallway, the blanket dragging along the floor behind him.

In the front room, Will was yanking his jeans over his hips with one hand as he glared down at his cell in the other. Hannibal's eyes flitted to the largemouth bass mounted above the fireplace. It appeared undisturbed. The short hand of the bronze captain's clock above the television had already nudged past two. The long hand was close behind.

Will clicked off his phone without typing anything, and shoved it back in his pocket.

She's choosing to stay mum about the call, Hannibal thought to himself, with a brief and bitter pang of satisfaction. If Will's wife suspected that her husband, or someone else, had phoned her—mistakenly or otherwise—from the deceased senior Graham's cabin, she hadn't texted Will about it.

Hannibal cleared his throat. "Do you intend to share your strategy with me? Or are you leaving me to guess at that also?"
"I'll be back tomorrow night," Will said, brusque, as he shoved his feet into his boots. "Chiyoh's coming. You need to get out of the country. She'll help you. I've made arrangements for a boat. You sail out on Saturday."

"I see." Hannibal paused. "And was this also part of your plan to set me free?" He gestured at the space between their two bodies, one half-dressed, the other naked; both still flushed with heat from their earlier lovemaking.

"I—mphf," Will mumbled, tugging his sweater over his head. "I said I didn't have any intentions."

"Action exposes intention." The blanket slipped from Hannibal's arm, leaving his left side bare. Goosebumps rose along his flesh. He could feel Will slipping from him, too.

"You wanted this." Will gritted his teeth. "I didn't know. Not at first. Not for a long time." His voice was hoarse and heavy with guilt as he went to the door and yanked it open. Snow-scented air drifted in with the night, chilling the room.

As the cold hit them, Will's shoulders sagged. He sighed, then turned to face Hannibal. "We—I—can't be like this, Hannibal. Not with you. It's too hard. Too elusive. Like chasing shadows in the dark."

Hannibal swallowed. He felt something knotted and ugly crack inside his chest. Hot fluid seeped into the hollow of his ribcage—vitriolic, crushing.

"Wanting this isn't a basis for my desire," he warned. He took a step towards Will, allowing the blanket to slip off his body completely. Another step. "I wanted you, Will. Always. Every part of you. Even the part that wanted to kill me."

Flashes of indigo sky, of bloodied arms and the press of Will's cheek against his chest—then orange brick and thin air, and the steel press of Chiyoh's pistol against his temple.

He blinked hard, shaking the images from his head. "Even the part that did kill me," he said, softer. "You knew that before you decided to set me free."

Will froze as Hannibal stepped closer. His eyes darted to his hands. Looking for a knife, Hannibal registered. The reflection of Will's eyes, black and round as two river stones in the dim light of his kitchen, rose from his memory.

"I set you free to give you back your life."

A hint of imploring in Will's tone. His gaze moved back to Hannibal's face when he saw he had no weapon. His eyes held the same dark shine, the same helpless longing, as that night. The crack within Hannibal's chest widened. Gushed.

He shook his head. "A life without you isn't freedom." He took a last step, bringing himself just inches from Will. The scents of lingering pheromones, snow, and the citrusy tang of trepidation mingled in his nose.

He reached up, fingers unclenching to stroke the sweat-moistened curls from the other man's forehead. Will stumbled back, his heat crackling against Hannibal's skin like a live current. Hannibal could see—could feel—the muscle memory as it blitzed through Will's mind. A steel blur. Impossible pressure. Slick kitchen tiles. A father's blood, mingled with a daughter's.

Would either of them ever truly be able to forgive each other for that night?
Hannibal took a step back, feeling oddly embarrassed. "You are my life, Will." His voice caught again on the syllable, as though the name were a thorn. "And you are loved."

Will's mouth opened. No noise came out. Moisture welled in his eyes, threatening to spill. He swallowed hard. "I'm late. The snow's picking up. I have to go."

As Will turned, Hannibal said his name once again, soft. His face felt like it was burning.

Will turned his head, eyes shifting to meet Hannibal's over his shoulder, his fingers frozen on the doorknob—just like the morning of the fire.

"You draw lines between these moments of intensity between us," Hannibal said. "Hoping you can separate them into isolated events."

Will's expression was hard. Unreadable. "And you underline them."

He stepped onto the porch, pulling the door shut with a thud.

---

In the Subaru, Will pressed on the gas as he blew through the snow down the Capital Beltway. He stared past the pulsing arc of his windshield wipers into the darkness rushing up to meet him. Concentrate on the road. Drive. Don't think—don't think.

His body was brimming with energy. Nerve endings tense and fired, his stomach knotted into a tight ball. He could smell Hannibal on himself, everywhere. Should've showered, he chastised himself, swallowing back against the simultaneous waves of arousal and anxiety that rose in his throat. Should've set an alarm. Shouldn't have fallen asleep.

But fresh in his mind was the taste of Hannibal's mouth, hard and slick against his own; lips seeking, needing, giving. The feel of hot flesh surrounding his cock, startlingly tight. Hips lifting and rolling, pushing Will's body further and further to the edge—then bucking back against him, Hannibal on his knees now, his strong thighs spread wide. Open-mouthed against the pillow, groaning, asking him to come, to tip over the edge, to fall with him.

Will inhaled, sharp, as a stab of heat shot through his body and into his groin. His cock began to stiffen inside his jeans. His eyes fought to close; to let his body wallow in the memory of Hannibal as he'd never before seen him, except in his dreams.

No—concentrate! his inner voice shouted. He jerked his eyes open and glared out the windshield, forcing himself to focus on the wet specks of snow whizzing toward the headlights.

Just before he'd shut the cabin door, a strange expression had crossed Hannibal's face. Not anger or irritation—something disturbingly close to surprise. Hannibal, who was always two steps ahead of everyone else; whose mind followed several trains of thought at once, without distraction from any.

Will had forced his feet forward, out the door, away from the cabin—away from that look.

Hannibal had offered up his body for pleasure and pain; had handed over his heart yet again, without hesitation. And Will had greedily taken both.
"You delight in wickedness, and then you berate yourself for the delight. Hannibal's voice floated to him from the muddy ether of his memories and dreams. How will you destroy us this time, Will?"

"Just please shut up," he muttered. "I said we can't do this." He scratched his fingers through his hair, gouging his nails into his scalp, hard enough to hurt.

*Creation or destruction, Will? Delight or disgrace? You can't have both at once.*

At the imagined words, the inevitable guilt slammed him like a thousand-ton wave: *Molly.*

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. A clammy feeling swept through him, pulling him under like the tide of his dream, dulling the lingering heat of Hannibal's skin.

*You can go home again, if there's any point. Is there any point?*

Bitter words, menacing in their truth—more so, now that he and Hannibal had flagrantly undermined whatever point might be left.

Molly thought he was at Quantico. Jack probably thought he was at home with Molly—if he'd thought about it at all. Hannibal thought—what did Hannibal think? That Will was angry with him? Frustrated? Naïve? Or merely ambivalent? In approximately twenty-four hours, Will would hand Hannibal over to Chiyoh, and she would take him across the ocean on the twin-screw cargo boat he'd secured through Wally Oswalt's contact. Tomorrow afternoon, Will would meet with Wally's man to finalize the arrangements. Hannibal would be long gone by the time the sun rose on Saturday.

If the wind held, he and Chiyoh would arrive at the Port of Klaipėda in two weeks. Hannibal could resume whatever life he'd lived in Panevėžys before settling on US soil, or choose an entirely new path for himself. A new identity. Will would go back to Great Falls, to Molly and Walt and the dogs. He would continue being that which he'd always been. *Alone.*

Hot tears sprung to Will's eyes. He switched the steering wheel to his left hand and wiped them away. *Jesus.* He blinked, bringing the road back into focus. Not only had he drugged his family, set fire to a federal penitentiary, and broken the Eastern seaboard's most infamous killer out of prison—now, it seemed he was also having a breakdown over it.

*Well done,* a voice snarled inside his head. *That should keep you up at night. And don't forget: stepping outside your marriage.*

It was then that he noticed the absence of the familiar weight on his finger. *Wedding ring,* he thought, rolling his eyes in disbelief. *Only about as cliché as it gets.*

Will squared his jaw, eyes burning. The snow was falling heavier now. If Molly was still awake, he knew she would be worried. Molly had always been effortlessly thoughtful, selfless, and quick to forgive—everything Hannibal wasn't. But Will had been growing for so long in the darkness—twisted, misshapen, and surrounded by rot—that he found himself no longer craving lighthearted companionship and easy love.

At one time, he'd wished for those things with Alana. Had found it, later, with Molly. But the pull of his and Hannibal's abyssal entanglement kept returning, kept picking up on its last thread before it could unravel completely. Tonight, they'd entwined themselves further—a knot that, once tightened by shared heat and flesh, could never be fully undone.

Hannibal had gutted him once for lying. For turning on his intimacy and taking his attentions for granted. What would he do now that Will had rejected his last gift?
A possible answer flew to him in a cold rush, right as he pulled into his driveway. *Something else missing.* The familiar press of the snubnose against his back.

He'd left his gun at the cabin. Will knew Hannibal would see only one worthwhile strategy—a game of chance, squared.

*Ten chambers now,* he thought, with a sinking feeling. *Two bullets. Two triggers. Double Russian roulette.*

---

A sudden jerk tore the emperor from his dreams as the boat tilted sharply to the side. The timbers groaned, and Hadrian pushed himself halfway up on the cot, icy sweat sliding down his brow. The cushion next to him was empty. He touched his palm to it. *Cold.*

In his dream, Pachrates and Secundus had appeared in Athena's temple, carrying a sling between them. The words of the emperor's interrupted devotion hung on the air between the soaring Pantelic marble columns, as he'd turned in surprise to face the men.

*Esteemed Augustus,* Secundus had said, foregoing his sacred vow of silence, *You once riddled me, 'What is a boat?'

Hadrian had stared, surrounded by his shocked attendants, as the two men unfolded the sling.

*Do you remember how I answered you?*

A limp body rolled from the fabric onto the glittering limestone, its dark curls matted and soiled, the youthful lips tinged blue with death. Hadrian's eyes bulged. *No!* His sight was deceiving him again. The vision before him was a lie. It *had* to be.

*A floating death,* Pachrates recited loudly, his voice rising in answer for Secundus. *A bird made of wood. A prison in winged flight. A ready-made tomb. Your erômenos has already fulfilled his prophecy. Heed these words: You will be next, Augustus.*

The man's speech blurred in the emperor's ears as he fell to his knees. *Antinous!* he cried, stretching out towards his beloved's lifeless form. Tears sprang to his eyes, shameful and unbidden. *What shadow, what thief, has taken you away from me?*

A clamor arose from somewhere on the deck. Hadrian shook his head. He was no longer dreaming. But where had Antinous gone? He'd fallen asleep next to him earlier that morning, warm and drowsy after the heat of their lovemaking.

He could hear shouting. Arguing. A chilly wind swept inside the tent's canvas flaps, bringing with it the implausible scent of rain. Hadrian breathed in, stunned, filling his nose with the smell. Had Jupiter and Ceres seen fit to reawaken the river's forces on Rome's behalf? Would the floods come, stirring the harvest and bringing Ægyptus' drought to an end?

He had little time to wonder.

"*Augustus!*" a familiar voice cried. The sound came from right outside his tent. "Pray, grant me entry!"
Arrian. Hadrian pushed himself up from the cot at the panicked cadence of his friend's speech.

"Come in, Arrian!" he called, foregoing the man's formal address as consul.

The bearded Greek, ten years his junior but already silvering at his crown, rushed inside the tent, eyes wide. He fell prostrate at the emperor's feet.

"Augustus, forgive us!" he moaned. "No one saw him. The guards heard no sound. No struggle."

Hadrian's forehead wrinkled. A sharp twinge of fear shot through his body. Where was Antinous?

"Arrian, stand up!" he commanded. "I heard shouting. Speak to me, now. What's gone awry?"

The consul straightened up, his sharp, honey-colored eyes darkened with fear. He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "It's the boy. He—he must have fallen overboard! The prow guard spied him floating past the ship."

"Antinous." The name dropped from Hadrian's tongue like a stone. "He is not—"

Arrian simply stood, his lips parted in silence, as pity welled sharp in his eyes.

Inside Hadrian's chest, something dark and impossibly heavy ripped open. It felt as though his entire being had been filled with liquid flame, or ice.

"Hadrian!" Arrian called, as the emperor stumbled past him and thrust aside the tent flaps, not stopping to pull his cloak over his tunica.

The morning sky hung with rolling black clouds that blotted out the weak light attempting to warm the sea. The wind was like needles against his skin as Hadrian's eyes shot to the mid-deck of the quinquireme. Several dozen of his attendants and guardsmen were clustered around something at their feet, too crowded for him to see.

Hadrian tore across the deck. "Clear the way!" he bellowed, his voice hoarse. At the sound of the command, the guardsmen sprung to the side, their faces ashen. Marcius Turbo, the Praefectus Praetorio, stepped towards the emperor, raising his hand in supplication.

"Augustus, it is a loss indeed. But he was only a boy." His advisor's stern, chiseled features appeared more sullen than grave. "The rain will wash away this wound. See, it falls for you—for the glory of the empire!"

"Move," Hadrian growled. He flashed a warning look at the prefect as raindrops splattered, heavy and cold, on his brow.

Behind him, Arrian's voice rose in caution. "I beg you, Augustus, turn away! Do not shatter your eyes with sorrow so early in the day."

Hadrian ignored his friend's pleading and stepped past Turbo, into the crowd. They parted for him, like sails, as the wind snapped in the canvas above their heads.

On the deck lay Antinous—his philatos, his hunter, his lover, his life. He was twisted half on his side, one lithe, muscular arm draped limply over his chest. Dark curls were plastered against his neck and forehead. His sightless blue eyes stared upward, glazed and unmoving.

The youth was dressed in his ceremonial chlamys instead of the shendyt, Hadrian saw. His mind snagged on the detail. Antinous hadn't worn his traditional clothing since their blood offering at the
sacred lake of Harsaphes in Heracleopolis—the place where Ra's burning eye had destroyed mankind, and where Osiris had been crowned king. He'd changed into the chlamys at some point after Hadrian had fallen asleep—but why?

A sound wrenched from the emperor's throat without warning, startling even himself. Then his knees buckled, and he staggered forward, falling to the deck beside his erômenos. His nightmare had truly awakened; had become flesh—become death. The shadow Antinous had spoken of had come to pass, claiming his life and Hadrian's along with it—just as Secundus had predicted.

Gasps of pity and scorn scraped his ears as he pulled Antinous' body into his lap. He ignored the exclamations of the crowd, cupping the boy's cheek in his hand and tilting his face upward.

*Why do you feel so heavy, my phíltatos? So cold? What thief has taken you away from me? Tell me, and I will kill him with my bare hands! Or was this darkness your own doing? I forbade you to sacrifice yourself, Antinous—did you not hear my command?*

The young man's lips—hot and flush against Hadrian's own only hours before—were colored a pale bluish-gray, just as in his cursed dream. Overhead, thunder rolled in a fierce cascade. Raindrops splattered dark on the wooden deck, coming down harder. They dotted Antinous' cheeks and disguised the tears that sprung to Hadrian's eyes as he buried his face in his lover's shoulder.

Underneath the disintegrating crackle of thunder, he heard Turbo sigh in exasperation. The prefect had advised Hadrian several times to exchange Antinous' favors for those of a younger, more suitable erômenos—as had the empress.

*Sabina will pretend to be sorry, he thought, as he clutched Antinous' limp body tighter to his own. She will give condolences with dry eyes and a hidden smile—as will the rest of them. Antinous—my beloved, my brightest star, my lost one—why, oh why have you taken yourself away from me?*

The low rumble of an engine sparked Hannibal's ears. The boat and the boy vanished into the well of his subconscious.


He opened his eyes. From the couch, he could see the late-afternoon light filtering low over the lake through the windows. He'd been asleep for approximately five hours, judging by the angle of the sun. It appeared that the snowfall had broken once again.

A click as the engine cut off and a car door opened, then shut. *Definitely not Will. Too early.* There came the soft crunch of boots over snow, up the path to the front door.

Hannibal pushed himself up from the couch, his senses firing to attention. He forewent pulling on his trousers over his boxer shorts, instead crossing immediately to the fish mounted above the mantle. He reached inside its petrified mouth and pulled out Will's revolver. He thumbed open the side latch and swung the cylinder out. *Five bullets. Fully loaded.*

He snapped the cylinder back into place and cocked the hammer. Underneath the fuzzed cling of his borrowed sweater, Hannibal's pulse beat steady and calm. He ducked into the kitchen, behind the wall of cupboards separating it from the front room, as the door opened with a quiet jangle of keys.

No sound. No salute of greeting. Boot soles squeaked on the hardwood as the door closed. He waited, Will's gun held against his chest, as the footsteps stalled, and then picked up again. They crept slowly across the carpet. Stopped halfway to the fireplace, to where his discarded trousers lay. The sound of a sharp inhale followed. *Decidedly feminine.*
Hannibal's lips lifted in a curt smile as he rounded the corner of the kitchen.

"Hello, Molly," he said, raising the gun and aiming the sight squarely between her surprised green eyes.

Molly straightened up from her half-crouch. The rumpled pair of pants slipped from her hands to the floor.

"You." Her whisper faded on the air as the color drained from her face. She blinked, slack-jawed, her eyes combing Hannibal's half-dressed form as though hoping he would suddenly evaporate.

Hannibal took another step, bringing himself out of the window’s sightline. Less than six feet lay between them. Molly made no move to run. *Smarter than the last time*, he thought to himself. It appeared the Dragon had taught her something useful, after all.

"Despite the unexpected nature of the situation, I promise this isn't a hallucination. And thank you for locating my trousers. I didn't have time to properly dress before you barged in."

Molly closed her mouth. She swallowed. Her loose bun quivered atop her head as she continued to stare at him. He could imagine her limbs trembling inside her long parka and faded blue jeans, fighting against her animal instinct to flee.

"You—you were the one who called my phone." She didn't wait for Hannibal to confirm. "And you sent that man—Dolarhyde—to kill us. Me and my son."

He flashed her a knowing look. "He was very enthusiastic about the idea, I assure you."

"And then you killed him."

Hannibal sneered. "Your husband was quite helpful in that regard. He relished ending Francis Dolarhyde's life as much as I imagine you would have. Did you fantasize about it afterward, as you lay in your hospital bed, bruised and broken? About taking the gun from him and pressing it between his damaged lips, against his jagged teeth, and blowing a hole through his skull?"

Hannibal caressed his index finger along the snubnose's trigger to illustrate his point. Inside her wool gloves, Molly's hands flinched—but not the rest of her body.

"Or would you have done it with your hands," he continued, "if you'd had the strength? For Walter. For yourself. But not for Will. He would've enjoyed hearing what it was like. That would have frightened you. And you're not that way, are you, Molly? You wouldn't have delighted in it."

A stunned look seized Molly's features. "He—Will watched you kill Dolarhyde."

"Is that what he said?" Hannibal smirked. "Bystanding is an overused alibi for participation. Though it can be helpful in getting one out of a tricky spot. Will's participation, in this instance, reaped a great reward—for both of us."

Molly was silent. The terror in her eyes had dullled to realization, making her look more weary than frightened. She breathed in. Blink. Stared hard into Hannibal's face.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Hannibal tilted his head, considering. "Will has put himself at great risk to protect me. It would be a rude repayment to him, at this juncture. Not to mention dissuasive."
Molly raised her eyebrows. "Then what are you going to do?"

He could see her hope and fealty falling away in small, shattered pieces, like shards from a cracked mirror. While his and Will's teacup still had a chance, Hannibal knew that no amount of glue or solder would be able to mend the cracks of Molly's discovery. She could never forgive like they forgave. Would never see the world as they saw it, spinning endlessly on its invisible axis of bone and blood inside the black music of space. In that, he and Will were unique. They understood.

"The answer to that question is better left to Will. Let's go ask him." Hannibal gestured towards the floor, keeping the revolver leveled at Molly's head. "Toss me those trousers, if you will, and those trainers by the door. It's time for a drive, I think."

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"Molly?" Will called, as he elbowed the front door shut and shrugged out of his heavy jacket. He tossed it over one of the kitchen chairs as a flurry of wagging tails and jangling chains surrounded him. No answer came from the rest of the house.

"Walt?" he tried doubtfully. He knew Walt would still be at school. But Molly had said she'd planned to close the shop early so she could come home to pack. The plan was for her and Walt to leave tonight for Molly's parents in Harrisburg. Will would join them the next afternoon—after he'd put Hannibal and Chiyoh on a boat to Lithuania.

Wally's contact, a sallow-faced Dutchman named Hendrik Aalders—or Haai, for short, as he'd informed Will in his stilted accent—had seemed reliable enough. They'd agreed to meet at a Kurdish deli near the Baltimore port earlier that afternoon. Will's jittery stomach had forced him to refuse the black tea and almond flatbread, but he'd walked away with the information he needed.

The five-cabin ship would accommodate Hannibal, Chiyoh, and the three-man crew without inviting claustrophobia. Or homicide, Will thought, with a blank sort of hope. There was even a hidden compartment in the hold big enough for two people to hide, Haai explained. Hannibal and Chiyoh would be safe. Watched over. Provided for. All of which Hannibal would probably find coddling and distasteful—even if it was for his own good. It would be up to Will himself, and Chiyoh, to convince him of that fact.

It wouldn't be an easy feat, Will knew—especially not after last night. But then, nothing with Hannibal had ever been easy.

Will ventured into the hallway toward his and Molly's bedroom. Her Chevy was parked in its usual spot in the driveway; she was probably pulling together her clothes. The dogs started after him, Winston loping ahead with a swish of his tail. Then the sound of the side door opening arrested both Will and the dogs.

He frowned, stopping just short of Walt's bedroom. Molly never comes in through the side door.

Winston's tail stilled, his nose lifting in curiosity. Zoe and Bowser skidded to a stop, but Wilhelmina pranced ahead, disappearing into the darkness of Walt's room. There was an audible thud as the side door closed, followed by silence. No click of the deadbolt.

Randy's ears flattened. A low growl rumbled in his throat, causing the chain around his neck to tighten.
"Whoa, boy," Will said, turning and retracing his steps down the hallway. Randy stalked ahead of him.

"Molly?" he called cautiously, as he rounded the doorway to the greatroom. "Were you out bac—"

The question froze on his tongue as his eyes met Molly's terrified, gray-green gaze. She stood next to the fireplace, small in her oversized parka, clutching her keys and her purse. Her boots were leaching soggy puddles of melted snow onto the carpet.

Behind her, Hannibal was dressed in his father's rumpled clothes from the night before, holding a gun—his gun—to the back of his wife's skull.

Randy growled again, louder this time, his limbs tensing. Will's eyes widened as they shifted to meet Hannibal's. A brief flicker of pain crossed Hannibal's face before his expression hardened. He glanced at the bullmastiff.

"Control your dog, Will. I'm sure Molly would prefer the revolver didn't go off accidentally."

Will gaped. No matter how many times he'd seen it, Hannibal's sudden and total transformation from man to monster never failed to arrest him.

It was Molly who spoke up. "Randy, go lay down," she said, a faint tremble in the command. "It's okay, boy. Go lay down."

Randy remained where he was, ears crushed flat against his skull. His tail gave a short, bewildered wag. The other dogs stood clustered around Will's feet, whimpering.

"Hannibal." Will swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. "It's my gun. Put it down."

At the words, Winston broke away from Will's side. He padded cautiously over to Hannibal and Molly, sniffing gently at Molly's leg before nudging his hand into Hannibal's empty palm with a soft whine.

Molly's eyebrows shot up. She turned her eyes to Will in disbelief. In her face, he read a crushing finality.

This is the end, he thought. No more blindness... You see now.

The cold glint in Hannibal's eyes softened as he scratched Winston's ear. "Hello, Winston," he said. "It's nice to feel welcomed."

Winston licked his palm, once, and then padded to the middle of the rug. He plopped down with a whuff, exactly between where Hannibal and Molly were standing and where Will's feet were riveted to the floor. The dog rested his head on his paws and shifted his eyes between the three of them. To Will's left, Randy gave an annoyed grunt, his tail drooping stiffly.

Hannibal tilted his chin as he stared over Molly's head at Will. "I hadn't planned to point a gun at your wife, Will, but unfortunately she's forced my hand. Both our hands, actually. Curiosity drove her to your father's house."

"We can talk about this without the gun, Hannibal," Will said. "We're all here together now. There's no need for it."

He felt paralyzed. Numb. As though his body were being swallowed by some crushing tide that had already infiltrated his lungs and stolen his oxygen. He didn't look at Molly. He could feel the betrayal
in her eyes, burning a hole through the front of his skull.

Hannibal tightened his grip on the snubnose. "Yes, and it seems you prefer less obvious weapons as of late. Words. Flesh. Intent. Did you believe they would serve as effective means of resolution?"

"There is a resolution," Will said, lifting his voice. "It's already been made. Molly's not a part of this. Let her go."

Molly's hair caught against the butt of the revolver as she turned to look at Will. Honey-blonde strands loosened from her bun and pulled out. Beside him, Randy stiffened.

"I thought... I hoped... for a second, that maybe—maybe you were seeing someone." Her laugh was high and unsteady, bordering on a sob. The sound reminded Will of a broken bell. "Up at the cabin. Like some stupid, secret affair. But I—I don't know. This is so unimaginably worse." She shook her head. "You said you'd be different when you got back. This isn't what I thought you meant."

Moisture sprang to her eyes. Her mouth pulled down, tight—an expression Will hadn't seen since the night of Dolarhyde's attack. He'd sat next to her in the hospital room and tried to sound consoling. He'd failed at that, too.

When Molly continued, her voice was shaking. "I could've tried to understand an affair. But not this, Will. Never this."

"I don't believe affair is the word Will would use to describe it." Hannibal shot a dark look in Will's direction. "Though, leaving first and explaining later seems to be Will's modus operandi at the moment."

Will glared back as Hannibal casually lowered the gun. Molly scrambled to the hearth the moment the press of the muzzle left her skull. Randy sprang across the room to her with a whine, ignoring the two men as he sought to comfort his adoptive mother with anxious licks.

Molly crumpled back against the stone veneer, hugging the bullmastiff to her chest. She stared straight ahead, not looking at either of them.

Will felt his ribcage splintering. Something was reaching inside him, wrapping an invisible hand around what remained of his useless heart and squeezing. Crushing. Soon, there would be nothing left but pulp.

Please, take everything, he thought. Don't leave anything for me. It doesn't belong there anymore.

The sudden squeal of the house phone startled all three humans and seven dogs. Molly's head jerked up. Her eyes shot to the digital clock on the DVD player, and then to Will. The phone trilled again, loud.

"That's probably Walt's school," she said, accusation thick in her tone. "I should've picked him up by now. I need to go get him."

"If you think the absence of a gun to your head means you're free to go," Hannibal snarled, "You may want to rethink that assumption."

Randy growled from between Molly's knees, causing Winston to lift his head. The mutt barked once, short, and then looked up at Will. His brown eyes were unusually bright.

"Molly," Will said, brushing off the threat for both of them, "Call Joanna. Tell her you got caught up
in something. See if she can swing by and pick up Walt. He can spend some time with—uh…"

"Tommy." Molly glared back as she pushed up from the hearth. "His best friend's name is Tommy, Will. He's been over here a half-dozen times."

Randy padded alongside her as she strode to the cordless phone in the kitchen and wrenched it from the cradle.

Hannibal moved the gun to his other hand as Molly passed, but didn't lift it. He cocked an eyebrow and watched Molly punch in the numbers with a gloved finger. A small beep sounded with the press of each key. The noise shattered against the inside of Will's skull, like cold raindrops, as she turned her back to them.

A tug on his leg made Will look down. Wilhelmina's curly white paw rested on the hem of his pants leg, pinning it to the top of his boot. She whimpered.

"Hi, Joanna." Molly paused. "They did?" Her voice was muffled as she moved farther into the kitchen. "Yeah, that's actually why I'm calling…"

Will glanced down at the six dogs seated uneasily around his feet. Then looked to Winston, whose eyebrows lifted in questioning. "Go lie down in your beds, guys," he said, sharp. "Winston, take everyone in."

The mutt pushed up from the floor at the command. With a low woof and a flick of his tail, Winston trotted into the living room. The other dogs sprang up and quickly followed, seemingly relieved at the dismissal.

Too much tension, Will thought to himself. Dogs could pick up on it more keenly than humans; it was partly what made them such good hunters. Wilhelmina whined once more, and then stepped off Will's shoe and scampered after the rest of the pack.

Molly's voice drifted in from the kitchen, lilting and falling; white noise in Will's ears. He looked at Hannibal. The other man's face was nearly devoid of expression.

"So that's it, then?" Hannibal said, low. "Everything's been decided. Except your indecision. You shift the burden of every action onto me. You give me back the world, my life, and then you cut yourself out of it, once again. And now you want me to jump across that chasm and stick the landing."

A low hum rose in the back of Will's skull as he took a step toward the other man. Then another. He felt his face growing warm.

"I gave you a gift, Hannibal. I set you free."

Another step brought him only inches away. Will could feel Hannibal's heat seeping from his skin in dense waves, beckoning his body closer. He ignored it.

"No one else would've done that for you. Only me. And this is how you thank me for it."

"Another gift given out of anger?" Hannibal shifted closer—sneering, undeterred. Their noses were nearly touching now. "You wouldn't have taken the risk if setting me free was the only thing you wanted," he said, scorn dripping from every syllable. "You wouldn't have come for me if there wasn't something inside you that wanted to run, too."

Will gritted his teeth. The double entendre pierced through his anger, coiling low in his groin. He felt
like a wounded snake, poisoned by its own venom—an ouroboros caught in an infinite loop of pain.

Would you prefer an axe to the head, or an axe to the tail?

Hannibal's voice buzzed in the back of his head, implausible, as he stared into the other man's darkened eyes.

Which one of us do you want to be released from, Will? Or is it yourself you're trying to escape?

Without blinking, he reached out and curled his palm over the revolver, twisting it out of the other man's hand. Hannibal didn't resist.

From the kitchen, the harsh click of the receiver on its cradle signaled the end of Molly's call. Will stepped back just as she came through the doorway.

The look on her face as she watched them break apart was as astonished as it was pained. Then her gaze moved to the gun in Will's hand. Her shoulders gave up some of their stiffness at the sight. Randy stood in front of her like a sentry, blockading the space between Molly and the two men. He didn't seem to care that the other dogs had left the room.

Molly crossed her arms over her chest. She stared first at Hannibal and then at Will, eyes bright and hard as crystals.

This is the end, Will thought again. The only one I deserve. I never really came back to us, did I? I'm sorry, Molly.

"Joanna's picking up Walt and Tommy from school and taking them to the arcade. I think it's better if you're not here when he gets home, Will."

Her voice snagged on his name, despite the resolve of her words. The sound deepened the gouge in Will's chest, hollowing him out, flattening his organs. Blood and breath had deserted him.

No radiance. No light. Only burning, now.

"You probably shouldn't come up this weekend. Or Thanksgiving."

"Molly." Somewhere between a plea and a warning. He felt his body lift from within, as though he were falling in reverse.

"Or after the holiday—not then, either. You have your dad's house..." She trailed off, swallowing, as fresh tears glistened in her eyes.

She turned to Hannibal, wiping away the moisture before it could fall. Beside her, the bullmastiff grumbled low in his throat. She quieted him with an absent pat.

"When I say that no one will ever know about the last couple of hours, I say it because I want to live." Her voice wobbled. She breathed in, steadying herself. Pushed on. "I want my son to live. In peace. Not in witness protection, not in constant fear of being hunted. Peace. Even if it's a broken one."

Will's gaze shifted numbly from Molly to Hannibal. The other man's head was tilted to the side, his ever-penetrating stare fixed on his wife's rigid form in the oversized parka. He seemed to be listening to her. Actually considering.

Molly swallowed and glanced sideways, her eyes not quite meeting Will's.
He opened his mouth to speak. No words came. He realized it was because she was absolutely right. There was nothing for them to fix; nothing else for him to say. He hadn't come back to Great Falls after the Dragon. Hadn't really even tried. Molly had been living with a ghost.

"I don't care where you go," she continued, lifting her chin and glancing back at Hannibal, "Or what you do, or what happens after you leave this house. If you leave me and Walt alone, we'll do the same for you."

Molly's eyes flickered briefly to Will's then, and he could see they looked red. Sore.

She tipped her head. "Do it as a favor for him, if that makes sense to you. He's definitely done you enough favors."

Hannibal licked his lips, as though savoring the taste of Molly's resignation.

"Maternal instinct is one of the oldest and strongest human drives experienced across all cultures. I hope, for your sake as well as your son's, that this will be our last and only meeting." He gave a curt nod, as if to punctuate his unspoken promise.

Molly's breath came out in a shaky rush. Her features drooped, making her look suddenly tired. Older. Will imagined a similar expression was reflected on his own face.

Their eyes met again. Silent sorrow ebbed between them, crossing from sea-green to gray-blue like overlapping waves. The invisible moon had sucked the tide out from under them. Now, only quicksand remained beneath their feet.

*Tough to hold onto anything good. It's all so slippery.*

Molly blinked. A flicker of pain, or perhaps memory, lit in her eyes just before she looked away. Will could feel the sand crumbling, giving way beneath him.

*Slick as hell.*

"I'm going to take the dogs for a walk," she announced, addressing the statement as much to herself as to the two men. She enunciated each word with sickening precision. "When I get back, the house will be empty. I'm going to pack, and then I'm going to pick up Walt. Then we're going to leave. I'm taking Randy with us. I'll feed the rest of the dogs before we leave."

She took a trembling breath, reigning it in before it could spill. Then fixed her eyes on Will with a strangeness that made his gut jerk.

"You'll—you'll need to take the dogs down to the cabin," she said. Her lip quivered as she spoke. "And whatever else you need to take with you. Before the end of next week."

Will could feel the words slashing into the soft tissue of his brain, leaving raw, pink gashes across his and Molly's truncated years of memories.

He nodded, feeling his face growing hot again. He knew anything he said now would sound wrong, or insincere, or inadequate. He'd already proven himself all three as a husband. The least he could do was not sprinkle salt in Molly's wounds.

"All right," she said, as if affirming her decision to herself.

Without looking again at either of them, Molly crossed stiffly to the hallway, Randy trotting at her heels. Her rusty whistle was followed by a jangle of chains and keys, and the staccato clicking of
toenails on the hardwood.

The front door opened. There was a yip from Zoe as she raced out into the cold air. Then a soft click as the door closed. The sound seemed to echo—to hang on the air, like smoke. Will's knees felt like they might buckle.

Beside him, Hannibal was silent. Will detected a pulse of satisfaction beneath the other man's thoughts as he mulled the domestic breakdown he'd just witnessed. He seemed to be rolling it around on his tongue like a new wine, picking out hints of flavor for later savoring.

In Will's mind, the cylinder rolled as the trigger clicked—then stuck. He knew instinctively that it was the loaded chamber.

*It doesn't count. Spin it again. Back to the beginning—zero bullets dodged.*

He stepped away, feeling suddenly dangerous. His fingers itched to tear something. To claw—to wound.

*Your eyes,* he thought, glaring hard at Hannibal. *Your mouth. I could rip them to blackness. Tear the tongue straight from your throat. See no more evil; speak no more evil.*

"I told you there wasn't any point." Hannibal's face was calm. Unsmiling.

"Fuck you," Will said, and walked out of the room. He'd need a change of clothes.

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The drive to the cabin was as silent as expected. Will had gone mute in his seething melancholy, and Hannibal found himself tasked with looking inconspicuous in a baseball cap and sunglasses in the passenger seat of the Subaru. He wasn't used to wearing either accessory.

He plucked at the knitted scarf around his neck, pulling it higher around his chin to cover the bottom of his face. The scarf was Will's, or so he assumed from the spiced-floral scent clinging to the yarn. Will had thrown it at him when he'd returned from the bedroom, carrying a small overnight bag. That had been nearly fifteen minutes ago. Will hadn't said a single word since he'd cursed at him.

Hannibal glanced out the window. He quickly turned his face as a car passed. The fact that Molly had chosen not to mention his phone call was both interesting and serendipitous. Perhaps she'd realized—smartly—the futility of casting any more blame on Hannibal. Will was the one who'd chosen to bring down their house. Implicating Hannibal in his plan would only endanger herself and her son. And Molly, it seemed, was very keen to avoid danger.

Hannibal would give that to her, if it was what she wanted—if only as a favor to Will. In allowing Molly to raze the domestic foundations her husband had already set ablaze, Will had inadvertently saved their lives.

Hannibal's lips curved behind the scarf. *Every act of creation is first an act of destruction. Or several acts of destruction, as the case may be.*

Will fiddled with the radio dial while Hannibal turned back to the window, staring at the evergreen
The dial landed on NPR. A commentator was discussing terrorist attacks at a hotel in Mali. Will listened for a while, absentmly, staring hard out the windshield. When the discussion moved to the Islamic State in Paris, he switched the station.

Dueling violins suddenly filled the SUV’s cab, their rapid call-and-response punctuated by the lively accompaniment of two harpsichords.

* Bach's double violin concerto in D minor—*Vivace *, Hannibal's memory supplied. Itzhak Perlman's buoyant, singular precision was instantly recognizable. Behind his dark sunglasses, Hannibal allowed his eyes to slip closed as the fugue unfolded, simultaneously on point and gracefully wild.

The last time he'd listened to music outside of his own mind's catalog had been at the cliff house, before the Dragon had come. He'd poured a glass of wine for Will. Then one for himself, as Bach's Goldberg Variations played in the background.

Then their Marousian lion had charged through the glass door, chasing the bullet that sliced a hole through Hannibal's abdomen, and the music of blood and breath had roared over everything.

His reminisce was sharply interrupted as Will flicked the dial again, landing on some pitiful-sounding pop-rock crooner. He thought about asking him to switch back to the concerto. Decided better of it.

Will’s jitteriness had driven him to the brink of explosion—or possibly implosion. At this point, something as small as a pothole might set him off. Hannibal knew that he would need to be delicate in his next moves, if he was going to persuade Will to listen.

At the moment, however, he didn't appear to want to listen to much of anything. Will twisted the dial again as the pop song segued into a syrupy chorus. It landed on a country western station. A classic Dolly Parton tune jumped to life with a pleading warble, backed by a clackety guitar:

* Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-leeene *  
* I'm begging of you please don't take my man *  
* Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-leeene *  
* Please don't take him even though you can… *  

"Jesus!" Will barked.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. * Apparently not a favorite.* With a stab of his thumb, Will punched back to NPR, where the topic had moved from terrorism to time.

—a man who videotaped himself at age eighteen, posing questions to his future self, the host, Ari Shapiro, was saying. He answered those questions this year at age fifty-six and called the project 'Later That Same Life.' So, if you could talk to your eighteen-year-old self, or ask your older self questions, what would you say?

From the corner of his eye, Hannibal watched Will's brow furrow as the host began running the pre-recorded audience responses.

* Misbehave*, a woman's voice proclaimed. *Go to protests. Kiss women. Write harder, and forget plan B. Being a good girl has nothing in common with being a force for good.*

Will unclenched his hand from his death grip on the steering wheel. Ran it through his hair. Something soft flickered into his eyes, changing their color.
Hannibal looked away. He could tell he was thinking of Molly.

What would Will have said to his teenage self? he wondered. Not to worry about fitting in, because it was never going to happen anyway? Or, perhaps, to be more accepting of genuine kindness when it came to him? Hannibal might've given the same advice to his own, less-developed ego.

In another time and place, the topic would have made for a revealing discussion. But the silence in the car was like a bulwark—one Will seemed uninterested in breaching.

They listened in silence for a few minutes as the audience rambled on with a predictable list of do's and don'ts. Hannibal found himself tuning out the radio for the hum of the road and the rush of wind outside the car. Then the last comment snagged in his ears, riveting him back to the segment.

—Sima Matthes from Rockville Center, New York. I would tell my eighteen-year-old self that, someday, you'll be someone's 'one who got away.' And there will also be someone by whom you will be glad to be caught.

Hannibal chanced a glance to his left. Will shifted his eyes in Hannibal's direction, but didn't turn his head. Dusky patches of slate-blue lake flashed through the evergreens. They weren't far from the cabin.

Hannibal cleared his throat. Damn the bulwark, he thought.

"You don't have to deny yourself everything, Will. You can hold on to some of the things you've caught, if you allow yourself to."

Will's mouth twitched in a half-grimace—a shadow away from a smile.

"I didn't catch you," he said, low. "You surrendered."

The sting of Jack's three-year-old words was dulled by the belated sense of irony.

"Your decision to drag me back out of prison is hardly what I'd classify as surrendering," Hannibal pulled off his sunglasses. He fixed Will in a critical stare.

In the background, new voices were arguing about the Argentine election conspiracy. He ignored them, instead focusing all of his engines of thought on Will.

The other man gazed straight ahead. His eyes were clear as they scanned the road. When he spoke, his voice was almost casual.

"I could say the same about you dragging me into bed." He twisted the wheel, steering onto the county road.

Hannibal opened his mouth, then shut it, as the intended effect of the words sunk in. Deep within his breast, the dark, seeping sore widened from a trickle to a stream. I'm not going to miss you... I don't want to think about you anymore... Goodbye, Hannibal.

Hannibal swallowed. "Then it seems we've both been misused," he countered, voice rough.

His throat felt dry and airless—as parched as the Western Desert, across which Hadrian and Antinous had tracked the Marousian lion. The emperor had constructed the entire hunt as an erotic power play on his younger lover. Although not lethal, Hadrian's game had ultimately ensnared both of them.
"Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit," Hannibal recited from memory, as the burn of Will's words ebbed to embers. "Horace. 'And captive Greece captured her rude conqueror.' A more fitting description on both our parts, I think."

"Stop talking," Will said, and punched off the radio.

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Will dropped his overnight bag in the entryway as Hannibal walked into the cabin after him. He pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and glared at it.

*Hoping Molly's changed her mind,* Hannibal thought, as he stood in the hallway, watching. *Don't linger on it, Will. She won't.*

"We leave in six hours," Will said, tucking his phone back into his pocket. "I need some time alone."

Before Hannibal could say anything, Will was striding down the hallway to the study. He watched him go, silently.

*The boy's bedroom,* Hannibal thought. *Doesn't want to be reminded of the master.* Will had slept there—made love there—with both Hannibal and Molly. His father had slept there, too—for a much shorter time than anticipated.

Will had always been particularly attuned to physical spaces and the memories they held. When he walked into a room, he could sense them crawling along the walls; could feel them leaching into his skin, like chemical residues. His rescinded stepson's room would hold visions of warm goodnights and celebratory whoops over the day's fishing catch. Nothing overtly challenging. Nothing he couldn't eventually forget.

Hannibal was reminded of the family photo by the stream that Will had hidden in the bottom drawer. He wondered if Will would take it out to look at it. Perhaps he'd pry off the back of the frame and peek at the photo underneath—the one of himself with his father and his father's friend.

*Oswalt,* Hannibal's mind supplied. Perhaps Will would think back to those early teenage days, and wonder how the boy in the photograph had grown into the man with the freshly broken marriage and a fugitive lover in his dead father's house. Perhaps he'd wonder—as did many, when flipping through old family albums—where everything had gone wrong.

Or perhaps he'd remember, instead, how nothing had ever been quite *right.* Sudden epiphanies were the province of ordinary experience, particularly in times of turbulence. But Will's experience had been anything but ordinary. Extremes of shadow and light had swaddled him from birth through childhood to manhood, and now to approaching middle age. Never had Will glimpsed the world in its natural color—but always refracted, as through a prism.

Down the hall, the door to the bedroom banged shut. Hannibal scratched a hand through his hair and glanced around the front room. *Six hours. Three-hundred and sixty minutes. Too many questions; not enough time.*

He knew he needed to shower, even if it meant washing himself of Will's scent—the traces of his claim on his body. It was strange, Hannibal thought, how the awareness of time often seemed to slow its passage. This night, however, he knew it would have the opposite effect. Will would take
his time. Hannibal would bide his.

In the bathroom, Hannibal stripped off the wrinkled trousers and fuzzed gray sweater. He stood under the water for a long time. He found he didn't mind the smell of the cucumber soap so much. He allowed his hands to wander along his body, remembering the touch of Will's hands, alternately hesitant and wild and soft. When he came, he bit his lip and bent his head under the spray, and let the water wash away the rest.

Afterwards, he stopped in the hall and towed his hair, listening for any sound from the second bedroom. Stark silence greeted his ears.

He went to the master bedroom and flicked on the light. He ignored the untouched creases in the blanket their bodies had made the night before. A rummage through the dresser drawers yielded a pair of chestnut-brown trousers with a passable fit. Then he hunted through the closet, which held a variety of flannel jackets and half-zip sweaters. He pulled out several and threw them on the bed. A Prussian blue knit, not overly faded, went over his head.

A shoebox on the back shelf offered a barely-worn pair of chukka boots—a fortuitous find. Luckily, he and the senior Graham shared a shoe size.

The leather duffel bag where he'd stashed his folded illustration of *La Braschi Antinous*, his burner cell, and a few of the better-quality carving knives from the kitchen—his only possessions, at present—sat in the back of the closet, looking forlorn. He glanced at the meager pile of clothes on the bed. They could go in later, he decided—if they had to.

He meandered into the front room and glanced at the captain's clock on the wall. *Four and a half hours. Two-hundred and seventy minutes.*

The present could never be preserved; it became the past the moment it was noticed. Better to become lost in something before the future sank into the quicksand of his and Will's conjoined memories, Hannibal thought.

He dug through the miscellany drawer in the kitchen until he found a Number-two pencil. Too soft, and a far cry from his preferred charcoal, but it would suffice.

He tore a blank page from the back of one of the tattered coffee table books—Arthur Liebers' *Encyclopedia of Pleasure Boating: The Complete Illustrated Guide to Motorboating and Yachting*. A relic of past decades, judging by the vintage cover art and yellowed pages.

Hannibal settled himself on the couch, propping the hardcover under his makeshift sketch paper, and allowed his pencil to trace over the page. The scratch of graphite against pulp had calmed him in the medical ward. It would calm him now.

It was half past ten when Hannibal realized his stomach was audibly growling. With a flourish, he scrawled his signature at the bottom of the sketch. He cocked his head, surveying his work. He could almost smell the raindrops staining the pale wood of the boat.

As an afterthought, he added a single sentence beneath his signature, in smaller script. Then pushed himself up from the couch, knees groaning with stiffness, and padded back to the master bedroom. Still no sound from behind the closed door, he noted from the hallway. Perhaps Will had fallen asleep—or perhaps he simply wanted Hannibal to think he had. Neither feint would have been a surprise.

A glint of gold from the nightstand. Will's wedding band. It was still sitting where Hannibal had
placed it the night before.

He picked up the ring, allowing its inconsequential weight to roll in his palm. He folded his drawing, tucking the ring inside before placing it in the top drawer of the nightstand.

He stood up, smoothing his hand along the blanket where he’d fallen asleep next to Will. The invisible traces of the other man's body heat seemed to seep into his fingertips.

*How do I feel to you?* A flash of ocean-gray eyes. A gasp through clenched teeth. *Like home.*

But Will hadn't answered his second question. Both of them knew he couldn't go home again—not to Great Falls. Not to Molly. Not anymore. She'd made her disdain for his company quite clear. Where would Will choose to make his new home, if not with Hannibal?

His gut squealed again, driving him to the kitchen. *Questions. Answers. Time—no time.*

He peered into the refrigerator, and then the pantry. Sighed. The remaining ingredients would have to do.

He set about making a simple beef-and-bean chili—a familiar and comforting recipe, even with tomato paste. It was the last meal Will had eaten before he'd abandoned his family to retrieve Hannibal from the hospital. Hannibal had smelled the traces of its aroma underneath the scent of smoke, as he'd lain in the bottom of the truck cab, his spine jarring over the bumps in the road.

The dish took him longer than usual to prepare, but not because he was tired or distracted. Hannibal had always been able to work through the two states with precise efficiency. Instead, he felt compelled to take his time. He was cooking in Will's father's house, with Will brooding down the hall. Time was all he had while he waited for the other man to emerge.

...*There will be time to murder and create,*  
*And time for all the works and days of hands*  
*That lift and drop a question on your plate...*

The scrap of poetry came to Hannibal from the shadowy recesses of his memory palace. He ladled a cupful of the chili into a bowl.

*Would* there be time? There’d been no stirring from the second bedroom over the past five hours. It was plausible Will would remain in self-imposed solitary confinement until the last possible moment. Which meant that Hannibal would need to *create* time. Their growing disorder demanded it.

*A context for life and death—past and future.* From the entropy of ash and bone, he would fashion a reply to the line of questioning Will had opened with fire and flesh. Dangle it above his plate—but delicately. Make the lure look like sustenance.

...*Ma penciocche gammai di questo fondo*  
*Non torno viva alcun, s'i'odo il vero,*  
*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

A call and response, like Bach's duetting violins. Like the pulse and pull of their bodies, their minds. Magnets drawn by blood-tinged poles, conjoined in time and space, yet still mysterious at their atomic levels.

Like Dante's condemned Guido, neither he nor Will would return from the deep places into which they'd hurled themselves. This moment, he knew, was only a temporary contact between two spheres of being. Hannibal would sail Styx for a while, if that was what Will wanted. But he would not end
his journey on foreign shores.

He set an empty bowl on the counter for Will. The chili he left, covered, on the stove. He shrugged on a fleece overcoat hanging by the back door, and took his own bowl outside.

The covered wraparound porch offered little protection from the cold, although it kept out the snow. It was falling in sparse flakes now—wispy, near-transparent specks that drifted without purpose or direction.

He took a bite of the chili. It was decidedly tempting enough to lure Will out, although he would've preferred fresh garlic and Burgundy to minced cloves and Tabasco sauce.

He watched the snowflakes bleed through the sky's gauzy patina. He'd knelt down in snow just like this, years ago, outside of Will's farmhouse in Wolf Trap. The slush and mud had soaked immediately through the knees of his trousers as a grimace had passed from Jack's face to Will's. The look had left Hannibal as fixed and formulated as Eliot's fictional Prufrock. Sprawling on a pin.

I didn't catch you. You surrendered.

Goodbye, Hannibal.

"Hello, Will," he called over his shoulder. He didn't turn his head. He'd sensed the other man's presence on the other side of the screen door even before he'd heard him.

Will didn't answer. The creak of old hinges reached Hannibal's ears, followed by the soft thump of rubber soles on wood. He spooned another bite of the chili onto his tongue. He barely tasted it.

"You made dinner." Will stepped next to him at the edge of the porch. His voice was flat. "You made chili."

Hannibal threw a cautious glance to his left. Will's face was freshly washed. His cheeks held a faint shine, and the corners of his eyes were red.

"Yes. I thought you might be hungry." He set his bowl on the wooden railing and looked out into the night.

"I'm not. But I'll have some later." He paused, then added, "Thanks."

Hannibal tipped his head in acknowledgement. Silence seemed to stretch into the sky, pulling them with it into the nothingness. He could feel the moment straining to its breaking point. He decided to reign it in.

"Your mind has been busy," he said. "New pathways have sprung up there. Or, perhaps, new walls."

He nudged his spoon with his thumb. It slid across the rim of the cheap ceramic bowl with a scraping sound.

"You could say that. I've been thinking." Will paused. A grimace tugged at the corners of his mouth, then dropped away. "About the unkindnesses we inflict on ourselves when we're together. And how they need to stop. We have to disassemble our repetition of the past. Stop going in circles. Circles don't lead anywhere."

"Repetition can be circumvented," Hannibal countered. "It's a far greater unkindness to deny our transformation out of some rote sense of responsibility. You would lay waste to our potential. Our
desire."

Will squared his jaw. Hannibal could sense his frustration—like a bowstring pulled taut in dry air.

"What would you have me do," he asked, low, when Will didn't respond. Any answer would be better than his sorry silence.

"Don't undervalue your freedom." Will shook his head. "Not this time. It's more important than my companionship. Show yourself some kindness. I'm bad for you, Hannibal. And you're not good for me." He sighed. "Not in this context."

Hannibal swallowed. His throat felt raw. "You ask me to value my freedom over you. What, then, are you asking of yourself?"

"I can't save myself... Maybe I never could." The other man spoke slowly. His eyes, darkened to a deeper blue by the night, wandered across the backyard. "But I can try to salvage what's left. I don't want a life on the run. I don't want to fall so deeply into a reevaluation of what I want, and what I need, and how that's changing, that I can't enjoy a walk with my dogs or a morning out in the stream."

Hannibal sighed. "You assume the two are mutually exclusive. They aren't. It's human to seek simple pleasures while pursuing the greater glory of one's highest potential." He paused, turning his eyes to the other man's. "You're very human in that way, Will."

Will's brow furrowed. "No—it's easier for you. Everything you do has a shimmer of higher purpose. I don't shine like that, Hannibal. I don't want to." He frowned. Squinted at the snow. "We need to go. Chiyoh's waiting for us."

In his mind, Hannibal felt the life draining from his phîltatos' body as he clung to him on the deck. Lips stained blue, silenced by death's icy kiss. Once, they had been so warm. They had kissed his mouth and sworn him fealty. Murmured promises of wild new beginnings and bold endings—conquests of the heart and of war. Not even death could separate us.

Hannibal cleared his throat. "Your vision of the kind of life we'd lead is born from apprehension. Fear is a weak foundation for growth."

"Hannibal, I—"

"I could stay here," he cut in, his pulse quickening with the words.

Will blinked. He sighed. "We both know that can't work."

Hannibal shifted his eyes to the silent cluster of trees bordering the backyard. They were hazy at the edges; indefinable in the winter darkness. Not so different from us.

He looked back at Will. "In that case," he said, "would you kiss me again."

A strange, almost startled look crossed Will's face. He opened his mouth. No words came. He swallowed.

"I would want to," he said quietly, "if this wasn't where our path was ending."

They stared at each other a long moment, the heat between them simmering—a spark on the cusp of ignition. Will remained completely still. Hannibal was the first to look away.
"A home you can't go back to? I had anticipated differently, after our fall. After the fire. I see now I was wrong. So, let us go, then." He paused, then added, with a touch of melancholy, "—You and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky. 'It seems you've dictated my fate this evening, Will."

Will cocked an eyebrow, his mouth twitching at the corner. "'Like a patient etherized upon a table?"

A shred of warmth tore through the icy hole in Hannibal's chest. He looked over. And I would remember this time, too, he thought to himself. So why, when I think of you, does it feel like forever, every time?

"Your capacity for poetic appreciation is an ever-endearing surprise," Hannibal said. He tried to smile, and found he couldn't.

Will shoved his hands in his coat pockets. He stared out over the lake, his breath frosting on the air and then disappearing. Mist danced upon the surface of the water in hazy swirls, obscuring the lights from the houses on the far side.

"Sometimes I can be surprising," he said.

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Hannibal was quiet in the front seat of the pickup, the baseball cap pulled low over his forehead. He'd said little on the drive to Chesapeake Bay, for which Will was silently grateful.

The near-desperation in Hannibal's voice when he'd offered to stay in Virginia had gripped Will with a sudden panic. Between that and the smell of the chili—which was nauseatingly similar to Molly's recipe—he'd almost gotten sick on the porch. He wasn't sure he could handle a repeat of their last day in Wolf Trap. Or the night of the fire, for that matter.

You delight in wickedness, and then you berate yourself for the delight, Hannibal had said. You draw lines between these moments of intensity between us, hoping you can separate them into isolated events.

But Will could also hear between the lines. Selfish, was what Hannibal had meant. Will knew Molly would've agreed with the sentiment.

Will drove along the curving outer road, bypassing the Baltimore Port's massive cargo bay. Rainbow flashes of steel containers were visible through the gaps between the buildings.

It was fortuitous that Wally's contact had come through with the twin-screw. They'd all been lucky in that respect; larger container ships traveled slower and required bigger crews. With Hannibal on board, that might have translated into greater potential for mayhem.

If they could get through this without anyone else dying, Will thought, it would be a small miracle.

Chiyoh and Haai were waiting for them at one of the smaller refueling docks. The security cameras had been disabled as the Dutchman had promised, their tiny red indicator lights gone black.

The two-man crew—a Belizean and a Jordanian, both odd-jobbing sailors—were busy preparing the ship for sail. They scurried across the forty-meter deck with experienced precision, uncoiling and recoiling rope and speaking to each other in animated, broken English.
At the ship's stern, the name Golem was painted in bold cursive letters. The night wind rushed along the steel hull and loading crane with a whistling sound, giving the craft breath. Life.

The sight sent chills down Will's spine. He could remember making the same meticulous preparations before setting sail across the Atlantic for Klaipėda. The journey had been as much for himself as it had been to find Hannibal; however, he doubted that anyone else—with the exception of Hannibal himself—would ever see it that way.

Chiyoh stepped forward as Will and Hannibal jumped down from the pickup. She wore the same long, hunter-green coat as on the night they'd met at Lecter Castle, Will saw. The bulge of a pistol strapped to her right boot suggested she'd already stowed the rest of her artillery below deck.

Her steel eyes, alert as ever despite her probable jetlag, glinted as she glanced at Will. Then warmed as they turned on Hannibal.

"Onii-san. Hisashiburi," she said.

"Hisashiburi, Chiyoh." Hannibal shifted his duffel bag to his other shoulder. "It seems you're to be my caretaker now."

"Hitsuyou ga aru nara, soba ni iru no." She glanced again at Will. "You've chosen to protect him. Thank you."

The narrow-eyed captain stepped forward. "You will both be protected," he said, extending a hand in Hannibal's direction. "I am Haai. You will get to your home, safe and whole. This is a nice opportunity for both of us."

Hannibal shook the offered hand. "Goedenavond. I appreciate the caution and care you've taken in welcoming us aboard. Sharks must swim tirelessly to avoid drowning. That suggests forethought and careful planning. I assume your moniker was chosen with this fact in mind. Goed gedaan."

"She is ready!" the Jordanian called, in a thick Arabic accent, from the bow. "Is okay? Yes?—jäyid!" Haai called back. He turned to Hannibal and flashed a yellow-toothed smile. "Sharks swim in wide waters," he said, lowering his voice. "And wolves have their forests. We will get along very fine. Zelfs roofdieren hebben vrienden nodig."

Will watched Hannibal's eyes flicker at the man's words. Whatever the Dutchman had said, he'd apparently found agreeable. Good for Haai, Will thought. He doubted that anything he himself said to Hannibal now would be well received.

A kind of vague numbness had settled over his body and brain, distancing himself from the inevitable. The wind was distracting—too refreshing, too stirring. Like Hannibal's gaze, which was boring a hole in his forehead. He knew he needed to look up. To meet his eyes and remain numb. It was time to say goodbye again—to cock the hammer, and hope for the best.

"Haai and I will prepare the cabins," Chiyoh said, with more authority than Will would have expected. She shot a pointed look in Will's direction, and blinked at Hannibal before turning.

She knows, he thought sullenly, as the Dutchman gave a nod and followed his slender passenger up the ramp and onto the ship, leaving himself and Hannibal alone on the dock.

Will wondered briefly if Chiyoh had excused herself and the captain on his own behalf, or on Hannibal's. He decided it didn't matter. Either way, she had allowed Hannibal to force a conversation. To say whatever he thought Will needed to hear. Little Chiyoh, ever the enabler, ever
the trickster—but only as long as she was certain Hannibal remained as safe as he wanted to be.

What a strange nest you must've shared, he thought to himself, as Chiyoh's raven head disappeared into the hatch.

"Your forgiveness is still so much like God's."

Hannibal's voice made his head turn. The other man's hands were tucked into the pockets of his father's old fishing parka. His eyes were shining, hard and impenetrable, like polished stones.

"You destroy your creation to preserve your righteousness."

Snowflakes dotted Hannibal's short, tousled fringe and the shoulders of the parka. Molly wanted to buy Dad a new one for Christmas last year, Will remembered suddenly. She'd gotten the idea back in the spring, when the four of them had gone out on Lake Barcroft and she'd seen how full of holes it was. Walt had given his adoptive grandfather a handful of stones from the lakebed to hold while he baited his hook. The stones had fallen right through the pockets. They'd laughed—his father most of all.

This is... uncomfortably surreal, Will thought, as he looked into Hannibal's dark, hurt eyes and said nothing. Time is a hole we fall into. We just keep looping and looping, until we find a way out and fall through.

He felt someone watching them. Will looked up to see the two crewmen peeking from the wheelhouse windows. He looked away. He didn't like the naked feeling it gave him.

"If you love something, set it free," Hannibal continued, his voice hardening on each word. "Following the proverbial wisdom, I see. I'd hoped you might try something new this time." He paused. Then something changed in his face, sharpening his features. When Hannibal spoke again, his voice was uncertain. Needing.

"Time did reverse. Fortune and chance gave us a new opportunity. Do you love me, Will? Or do you still wish to set me free?"

Will squinted, gazing out over the harbor at the gray clouds rolling low over the horizon. He could feel the heat of Hannibal's body reaching toward him, buzzing like a live wire.

The man who'd once gutted him within an inch of survival was the same man who'd set him afire with lips that tasted of worship, and then yielded to him on his knees the moment he'd asked. The same man who'd killed with him. Who'd tried to kill him—and whom he'd tried to kill.

Maybe it's not supposed to make sense, he thought dully. Maybe it can't. Too many paradoxes. Too many endless loops.

"I'm giving you back your freedom," he said, because he had to say something. He felt weak. Disjointed. As though his mind and body had become trapped in two different realities—one where the current crackling under his skin, reawakened by Hannibal's touch, ached to surge alongside him. To create fire. And another where his body balked at the electric hum vibrating between them, shirking from it as trees grow away from power lines.

"I told you, Will. A life without you isn't freedom." Hannibal's voice was rough, his eyes softened in pain, just as they had been in Wolf Trap.

At that moment, Will felt what was left of his ruined heart split in two. It began to gush, like the wound Hannibal had opened in Abigail's throat—like the hole he himself had torn in Bedelia's chest,
in some other life and time. Unquenchable. Irreversible. Irredeemable.

Will turned away. "A life with you isn't freedom, either."

A sick taste bit at the back of his throat. First Molly and Walt; now Hannibal. When would he stop sabotaging the people who tried to love him? Could he stop?

"Will."

He looked back. Yellow light from the dock lamps spilled over Hannibal's face, giving him a pale, fatigued appearance. He'd had the same look on the floor of the truck during their first drive to the cabin. This time, though, he wasn't sleeping. His eyes were alert. Too bright. Naked.

Before Will could speak, Hannibal had closed the space between their bodies. He could feel the cold press of Hannibal's palm against his sweater, over the scar on his abdomen, as though it were flush against his skin.

"Afterwards," Hannibal said, lips grazing his ear, "when I stepped outside, the rain washed your blood off of me. It was the last thing I had left of you. When I looked down, my hands were clean. Every drop was gone. I hated the rain for taking that from me."

Will shivered. Underneath his t-shirt and pullover, his stomach muscles tightened.

"Abigail didn't get the choice to leave," he whispered, stepping away.

Hannibal's hand dropped from his side, fingers half-curl ed in muscle memory. Will's gut jerked at the sight. If they'd run together—as they had in their shared memories—how long would it have been before Hannibal's instincts overrode his love?

"You didn't give that to her," Will continued, his voice hardening. "Her blood still stains our hands."

The breeze whipped along his back, flattening his curls and sending another shiver down his spine. Hannibal listened silently, his fingers flexing.

"I'm giving you the chance you didn't give to Abigail," Will said. "To get away from both of us. Before everything falls to chaos again."

Hannibal's hand stilled. He tucked it back into the front pocket of the parka.

"So you free me this time to change me. To create something new." He nodded to himself, eyes distant. "I see."

Before Will could reply, Hannibal stepped back. The lingering heat between their bodies pulled away with him. He nodded tersely. "Goodbye, Will."

Without another word, Hannibal turned and strode up the ramp to the boat. He climbed down the hatch ladder, disappearing after Chiyoh and Haai into the new darkness of his floating home.
Rosetta and Damietta

Chapter Notes

If you aren't familiar with the prequel, *Of Putrefaction, Saccharine*, it may be helpful to read the summary of that story (available on this post) for background on some plot points in this chapter. Also, please heed the warnings listed in the notes section of the first chapter of this story, as this chapter contains subject material that may disturb some readers.

This story will be posted in nine parts over nine weeks. It can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics can be found on this post. Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series *A Thousand Savage Futures* can be enjoyed on YouTube here. Also, the header arts for *Eve of Dreams* contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

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*The cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears or the sea.* —Isak Dinesen

—Twenty-eight days after the fall—Thanksgiving day—

*Water, water, everywhere.* At the eastern edge of the river, the skies began to lighten from sullen gray to turquoise blue. Great flocks of snow-white egrets lifted from the surface of the water and flew. Farther upriver, the emperor caught flashes of the same flocks, now settled among the reeds.

Yesterday morning's rain had lasted less than an hour. The clouds had cleared later that evening, giving way to star-studded blue. Hadrian had caught a glimpse of a new light in the sky; a star he hadn't before seen. It intrigued him. He'd found himself staring up at it, transfixed, for nearly an hour —until grief pulled him back to Antinous' body laid out on his sleeping couch.

Already, the boy's tan from the desert sun was fading. Hadrian willed the pale arm draped over the edge of the cot to reach out, to beckon him near. It remained still.
One crook of a finger, Hadrian pleaded silently. One flutter of a hand, and Rome will crawl on his knees to your side, O beloved Graecia.

It seemed not even Rome himself could drive out death from his ship.

Twenty-four hours. A single day. In the past, Hadrian had spent weeks apart from Antinous on imperial business. However, in recent years, he and the youth had rarely gone more than a day without seeing each other. They had shared a bed most nights, a custom that irritated Sabina. The empress would never say so aloud—except, perhaps, to her handmaiden, Julia.

Arrian had begged him not to keep the body in the tent. Hadrian had staunchly refused. Let the priests here take him, Augustus, his friend had urged. They will take care of him. Preserve him for burial—if that is your wish.

The consul's eyes had shone with pity, but Hadrian had shook his head. Antinous will stay with me, just as he did the night before, and the night before that.

Arrian had fallen silent at the emperor's words; although he'd seen to it that the guards moved their posts by one passus each, to give the emperor some privacy.

The truth was, Hadrian had not yet decided whether to have the youth embalmed, in the tradition of Ægyptus royalty, or to cremate him, in the Roman tradition. He had already placed Charon's obol on his tongue. Perhaps the ferryman was rowing Antinous across the River Styx at this very moment. Perhaps Antinous would stir, and press his warm lips to his emperor's own, one more time—one last time.

The thought skated the edge of Hadrian's mind as a knife edge curves across flesh, seeking a place to wound.

No. He shivered, clutching the skin of the Marousian lion around his shoulders. Not even death could separate us. Antinous said so.

Golden light played along the edges of the carpet as, outside, dawn peeked over the horizon. Soon, the emperor would need to leave his tent. To address his advisors on what needed to be done. He had already decided his next royal decree—Antinous' divinity would be declared throughout Rome, throughout Ægyptus and the provinces, and tribute would be paid. A city would be established in his honor; a memorial obelisk erected in the capital. Poets would write verse in his name. Mourners would weep, publicly, for no less than thirty days upon the emperor's return to the capital. Antinous' memory would be honored. Worshipped.

I'm here, Augustus.

A sudden press on his arm—a palm. Cool. So light, it might've been his imagination.

In his mind's eye, Hadrian turned to see his phīltatos standing in front of him, the sheet from the cot wrapped loosely around his hips.

Not death, my emperor—only days. Time will separate us for a little while. But time is only the beginning.

His lover's eyes, as blue as the Nile on which Hadrian still sailed, looked upon him with a sharp, almost ethereal light.

Antinous! Hadrian choked. Fresh tears sprung to his eyes as a surge of relief tore through his body. I thought you'd taken yourself away from me. What did you glimpse across the western ocean?
The youth's arms reached out to encircle him, enfolding him in their renewed warmth.

Never would I leave you, he whispered. But the Fortunate Isles wait for us. They shimmer like jewels amid the waves.

Hadrian closed his eyes, pressing parched lips to his erômenos' curls. Stay with me, he begged silently. Please let this be the end, if there is to be one.

What he said instead was: Do you love me, Antinous?

Antinous' breath was warm against his ear. You must hear that answer in your heart, my Augustus—not from my mouth.

Hadrian bent his head, allowing his tears to flow freely. He breathed in the soft musk of curls and the salt-sweet scent of his lover's skin.

I will place another coin on your tongue, as Psyche did, he promised, clutching Antinous' slender body to his own. A sob thickened in his throat, slurring his words. The debt will be paid; the ferryman will return you to me. We will be together in both worlds once again, my phíltatos—I swear by all the Gods of Olympus!

The waves slapped hard against the sides of the boat, jostling the emperor and the youth. Outside the tent, something splashed. The sound was immediately swallowed by the water.

Hadrian looked up, startled. Sunlight rushed in through the tent flaps, blinding him. A new dawn.

When he looked back, his arms were empty.

The sounds of splashing jerked Hannibal from his daze. He blinked. The Atlantic blurred before his eyes in shades of jeweled blue and green. A pattern swirled on the water where something had surfaced and then disappeared.

He was vaguely aware of a wetness on his cheeks; of the sting of air and salt. The swell of the ocean swarmed in his ears like a dying hive. Its low roar had permeated his consciousness for the past six days as he'd lingered somewhere between asleep and awake. Water, water, everywhere—nor any drop to drink.

He stared over the dull, unending expanse of waves, the aroma of warm curls and skin and breath still thick in his nose, his memory.

After the glow of their lust had quieted, he'd pulled the quilt over Will's body to keep him warm as he slept. When they'd both awoken, hours later—Will, caught in the throes of a nightmare, and Hannibal at the sudden mercy of Will's guilt—his phíltatos had been as lost to him as Hadrian's own.

Now he himself, as well as the emperor, were forced to sail on as though nothing had happened—as though their beloveds had not torn gaping holes in the strongholds of their hearts.

Cursed once by the Nile and twice by the Atlantic. Fixed and formulated, yet again. Water, water everywhere—monotonous and mocking.

Unlike the Speedwell's crew, however, he and Chiyoh had plenty to drink. Their captain had kept them watered and well-fed, like prize ponies. Haai's taste in wine had come as a pleasant surprise, and he'd invited Hannibal to make use of the ship's galley as often as he liked.

Chiyoh would sometimes join in, working quietly beside him, her hands already familiar with the
rhythm of Hannibal's kitchen. Had he felt inspired, he would've spent more time in the galley; but cooking had become merely a mundane comfort. A distraction. He'd never felt a sense of force in it, until now.

The crew had replenished their foodstuffs two evenings ago when they'd docked in Panama. Hannibal and Chiyoh had set off to procure his new passport while Haai conducted his own business.

A vague sense of surreality had clung to him as he and Chiyoh had navigated the narrow, dilapidated streets of Panama City's Casco Viejo district. In another life, he and Will had walked the same streets on their way to meet Chiyoh's forger, shortly before boarding a plane bound for Vilnius.

As the peeling white belltower of Iglesia de San José had loomed into view, Hannibal had been struck by a flash of memory.

_The Church of the Golden Altar_, he'd told Will, pointing to the intricately carved, wooden doors at the front. _In the sixteen-seventies, a priest ordered the 'altar de oro' painted black to hide its value from the Welsh privateer, Henry Morgan. Morgan's men ransacked the rest of Old Panama City, but the altar survived._

Will had smirked, the tips of his ears twitching with the movement. He'd decided to shave his facial hair and shear off most of his curls in a fit of pre-travel anxiety. Now, when he smiled—which was seldom—Hannibal could see that his whole face lifted when he did so.

_Guess 'nothing gold can stay,' huh?_ Will had commented, his voice thick with sarcasm. _Not even for pirates._

Hannibal had fallen silent. The memory of Will's threat had hung over his mind, like a thundercloud, since the morning in the kitchen: _I'm not your pet, Hannibal. I don't need to be here with you, playing house. I don't actually need to be anywhere with you._

He'd considered telling the story of the church to Chiyoh. He and Will hadn't taken the time see it; perhaps she might have wanted to step inside with him. But his sister was staring hard at the map on her phone, double-checking their route—and then, without a word, grabbing onto his coat and steering him down an alleyway, towards the forger's shop.

_We're almost there. We need to be in and out quickly_, she'd said. Underneath her words and the sharp look in her eye, he'd heard a silent reprimand: _Focus, my brother. This isn't the time for brooding._

He'd silently assented, allowing Chiyoh to lead the way—even though he already knew it from memory.

They'd returned to the boat later that night. The wisdom of Chiyoh's words had been thrown into sudden focus when Hannibal's sensitive nose had detected a new smell.

Beneath the jasmine-scented _Geisha_ coffee beans the crew had loaded at the port lurked the mingled reek of ether and solvent and plastic. The dense chemical aroma seeped from the walls of the hold and the boards of the deck—unmistakable, unexpected.

Hannibal had slowed in the hallway as Chiyoh strode ahead of him to her cabin. She hadn't seemed aware of the ship's covert cargo.

"Chiyoh," he'd called, stopping. A lightbulb had buzzed and dimmed in its wire cage overhead, casting her face in chiaroscuro as she'd turned. In Japanese, he asked, "Did Will mention we'd be
transporting cocaine?"

Chiyoh had stiffened, then straightened, her brow furrowing. "No, he didn't," she'd said slowly, in her native tongue. "But if he knew, I'm sure he would not have left out that detail."

Hannibal had felt a brief flicker of doubt. *Would you kiss me and then betray me, my phíltatos?*

He'd scoured the wallboard, picking out the nearly invisible cuts across the old joints. They'd been lightly plastered over—another chemical smell on the air, fresh and foreboding.

"Or perhaps the betrayer is someone he trusts," Hannibal had thought to himself, recalling Will's assurances at the cabin. *You need to get out of the country,* he'd said. *I've made arrangements for a boat.*

Will hadn't named his accomplice. But Hannibal was certain, now, that whoever it was couldn't be trusted. Which meant that Will was potentially in danger.

"There's quite a lot of it in the walls," Hannibal had said, continuing in Japanese. "It seems we're sailing with a kingpin."

Chiyoh's eyes had narrowed. "The captain has lied to us. This compromises our safety."

"You've already jeopardized your safety by helping me." Hannibal had managed a lopsided smile. "But we'll want to keep an eye out for more surprises from now on. In the meantime, we'll act as though we aren't aware of it."

Chiyoh had given a solemn nod. Low anger had simmered in her eyes, darkening them.

"May I escort you to your chamber?" Hannibal had said, switching to English and holding up his arm.

Chiyoh had forced a smile, and looped her arm around his elbow. The touch of her hand had been light as a sparrow's wing as they'd walked down the narrow hallway to the passenger cabins. Around them, the overhead lights had flickered as the ship rolled on its moorings.

"Now I see why Haai chose *Golem* as his ship's moniker," Hannibal had mused aloud, thinking of the Dutchman's sour smile. *Even predators need friends,* the man had said, in his native *Nederlands,* when they'd shaken hands on the dock in Baltimore.

Chiyoh had glanced at him. "Why?"

"Monsters created from raw earth," he'd replied. "We should've purchased some coca tea in the city. Good for keeping up one's energy while sailing."

He'd stopped in front of the steel door to Chiyoh's cabin, unwinding her arm and squeezing her hand before letting go. *Oyasumi, Chiyoh."

"Oyasumi, onii-san," she'd said, giving him a solemn glance before disappearing behind the narrow door.

Hannibal had watched her through the small porthole as she'd walked into the room, pulling out the *kanzashi* holding up her hair. Then he'd turned and headed towards his own cabin, the caustic reek of high-purity cocaine swirling in his nostrils.

Now, in the too-bright light of late morning, Hannibal heard quiet footsteps approaching from behind
on the deck. Chiyoh.

"Dou shita?" he asked, without turning his head.

"Something is wrong." Her footfalls stopped just short of where he sat opposite the curve of the hull.

At the worry in her tone, he twisted to look at her. Chiyoh's Remington was cradled in her arms—a sight to which Hannibal and the Golem's crew had become accustomed over their week of sailing. Chiyoh, he knew, preferred to remain visibly armed in the company of strangers.

Her eyes shot to the wetness on his cheeks, but she didn't comment.

"The charts," she replied, in Japanese. "Our captain plans to change course."

Hannibal straightened up, immediately on alert. The vision of Antinous' pale, loose-limbed body slid from his mind, and with it, his memory of Will's sleeping face.

He wiped the salt from his stubbled cheeks and squinted up at her.

"For—?"

Chiyoh's steel gaze roamed the ceaseless expanse of blue-gray sea surrounding the ship. The sunlight glinted in her eyes, giving them a deep brown glow.

"Calabria."

Italy. Hannibal paused. A flash of red: Rinaldo Pazzi's entrails slipping from his slit belly. They'd fallen faster than his body had in the hand cart, tainting the Florentine night with their spoiled stench.

Though notorious for its drug trafficking, Italy's poorer region of Calabria was a considerable distance from Tuscany. Hannibal knew that Haai would need to dispose of himself and Chiyoh before he could unload the cargo hidden within the Golem's walls. Who else in Hannibal's old country was seeking his capture?

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I implored Sadis to give me a tour of the ship. I looked around with wide eyes and asked questions, and pretended I didn't understand things. The scrap log was open in the wheelhouse. I memorized what I could. When I researched the coordinates, I found they were off." She paused, then added, "Sadis believes he impressed me. He thinks I may sleep with him, though I won't. I was able to fool even Will Graham in that respect."

Hannibal was silent. He'd always admired Chiyoh's vigilance and tenacity, though in their youth Hannibal had always led, and Chiyoh had always followed. It seemed her instincts had been ahead of his, this time.

My little songbird. My little trickster. Chiyoh had smelled danger beyond that which Hannibal had scented in the walls. And then she'd used the Belizean to pinpoint it. Atta girl.

"Did you suspect anything before we set sail?"

"No," Chiyoh answered. "Not until Panama. Otherwise, I wouldn't have allowed you to get on the boat."

She flipped up the tail of her duster and sat down next to him, cross-legged, on the bow. Hannibal hugged the senior Graham's parka tighter around himself.
Strictly speaking, they didn't need their coats. The Caribbean warmth had not yet given up its hold on the Atlantic. But they were sailing fast, and the topside wind was chafing. In a few days, the ocean would grow cold as they approached northern waters.

Chiyoh's glance straddled the border of criticism and pity. "You've been distracted. I had suspected you might be. That's why I came."

"You came to protect me."

She shifted her rifle into her lap, settling the scope against the crook of her knee.

"Yes."

Their eyes met, hazel to deep brown, understanding passing between them as easily as it always had. Sometimes even predators need protection, her look seemed to say.

"You were with him. At his lake house." A hint of questioning in the statement.

Hannibal nodded. Her eyes flickered away. After a moment, she sighed.

"The language of the body is deceiving. Sometimes it reveals truth, and sometimes it replaces it. The first thing Will revealed to me was his scar. He said you left him with a smile."

She paused, staring out over the waves. Sunlight glinted off her hair, silver on black.

"You kill him, and embrace him after. He embraces you, and then he kills you—and then you fall. It's the same ruse. Just inverted."

"I was willing to fall."

A splash made both of them turn their heads. Off the port side, a circle of swirling sapphire marked some creature's swift plunge back into the water.

Chiyoh lifted an eyebrow. Her eyes lingered on the spot before turning back to Hannibal.

"You know how to give each other death," she said, sliding her thumb along the barrel of her Remington. "But death is not something Will fears. Not from you. What could you give him to sustain him? You're both afraid of what loving might mean without violence. Savagery is your nature. You follow the same patterns, over and over. Nothing will change until one of you breaks it—or until both of you do."

Hannibal blinked and gazed across the cloudless sky. The sunlight warmed his face.

I'm giving you back your freedom... Isn't that enough? The taste of Will's mouth, the warmth of Will's living body against his own, at once yielding and claiming.

A life without you isn't freedom, Will. I showed you that when I gave myself to Jack.

"We've both journeyed with Will," Hannibal mused aloud. "We've both tried to kill him, and we've both killed for him. Perhaps you and I understand his savagery better than most. I trust your insight."

After a moment, he added, softly, "Doumo, Chiyoh."

She tipped her chin in agreement. The heated shine hadn't left her eyes.

Hannibal turned to stare at the rippling, silver-green waves, contemplating. At the speed they were traveling, they would reach the coast of Calabria in approximately two weeks. From there, it would
take two days to reach Panevėžys by car. He knew Chiyoh would want to go home.

"What do you think?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

Chiyoh's eyes were hard. "They will drug us and hand us over quietly. Not at the port."

At that moment, a series of loud splashes seized their ears—this time, from the starboard side. Hannibal caught a flash of silver fins like wings, and wriggling tails. Small white bellies glistened in the sunlight. Then, a terrific volley of silver-gray bodies sliced back under the waves in near-unison. *Flyingfish,* his mind supplied.

"Can you eat them?" Chiyoh asked dryly.

"If you're referring to the fish—yes. Just like *kusaya* or *tobiko.* Though I'm sure our bold captain and his crew would also suffice, in that regard. All are edible saltwater species." Hannibal paused. He tilted his head. "The fish are heading back towards South America, to warmer waters. Leaving the Atlantic behind."

Chiyoh's eyes met his. He saw a question poised in them—one she wouldn't voice. Instead, she pushed herself up from the deck and flipped the pin on her rifle. She slid the bolt forward, then back.

"Do you feel like killing something?" she said.

The corners of Hannibal's lips lifted as Chiyoh assumed her stance, without waiting for his response. Her shoulders lifted as she squinted, staring down the tunnel of her scope and waiting for the school to reemerge.

She was rewarded a moment later. The sharp punch of the Remington's fire was followed by an explosion of red across the water.

Hannibal stood up as the fish's dragonfly-like wings thrashed, tossing a spray of diamond-and-ruby droplets into the air. Its body sank below the surface and then bobbed back up, spurting blood from a hole through its back.

Chiyoh smirked as she reloaded the chamber, and silently handed the rifle to Hannibal. He took it in his arms. It was smooth. Cold. He cocked the handle and slid the bolt, then raised the butt against his shoulder and squinted through the scope. Chiyoh had set the same crosshairs on Will once, to save Hannibal's life. Perhaps, in some circumventive fashion, she was now pushing him to save himself.

A flash of silver wings jumped to life inside the glass at the intersection of his lines. He squeezed. A bright bob of blood jumped from the second fish's front, from the hole where its head had been a moment before.

Another flash caught his eye—a serpentine scrawl across the water's surface. He reloaded and took aim. The fish's zig-zag motion was abruptly shortened by a shot to its tail.

Hannibal lowered the rifle, pleased. He knew Will wouldn't have admired the easy shots. *He* was more inclined to lure; to catch and release. *Six days. Approximately one hundred and thirty hours.* And not one word had he received from Will.

Hannibal wondered, coldly, how the other man was spending the holiday. Somewhere *not* with his former family—*that* much Hannibal had guaranteed with his successful lure of Molly.

A shout from behind made Hannibal and Chiyoh turn, their ears ringing with the rifle fire and the swell of the sea.
Haai was standing near the wheelhouse, waving his arms. His stringy gray hair poked out from under his cap like candyfloss.

"Hei!" he called, against the wind. "Ben je gek geworden, vriend? What are you doing! Do you want to draw a crowd?"

The captain eyed the rifle in Hannibal's hands. Behind him, Sadis hovered with a confounded expression, legs stocky in his baggy denim shorts. The other sailor, Adham, was nowhere to be seen.

Hannibal sensed Chiyoh stiffen—not with anxiety, but in anger. He flashed a broad smile at the Dutchman.

"Thanksgiving!" he called back. "Perhaps your sailors could steer a pinch to the starboard side? And might you have a landing net, for us to fetch our dinner?"

Hannibal held his grin as he watched the captain sigh in exasperation.

*If Haai and his crew have a surprise for us, he thought, then it wouldn't be very polite to spoil our own.*

---

—Thanksgiving night—

*Blood. Breath. Radiance.* Arms entangled, one heartbeat stacked against the other.

Will sensed the lifeblood draining from the wounds in his cheek and shoulder. He could *feel* it, just as keenly as he felt the press of Hannibal's blood-soaked clothing against his face and the surge of their killing consummation filling his body, expanding his awareness. Explosions of light and color danced within the black well of his mind. He was surrounded. *Whole. Alive.*

*I've never been more awake. More aware. Of you, of myself, of the inversive glorification of life.*

He wanted to *tell* Hannibal. To pull back from his chest and look into his eyes once again. To drown in the shine of pride and lust and longing he'd seen there.

The filmy clouds slid silently across the indigo sky, enshrouding them beneath the moon's milk-white glow. Their breath came in gasps, each lungful a burn of pain.

*We could end here,* he thought. *We could begin here. Choose a different path. A new knot on fate's thread to trace, to cling to.*

Will lifted his head. Looked into the eyes of the man he now *knew* loved him.

*We've been here before,* Hannibal said softly. *You remember.*

The chilling wind cut across their wounds, but did not dull the heat between them.

Will nodded. A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth, sparking pain in his cheek, as he recalled Hannibal's later words: *I would have liked to enjoy the beauty of your gaze a little longer, before plunging to my death.*
You see me, Will said. You said you wished we'd stayed here longer.

I see you, Hannibal breathed. I see us. I see our solitary pasts, and every one of our thousand savage futures. Why didn't you kiss me then, my phíltatos?

Will's brow furrowed at the unfamiliar word.

Because I… he trailed off. Swallowed. His fingers tightened in the soiled fabric of Hannibal's clothing. Oddly, he wasn't wearing his pullover—but a long, scarlet robe, pinned at the shoulder.

Because then I might not have pushed us off the bluff, he confessed.

Hannibal's eyes widened, then changed; their shine swallowed by a sudden, naked pain.

You could have saved us, Will.

And then Hannibal was pulling him to his chest, this time; and Will felt a hot exhale of breath on his neck as Hannibal laid his head aside Will's cheek.

You could have saved yourself. Creation from destruction—honey from the lion. Do you remember?

Before Will could reply, a voice rose up behind them, from the direction of the house.

Do the right thing, Will.

The familiar baritone filled his ears like the echo of wind inside a conch.

Will whipped his head around to look. To their left, Jack Crawford stood not ten paces away. He extended his arm to them in supplication. The battered rolls of armor hanging from his shoulders moved with him, shining dully against the red of his military tunic.

The kindest thing you can do for this world is to remove yourself from it.

Jack. Will's whisper was lost on the wind. You weren't supposed to be here.

In his arms, Will felt Hannibal stiffen. The heat of his body sharpened to a sudden smolder. Will's eyes shot to Jack's other hand. The faint outline of his Glock was visible in the darkness.

An icy wave of panic—infinitely colder than the Atlantic's embrace—washed down Will's spine. It's happening again! he panicked. No Chiyoh watching over us this time. No window. Just the edge.

You brought this into our lives, Will. Our home. Our bed.

A second voice, high and hollow as a broken bell, assailed his ears. The words rang through Will's brain like a siren.

An equal distance away, Molly stood, staring at them. Sorrow burned in her wide green eyes. Her slender form was swaddled in the white-and-purple robes of an empress, and her golden hair was piled atop her head inside a silver circlet.

You want to do something good for us, Will? Don't come back. Molly's eyes moved to Hannibal, brightening with anger. And don't let him walk away this time.

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. His hand tightened around the small of Will's back—atop the Smith & Wesson tucked into his waistband.
Jack took a step toward them, raising his Glock. Hannibal wrenched Will's gun from his trousers and lifted it, aiming at Molly's head.

*Back so soon?* Hannibal spat. *It seems your sense of self-preservation is quickly evaporating, Molly.*

*Will—look at me!* Jack boomed, steadying his weapon with his other hand. *You can end this right now. You know how. Do the right thing!*

*No,* Will said under his breath. *Not this time. This fall belongs to us.*

In one swift motion, Will pulled Hannibal's body back to his own. The fierceness of the embrace took Hannibal by surprise. The gun slipped from his hand and over the cliff's edge, clattering against the rocks as it fell.

Hannibal's eyes, simultaneously dark and dangerous and aching, clashed with Will's own. *Dark as honey,* Will thought to himself. *And out of the strong, came forth sweetness…*

*This is for both of us,* Will told him. Then he closed his eyes, and his mouth found Hannibal's, warm and yielding. The heat of the other man's body mingled with his own, as Jack and Molly murmured their assent:

*Do it, Will.*

And then: a swift, cold crush of air; a heady sense of weightlessness as gravity seized them, tumbling them over and over. A frigid shock of seawater slapped them—and then waves engulfed their entwined bodies as, once again, the Atlantic claimed them for its own.

*How many more times will we drown in each other?*

Will clung tight to Hannibal's body as the oxygen left his lungs, and all of his thoughts scattered into the dark.

Then: a wet lapping at his face—*warm,* not cold. A soft whine.

Will opened his eyes. A mottled brown blur swam into view, and the scent of warm fur filled his nose. *Winston.* A flash of dark eyes above him.

"Hey, boy," Will croaked.

At the words, the dog's head bobbed excitedly. He whined again, the sound like rusty hinges, and licked a rough stripe up Will's face, over the scar from Dolarhyde's knife.

Will blinked. "Okay, Winston. It's okay."

He lifted a hand to nudge him away. *Was it okay?* He had no idea. He couldn't feel his fingers.

Beside him, Winston pranced impatiently, bumping up against him. The movement sent Will spinning. Nausea rushed into his gut as he shot out an arm to steady himself. He could barely feel his palm as it connected with something smooth and curved. His vision blurred, and he blinked hard. *Focus.*

Overhead, the white half-moon shone cold and full. Light danced around him, rippling in silver ribbons. *The lake.* Something cold against his back. Metal. His entire right side was numb. *I'm in the lake.*

Will gingerly pushed himself up, pins and needles blazing in his right hand and arm. The aluminum
rowboat tilted with him. His gut heaved. Water sloshed in the bottom of the hull as the small boat bobbed at the edge of the water, half-anchored to the shore. The whiskey in his stomach sloshed along with it. He coughed, then swallowed hard.

Don't be sick, he willed.

He scrubbed his left coat sleeve, which was partially dry, across his face. It came away wet. He stared at the colored streak for a moment before he realized what it was. Cautiously, he touched his fingertips to his face. When he pulled them away, they were red.

Will frowned. He didn't feel wounded. He didn't feel much of anything.

Winston yipped. Will turned his head. The dog stood on the frozen shoreline, all four paws braced against the wet earth, regarding him with a critical expression.

Will squinted. Something wrong. Dark drops of liquid were dripping from his muzzle and splattering into the slush.

A rush of awareness surged through him. He'd left the dogs inside the cabin. How did you get out here, Winston?

"C'mere, Winston," he said softly.

Will shifted on the aluminum bench of the boat, shivering as the icy water pooled around his feet and seeped into his boots. The back of his skull was buzzing with liquor and cold. He wasn't ready to stand just yet.

Winston trotted over obediently, tail wagging. As he nudged his head over the side of the rowboat, Will could see a wide gash across his snout. Blood dripped down along his jaw, staining his teeth.

"Winston, what happened to you?" He smoothed his hands down the dog's neck. Winston lifted a muddy paw and whined. "Let me see."

Will splayed his fingers beneath Winston's ears, cradling his skull in his hands. Winston's body stilled as he allowed Will to examine him. Light from the full moon illuminated the gouge across his muzzle. Although not deep, Will could see the cut was uneven.

He glanced up the sloping yard to the cabin. A tall rectangle of yellow light shone through the outside porch door. It was solid where the bottom of the screen had been torn open.

He must've left the inside door open when he'd gone outside—whenever that had been. Will couldn't remember, exactly, although the moon's southern descent said over an hour. Furry shapes hovered on the other side of the busted screen, silhouetted against the low lamplight.

He rubbed his thumbs along the undersides of Winston's ears, cradling his skull in his hands. Winston's body stilled as he allowed Will to examine him. Light from the full moon illuminated the gouge across his muzzle. Although not deep, Will could see the cut was uneven.

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He rubbed his thumbs along the undersides of Winston's ears. A warm lick left a spongy streak of blood across Will's half-numb hand. Busted through the mesh to get to me. That's how he got cut.

"Were you worried about me, boy?" he asked, swallowing against the lump of guilt rising in his throat. Winston whimpered. A drop of blood slid down Will's wrist.

He rose unsteadily, running his palm over the dog's head as he stepped out of the boat. "Let's get you inside and get you fixed up."

Winston trotted beside him to the house. A small, white head poked through the hole in the screen as they clambered up the porch steps.
"Hey, Zoe," Will sighed.

She gave a reprimanding yap and turned, trotting away on her short legs. As Will opened the porch door and stepped inside, Simon and Wilhelmina crowded around his feet in two white-and-brown blurs, one tall and one short. Winston walked in ahead of him, licking at the blood still dripping down the side of his nose. Bowser yipped, his tan eyebrows lifting in his glossy black face as he sniffed at Winston's torn snout.

"Back, Bowser," Will said, sharp. His own words boomed in his ears, too loud. Winston turned his head, leaving a dark red streak across Bowser's jowls that the Australian shepherd immediately licked off.

The room swayed a little as a vision of Mason Verger flashed through Will's mind. All of the dogs' snouts had been bloody then, he remembered. They'd gobbled up the sheared-off pieces of human flesh as eagerly as they had Molly's store-bought bacon treats. And there was no telling what Hannibal had fed them during the times he'd been away.

He put a hand on the counter to steady himself, as the room spun. How much had he had to drink?

Better question: How much is too much? his inner voice retorted.

Bowser whined and licked again at Winston's snout, eliciting a warning snap from the mutt.

"Bowser, quit!" Will called, raising his voice.

Even my dogs are cannibals, he thought dismally.

The shepherd relented, his tail drooping as he backed away toward the couch, and then bumped into it. He whipped around with a yelp.

Will sighed. The dogs hadn't yet gotten used to their new home. He doubted he would, either.

Will locked both doors to the porch, sealing out the cold air, and then shrugged off his coat. It fell to the floor in a soggy heap. The room was still frigid, but sensation was slowly tingling back into his fingers. There was no telling exactly how long he'd been passed out in the rowboat, half-submerged in ice water.

Good way to get yourself frostbitten, the voice in his head mocked. Not that you didn't try that already when you jumped into the Atlantic.

Will couldn't remember taking the rowboat down from the side of the garage or putting it in the lake—or why he'd had the idea in the first place. He couldn't remember a lot of things.

Well, wasn't that the point of the whiskey?

"C'mon Winston," he called, trudging toward the hall bath. He felt like he could sleep for a thousand days. "Let's clean up that cut."

Winston followed, padding silently behind him.

In the bathroom, he pulled a bottle of liquid Dial from the cabinet under the sink, along with a handful of cotton swabs and a roll of gauze.

"Sorry, Winston—this is gonna sting a little. Try to keep still."

Will steadied the dog's head with his left hand as he bent down. The motion made him sway, which in turn made his stomach flip-flop.
He swallowed angrily. Hannibal was on a boat somewhere in the Atlantic right now, sailing back to his old home to create a new life for himself. The same certainly couldn't be said for Will. His boat wasn't going anywhere. He didn't even have a paddle. Molly had sent him away, just as he'd sent away Hannibal.

Her rejection had been justified. But Will knew, deep inside, that his own had been only a failed attempt to avoid the truth. To prevent the very act of justification Molly had been forced to make. Once the dam had split, neither of them had been able to remain blind. Now he was alone, as drunk as he'd been every night for the past five. That made it Thursday. Which made it...

**Thanksgiving.** The realization settled into his gut like a brick.

*Should've picked up some Wild Turkey,* the voice in his head mocked.

He wiped the blood and ragged bits of flesh from Winston's snout with the soapy swab, wondering vaguely what Hannibal was doing. *Probably cooking for Chiyoh.* Hannibal wouldn't have declined the opportunity to conjure up a holiday meal, even while at sea.

Winston's ears quivered as Will poured soap and water onto a fresh swab. "Shh, it's okay, buddy," he soothed. Self-hatred flared within him, sharp and hot, as he bent down to finish cleaning the cut.

Haai had assured him, at their initial meeting, that the boat's kitchen was more than adequate for basic culinary expression. *Hopefully adequate enough to keep Hannibal preoccupied,* Will had thought to himself, as he'd stared into Haai's crooked smile and hated himself with every ounce of his being.

He knew Molly and Walt would be celebrating the holiday with her parents. They'd spend the remainder of the long weekend in Harrisburg, like Molly had planned, and then drive back to Great Falls. To an empty house.

He wondered what Molly had told Walt. What she'd told her parents—if anything. That she didn't feel safe with Hannibal Lecter on the loose? That she didn't feel safe with Will? He knew both were likely equally true.

He dabbed a thick line of antibacterial ointment across Winston's snout, and then trimmed a rectangle from the roll of gauze. Winston watched, with a skeptical expression, as Will fastened two strips of medical tape at either end. Then he lifted his front paw to rub at his snout.

"No, Winston," Will nudged his paw down, and tipped Winston's chin before he could worry the wound. "You can't scratch it, okay? The gauze is just for now. We can take it off tomorrow, once it's healed up a little."

Winston's tail wagged once, indicating he understood.

"Okay," Will sighed, and pressed the gauze strip over the dog's muzzle. He smoothed down the ends of the tape, mentally crossing his fingers that the dressing would hold long enough for the wound to clot.

He shoved the medical supplies back into the cabinet and plunked down on top of the toilet lid. He was tired and cold, and his head was swimming. Winston padded between his legs and rested his head on his knee.

"You did good, Winston," Will said, ruffling his fur. "Don't ever tear through a door like that again. Not for me. You'll only hurt yourself."
Winston whined softly in reply, and then followed Will as he got up and went to the kitchen. He plucked the cordless receiver off the wall and switched it on. *Dead. No sound.*

Will's brow furrowed. He hadn't used the phone in the past five days. Not since he'd relocated from Great Falls, along with half of his clothes and several boxes of things he hadn't been able to decide whether or not he needed.

Jack and Alana had both phoned him on his cell to discuss the hunt for Hannibal. He hadn't told either of them that he wasn't in Great Falls. Predictably, Molly hadn't called him at all.

He stared at the receiver. The green power light was on; the battery was obviously charged. He squinted at the cradle hanging on the wall, and immediately saw the problem. *Jack's unplugged.*

He squeezed the plastic prong, clicking it back into place on the underside of the cradle. He switched the receiver off, and then on again. This time, a low, discordant dial tone greeted his ears.

*That's weird—the socket didn't feel loose.* He dismissed the thought before it could derail his courage. He punched in the ten digits with careful precision. His fingers still shook. *It's Thanksgiving,* he told himself.

Molly picked up on the fourth ring. Will heard a sharp inhale. Then she spoke.

"Will—?" A hesitance in the sound.

"Hey." His voice caught in his throat. Then everything he'd planned to say flew straight from his head.

*Say something.* He swallowed. "Are you okay?"

A sigh on the other line—relief, this time. *Also strange.*

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I just—this is. Never mind."

"Okay." He hiccupped. Swallowed. "I wanted to—to wish you and Walt a happy Thanksgiving."

His forehead prickled. The furnace was chugging at full blast to make up for cold he'd let in. He scrubbed his sleeve across his face before he remembered it was still wet.

"Will—it's after midnight. Walt's in bed. I'm about to go to bed."

"Oh. Okay. I, um." He faltered, unsure. She didn't ask if he'd been drinking. He knew she didn't need to.

"Molly," he rushed. "I'm sorry."

It was a moment before she responded. The silence seemed to stretch into an abyss.

"No, Will. You're not."

He could imagine her shaking her head, eyes downcast, picking at the gaudy fringe of the chenille duvet in her parents' guest bedroom.

"Please don't try to make me feel better about this. There is no feeling better about this."
Winston whined from the floor. He scraped a soft paw against Will's pants leg, eyes glinting. 

_Cautioning._

Will's throat felt like it was pinched shut. _No air._ Nausea rumbled low in his belly.

"I—I didn't get the chance to move everything," he said. "Not yet."

Molly sighed. The sound scraped his ears. "Well, then you can get the rest of it while I'm at work and Walt's at school. We're usually home by four-thirty—if you remember."

Will winced. The blow struck low and deep, exactly as she'd intended. _You didn't come back to us, Will. Don't try to come back to us now._

The lump inside his throat hardened. "Did Jack call you?" he asked.

"Jack? Why would _Jack_ call me?" Molly scoffed, then halted. Will heard her suck in a breath as understanding hit her. "Don't worry, Will. _If_ he does, and _if_ he asks why you're not here, I'll tell him to call you. Then you can explain how Hannibal Lecter running around in the open made us less than eager to be living in the same house. It's _you_ he wants, after all. Jack knows that already." She paused. "So do you. That's why you took advantage of it. Right?"

Venom dripped from the words, seeping into the open sore of Will's brain from one hundred and forty miles away.

When he didn't answer, Molly sighed. Her voice softened with her next words.

"Will, you brought this into our lives. Our home. Our—" Her voice cracked. She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to. He'd already heard, in dream, what she was about to say: _Our bed._

_She knows,_ he thought, guilt rising inside him in dirty waves. _She could tell. Just like Chiyoh. Just like Bedelia._

The line went silent for several seconds. Then: "You want to do something good for us, Will? Don't come back. Just—leave us be. We're trying to put the past behind us. _Please._"

"Molly—"

"Goodbye, Will."

The dial tone buzzed loud in his ear. He stared at the receiver for several seconds. Anger boiled up inside his chest, fast and hard and ugly.

Before he could think, the receiver was sailing through the air and smashing against the fireplace's riverstone façade, shattering the outside casing in two. The broken phone clattered to the hearth, silenced.

"Fuck!" he screamed. Winston yelped and jumped back, skidding into the dishwasher. The other dogs leaped up from their beds, startled.

Will's fingers clenched as hot tears sprang to his eyes. Twin pangs of nausea and rage swarmed through him, warping his vision.

_Red. Red. Black in the moonlight. You abandoned yourself long before you abandoned any of them. The kindest thing you can do for this world is to remove yourself from it._

A rough whimper riveted his attention back to the room. He looked down. Winston was staring up at
him from the kitchen floor, frightened. His bandage had fallen halfway off. It hung, limp, over the side of his muzzle, a crimson stain streaking the underside. Will knelt immediately down as a surge of guilt dulled his anger.

"Hey, boy," he said softly. He coaxed Winston into his arms. Rubbed his palms along the dog's scruffy neck, and then patted the gauze back into place. "I didn't mean to scare you."

With an imploring whuff, Winston allowed himself to be soothed. Will's fingers dragged through the mutt's soft, mottled brown fur. He could hear the other dogs settling back onto their beds, the moment's alarm having passed.

"It's okay. I just got mad there for a second."

A pang hit him as he remembered. Molly's words. She'd said the same thing to him after the Dragon's attack.

He bowed his head, fingers stilling on Winston's sides. His face felt hot. He didn't know whether he was going to be sick, or whether he wanted to scream.

Winston nosed his temple, then gently took the collar of his shirt in his teeth and tugged. A hot tear rolled from Will's right eye and splattered atop Winston's dressing.

He wiped at his cheek with his thumb. "Yeah, Winston? What is it?" he asked, the words thick in his throat.

Winston turned and trotted a few paces. He stopped just outside the kitchen, waiting for Will to follow.

"Okay, I'm coming," he said, pushing himself up. He trudged down the hallway after Winston in his muddy boots, not caring whether he left tracks.

The dog led him past Walt's bedroom, to the master. Will flicked on the dimmer switch, his breath catching in his throat as Hannibal's dark, desiring eyes flashed into his mind.

A new night. A new life. We make our dreams, Will. Not the other way around.

Not a mirage this time—real.

His palm tingled where Hannibal had kissed it, just below the wrist. Lips moving up, fluttering along his collarbone, grazing against his scar. A warm mouth curving along his neck, sucking gently; then up to his mouth, seeking heat, blood, flesh, love.

Was that really what it was? Not the kind of love he and Molly had shared—something deeper. Darker. More profound. And impossibly difficult to grasp.

You don't have to deny yourself everything, Will. You can hold on to some of the things you've caught—if you allow yourself to.

I didn't catch you. You surrendered.

In the passenger seat of the Subaru, Hannibal's eyes had flickered away at the words, then dulled. He'd turned his head, biting back the sting—just as Will had swallowed the bite of Molly's words over the phone.

When will you stop sabotaging the people who try to love you? Can you stop?
He followed Winston to the bedside, and braced a numb hand against the mattress as he knelt down. The faint scent of detergent wafted to him—a small miracle, considering how many of the past several nights he'd fallen asleep in the bed without showering.

He'd thrown all of the bedding into the wash the afternoon he'd driven back to the cabin from Great Falls with his clothes and computer in tow. It was the first thing he'd done after he'd moved his things inside. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep in the bed otherwise.

Winston pranced in front of the nightstand. He looked almost excited.

"What is it, boy. What do you want to show me?" he asked wearily. Winston tipped his snout and pawed at the drawer handle. Will frowned. He knew the bottle of lube he and Hannibal had used was in there. That couldn't be what Winston wanted him to see.

"C'mon, Winston," he scolded, and went to stand up. Then Winston snapped, his jaws closing on the empty air beside his arm.

Will's eyes widened. Winston's tail wagged in a frenzied arc as he circled to Will's side and nudged him toward the nightstand.

"Jesus, okay," he said, hunkering back down. "What's got you so upset, buddy?"

Will slid open the drawer with a squeak. A folded piece of paper sprang up and spread open, like a pair of butterfly wings. Will frowned. He didn't remember tucking any paperwork or receipts in the drawer; those usually found their way to the kitchen. He lifted the paper out as Winston sat back on his haunches, panting proudly.

Something small and heavy dropped from the fold. Will followed it with his eyes. Between the worn strands of carpet, his wedding band from Molly glinted up at him—a forgotten promise.

He picked it up. He clutched it in his palm for a moment, feeling the metal grow warm again. With a swallow, he set it back inside the drawer. He no longer had any claim to wear it. Perhaps he hadn't ever really been meant to.

His fingers trembled as he spread open the page. A chaotic symphony of graphite streaks greeted his eyes. Will crumpled back against the side of the bed, cradling the drawing in his hands.

Dark clouds loomed over an ancient ship. Raindrops splattered onto the wood of the deck, into which knots like a thousand eyes had been expertly etched. Vague human shapes hovered around the two central figures—one short-haired, dressed in a flowing toga; the other younger, clad in a ceremonial-looking robe. The older man clutched the younger one's loose-limbed body to his chest, his brow furrowed in pain. His hand was frozen in the dark curls plastered to the younger man's forehead. The youth's eyes were pale. Open. Unseeing.

Although the faces had been drawn to resemble his and Hannibal's, Will instantly recognized the figures. They were the same ones from Molly's textbook. From his own dream. The emperor Hadrian and his lover, Antinous, who'd drowned in the Nile. Hannibal had drawn them again. And this time, he'd meant for Will to see it.

His breath caught in his throat as his eyes shifted to the caption below Hannibal's signature.

*My philìtatos, why have you taken yourself away from me?*

The strange word rang in Will's memory. He'd watched Hannibal's lips form it in his dream, though he'd never heard it before. He didn't have to guess at what it might mean.
Sleep, my phíltatos… The empress must hear Memnon sing one more time.

Hannibal's living voice now, inside his head, through the thick of his dreams. Warm limbs shifting beside him, spreading a blanket over him. Then darkness. Sleep, my phíltatos. You are my life. My freedom. My world. Sleep, and be at peace.

Half-dream, half-remembered. Like the ocean and the cliff house; like the Lecter library and Aukštaitija; like Paris and the apartment on the Seine. Now, Hannibal had drawn them into a new dream—a reimagined history.

But who is the empress? And who, Memnon? That part hadn't made sense. In Will's dream, Hannibal had worn the scarlet robes of Roman royalty. Will himself had been dressed in robes—short, like those of Hadrian's lover. Molly had been clothed in purple, too, with a circlet of silver in her hair. Was she the empress? Not Hadrian's wife, then—but whose?

The empress must hear Memnon sing one more time…

What did it mean to sing? Singing was one voice calling to another—to convey emotion; to share inspiration.

Or information.

A vision of the unplugged phone jack flashed before Will's eyes. He stilled, as the cold realization crawled up his spine.

He'd assumed Hannibal had fallen asleep with him—but maybe he hadn't. Maybe he'd crept into the kitchen to call Molly, and then unplugged the jack so she couldn't call back and wake them. Just to pique her curiosity. Just to see what she would do.

A shudder shook his body. The drawing fell from his hands and fluttered to the carpet, where it landed facedown. He pressed his palms to his eyes as a silent sob shook his shoulders.

Losing it—you're losing it, the voice inside his head chided. You thought you'd lost it all, already. Guess there's still pieces of you left to die.

He'd been foolish, as ever, to think that Hannibal would go quietly. To think that he wouldn't betray him—again. Shadows moved in the dim light, darkening his vision. Hannibal. Molly. Dad. All ghosts. All gone.

Another voice, commanding and unfamiliar, rose inside his skull. You need to get out of here. Remove yourself. You know how to fall, and how to preserve yourself. You've done it before. Do it again—now!

Will lifted his head. Inside his chest, something hardened. It took on the shape of a dense, watery depression; a silt-lined bed. He blinked, bringing the room back into focus. His eyes narrowed.

Not the Atlantic this time, he thought. And not the Seine. Not Hadrian's Nile. But a river—yes.

He pushed himself up from the floor. Winston sprang up beside him. Hannibal's drawing crinkled beneath Will's boot as he strode into the hall. He needed something familiar. Something that reminded him of neither Hannibal nor Molly.

The water. A place to return home.

In the front room, he grabbed his burner cell from the coffee table, ignoring the half-empty bottle of
Glenlivet beside it. He thumbed on the phone and scrolled through the shortlist of numbers in his address book.

It was close to one a.m. in Belle Glade, but he didn't care. If anyone knew who might be renting out space for cash in New Orleans, it would be Wally Oswalt.

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-Forty days after the fall, the dead of night-

Waves bobbed and crashed against the hull beneath their feet. A boning knife from the senior Graham's kitchen—the sharpest weapon in the house—was poised in Hannibal's left hand, blade up. In his right, the butt of a cleaver from the ship's kitchen was propped against his knee.

Chiyoh sat next to him on the narrow bed in the dark, clutching her hunting knife. She glanced at the packed duffel bags at their feet. He could make out her longing look even in the dimness. Her duffel was full of guns—guns he knew her fingers were itching to use. In this case, however, they'd both agreed that not drawing the attention of other ships would be the wisest course.

Hannibal's bag held the remnants of his short stays at the medical ward and Lake Barcroft—clothes, his drawing of Antinous, additional cutlery, an extra pair of shoes. (One simply couldn't travel without a spare pair.) He'd also packed away some of the non-perishable foodstuffs from the kitchen—enough to hold himself and Chiyoh through a few days of eating on the road.

He cast a glance to his right. Chiyoh's pensive posture and determined glare fed the burden of pride he'd developed for his surrogate sister over the past two weeks. She was ready. More importantly, she was eager. She would never serve as a replacement for Will, of course—but she understood that acts born of necessity needn't be absent of thrill.

Outside the cabin door's porthole window, the hallway lights flickered as the sea roughened with their approach to land. They'd predicted that Haai and his crew would aim to make landfall overnight in the hope that their passengers might be asleep.

The coastline, too, would be less recognizable in the darkness—though, how the captain had expected them to completely ignore their passage through the Strait of Gibraltar was beyond even Hannibal's comprehension. He'd chalked it up to a grievous underestimation of "landlubbers" on the Dutchman's part.

Hannibal smiled to himself as he recalled his conversation with Haai the previous day. We have good speed, the captain had said, revealing two rows of crooked, tobacco-stained teeth. The Dutchman was fond of snuff, as it turned out. He spat off the deck at least four times a day, gathering a crowd of small fish where the gob of chew fanned out across the water.

Is that so? Hannibal had asked, smiling courteously. Then Aristotle's Caecias wind has been kind to us.

Haai's smile had faltered momentarily at the unfamiliar term, but he'd quickly brushed it off. We land in two days, m'n vriend. You go on your way, and we go on ours. Eitje!

Hannibal had nodded. By Chiyoh's estimation, they would make landfall the very next evening. Op een stille zee kan iedereen stierman zijn, he'd affirmed.
The captain had raised an eyebrow at the saying, but didn't disagree. He'd taken a risk by accepting Hannibal on board, after all. Steering under difficult circumstances was a point to be admired. Hannibal intended to let the Dutchman continue believing in his admiration—right up until the moment he chose to end that belief.

The quiet pad of footsteps down the hatch ladder caught their ears. Chiyoh shifted beside him on the mattress. It was impossible to be completely silent on a craft built mostly of metal, even in rubber boots.

From the corner of his eye, Hannibal saw her fingers tighten around the handle of her knife.

A creak of hinges. *Chiyoh's door.* A huff Hannibal recognized as Haai's, followed by a low murmur from Sadis.

"She prob'ly in da fadda's room. Sketel."

Chiyoh's eyes glinted like polished onyx as they met Hannibal's. From the tone of the Belizean's voice, it wasn't difficult to guess the nature of his insult. She squared her jaw.

"Ready, Chiyoh?" he said softly. She nodded and turned her head, fixing her eyes on the porthole.

The door swung outward, revealing the silhouettes of the three men. Hannibal waited until Haai had stepped fully inside the room—and then sprang.

Chiyoh rose up in perfect synchronicity beside him, the curve of her blade flashing white in the half-light.

The blitz attack caught the crew by surprise. Hannibal drove his elbow into the side of the captain's skull, knocking him over with a grunt. He rushed through the doorway to the Jordanian. From the corner of his eye he caught a blur of brown and white limbs, locked in struggle. *Come on, Chiyoh,* he urged silently.

He'd watched the two sailors at their work on the boat—the way their hands had grasped at tools and rope; the dexterity of each man's limbs; the reaction time when something dropped or swung loose. He knew which one would be better adept at handling a weapon. It had been decided—perhaps appropriately—that Chiyoh would take Sadis. The Belizean had shown himself to be slower and frequently clumsy, traits that gave Hannibal peace of mind for his sister's preservation. That left Adham and Haai for him.

The Jordanian was frozen in shock, his feet fixed to the tread metal floor. A folding knife hung loose in one hand. The fingers of the other were curled around a hypodermic syringe.

The man's hazel eyes widened as Hannibal raised his arm and smashed the meat cleaver diagonally into his forehead. It lodged in his frontal bone, unleashing a waterfall of red down his cheeks and newly displaced eyes.

The sailor made no sound as he stumbled backward, limbs on autopilot, brain irrevocably damaged. Hannibal watched him crumple to the floor and slide to his shoulder before turning around. The whole process had taken less than six seconds.

He flipped the boning knife from his left hand to his right. In the strip of light falling across the cabin carpet, Haai was struggling to his knees.

A wet gurgle made both of their heads turn. Chiyoh was bent backwards under the stocky Belizean, teeth gritted, eyes narrowed in pain. Hannibal watched her arm jerk outward. A spray of blood
followed the path of her knife as it sliced across the man's throat.

Sadis' eyes rolled as he staggered backward, his thick hands clawing at his severed trachea and vocal cords. Blood spouted between his fingers from his slit jugular.

"Kuso yarou!" she spat.

Chiyoh crumpled back against the writing desk in the corner, breathing hard, one hand clutching at her lower back. The hunting knife was still curled in her hand. Her eyes flickered to Hannibal's before shooting back to Haai in alarm.

Hannibal whipped his head around. The Dutchman's face was contorted in anger and disorientation, his cheeks and brow flecked with the Belizean's blood. The Bernardelli pistol in his hands was leveled straight at Chiyoh.

"Ik ga haar vermoorden," he warned him. I will kill her.

Before Haai knew what was happening, Hannibal had crossed the space between them and buried the boning knife up to the hilt in his side. He wrenched the gun free from the man's fingers with his other hand.

The captain collapsed to the floor with an almost childlike wail. His fingers scrabbled at the knife handle as Hannibal turned the pistol back on him. The six-inch blade slid out between Haai's red, shaking fingers and fell to the carpet. He curled onto his side, an animal noise leaking from his throat.

Hannibal kicked the knife out of his reach and straddled the man's chest, keeping the gun's barrel trained on his forehead. Haai gasped in pain as his wound stretched. Hannibal could feel blood soaking through the leg of his trousers from the man's side. He pinned the captain's arms beneath his knees and stared down at him.

"Luckily for me, you aren't thinking very straight, Haai," he said, panting. Below him, the Dutchman's lip curled. His eyes were pale slits in his face. "Though it seems you haven't been for some time. Nu komt de aap uit de mouw. I hope you did not expect me to hesitate when you threatened my sister's safety."

"Me?" Haai gasped. "You are more threat than anyone—unghh—to her. To us. To your friend who wants to save you!"

A low gurgle sounded from across the floor—a death rattle. The second sailor's exit from the world was almost complete.

Hannibal ground his shin against the wound in Haai's side. The captain's eyes widened, pain blossoming across his features like a sunrise. *Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning*, Hannibal thought to himself, with a smirk.

"You've secured your own threat already, with your inconspicuous cargo," Hannibal hissed. From the way the captain's features twisted, Hannibal knew that Haai hadn't been aware of his and Chiyoh's discovery.

"I can put the knife back in," he suggested, "and you can spend your last moments in extreme discomfort. Or, you can tell me why Will Graham hired you."

Haai squared his jaw. "You expect me to tell you anything. *Je bent gestoord!*"

"All right, then. Chiyoh?"
Behind him, Chiyoh stepped over and picked up the boning knife. Hannibal could sense her stilted movements. *Unable to hide her pain.* She placed the handle in Hannibal's outstretched hand and took the offered gun from the other.

He couldn't smell any blood on her, other than Sadis' own. *Good,* he thought. *Nothing to demand stitches.*

Chiyoh stepped to the side and raised the pistol in her red-streaked hands, poised to fire at the first foul move from Haai.

Hannibal found the opening of the wound with his fingertip and positioned the tip of the blade at the entrance. The man writhed beneath him, his stringy biceps flexing against Hannibal's shins. The sight evoked a strange and sudden vision of Will struggling under his spread arms, freshly ejected from a nightmare. *Hannibal. Let. Me. Up.*

He blinked, clearing the image from his head. *Not now. Not the time.*

He pushed the first two inches of the boning knife back into the wound and twisted. Haai moaned and squirmed against him, unable to keep silent. His straggly gray hair snagged on the shag carpeting like dandelion seeds on blades of grass.

"It will only go deeper the more you struggle," Hannibal advised. "And the Mediterranean waters are rough here. Now, tell me: what is your connection to Will Graham?"

"You're going to kill me anyway. *Eet stront.*"

Hannibal sighed. *This is getting frightfully boring,* he thought to himself.

He pushed the blade all the way in, angling towards Haai's kidneys for a fresh effect. Blood streamed from the wound and pooled around Hannibal's knee as the Dutchman bit his lip, his throat working to barely contain his scream.

"An interesting, if derisive, suggestion," he said. "But not a suitable dish for my table. I would have taken your kidneys for breakfast, but I've just punctured one. Shall we do the same to the other? I'm a great admirer of symmetry. I'm sure Chiyoh would be happy to lend us her knife."

Haai blinked. His eyes were like flint.

"What do you say?" Hannibal tilted his head. "*Tussen ons gezegd, het ene roofdier naar de andere.*"

"*Een vriend,*" the captain spat. "That's how."

"Where?"

"*Dat ga ik niet*—"

"*Where!"* A hard twist of Hannibal's wrist brought the blade spiraling in the other direction, threatening the coiled mass of Haai's intestines.

"Answer him," Chiyoh said calmly. "In *English.* Or a bullet will puncture your skull, next."

"*Florida!*" Haai snarled. "*Godverdomme! You know my business. Where do you think?*

Hannibal's hand stilled on the blade's handle. The senior Graham's friend—*Oswalt,* the one whose card Will had kept from the memorial service—ran an alligator-hunting outfit in Florida. If it was the same man, there must be a connection between Oswalt's work in Florida and Haai's in Italy.
Hannibal knew if the threat had come from Florence, Haai would have disposed of them from Livorno. Not Calabria.

"You don't operate out of Florida," Chiyoh countered. "And your cargo is going to Europe. What's your point?"

Though her tone was level, Hannibal could sense an undercurrent of frustration in the words.

Haai looked at her. A trickle of Sadis' spattered blood slid along his lip and dripped onto the carpet.

"Nee," he said, his lips curling over his yellow smile, "but Will Graham's friends do. And their friends have their fingers in assholes all over the world. Ptuah!" He spat a blob of red-tinged phlegm onto the carpet and stared defiantly at Hannibal.

Hannibal's eyebrows lifted as the elements assembled into a hastily composed, half-dried painting in his mind. Il Mostro had terrorized Florence for nearly two decades. However, Italy's boot toe had been crawling with a different kind of spider for more than a century. Neither the Carabinieri nor the Guardia di Finanza had been able to stamp out the 'Ndrangheta—the Greek-speaking Brotherhood of the south, and cousins to Sicily's Cosa Nostra.

Hannibal remembered reading about the 'ndrine war of the mid-nineteen-eighties during his residence at Johns Hopkins. The mafia families had slain more than nine hundred of their own. Had he been living in Florence at the time, Hannibal would've been able to taste the blood in Calabria's Bergamot oranges and Porcini mushrooms.

The Brotherhood had later exported itself to the eastern and southern coasts of America. From there, it had seized nearly total control of the cocaine trade between Latin America and Europe. It made sense for Haai's business—but not for Hannibal's own. The belly of the 'Ndrangheta was already swollen with killers. What did it want with another?

He glared back at Haai. The man's breath was coming in short, painful bursts, and his face had gone from flushed to pallid. He was nowhere near death, of course; but he would be soon, if Hannibal willed it.

He rotated the knife slowly upward, widening the hole in the Dutchman's side.

"Aaah!" Haai's back jerked once, and smacked against the carpet.

"Flip-flop, little shark," Hannibal thought.

"It's time to come to a point," Hannibal said, "so to speak. I could carve you as I would a fish, and let your life leave you through your belly slowly, and with agony. Or I could snap your neck and end it quickly. You'll feel very little pain. A wise choice will pacify your last minutes. Explain what your business with the 'Ndrangheta has to do with me."

Haai's mouth twitched, alternating between a grin and a grimace. His teeth were stained red with the Belizean's blood; the floor of his boat was painted with his own.

What is a boat? A floating death—a ready-made tomb. The philosopher Secundus' words, spoken aloud by Pachrates in Hannibal's dream, had come full circle. Haai's ship had become a tomb—his own tomb—the moment he'd invited Hannibal on board with the intention of betraying him. A mistake yet to be unraveled.

Hannibal slowed his pull on the blade in encouragement. He needed Haai to talk.
"You don't know?" The Dutchman snickered, a wheeze in the sound. "You've had their attention for years. You think only the Americans want to punish you? You made new enemies in Italy, last time. They haven't forgotten. And the 'ndrine will do favors for even their prodigal daughters. Puah!"

Haai's foamy spittle landed on the cuff of the senior Graham's parka, as the captain was seized with a sudden coughing fit. Hannibal ground the pad of his thumb between the man's windpipe and sternomastoid muscle, pinching off his airflow.

His mind raced as Haai gasped for breath. Someone else had hired Haai—someone other than Will. A daughter of the 'Ndràngheta. Whom had he killed with ties to the Calabrian Brotherhood? The Fells had caused him little trouble, either during or after their disappearance. And Antony Dimmond's whimsical academic and social pursuits had been hardly compatible with a lifestyle of organized crime. Then there was Doctor Sogliato. Though respected in certain circles, the professor had lacked both the loyalty and love of his peers. Hannibal had read it in his small, beady eyes—the envy, the bitter loneliness. His death would never have inspired vengeance. Whose loyalty had, then? Whose love?

He released his thumb. The answer raced to him in the moment that Haai spoke.

"I see on your face the look of knowing, m'n vriend!" The Dutchman's words scraped his ears, a choked vibration beneath his hand. "Do you understand now? Allegra Pazzi was a Suraci long before she was a Pazzi. Florence offered her a chance for escape. That's where she met the inspector. But the Calabrian blood still boils inside her." He paused, heaving.

Hannibal curved his thumbnail into the greasy flesh of the captain's neck, drawing a bead of blood. A daughter of the 'Ndràngheta. It appeared that Rinaldo Pazzi's widow possessed a family legacy almost as interesting as her late husband's.

"Her father was shot in the street," Haai hissed. His voice was like sandpaper. "Did you know that? She saw it happen. She was a girl then. She thought she would make a nice life later, in the north. What she got was Pazzi and his debt, and his crazy theories. And then she got you." Under his fingers, Haai's throat twisted as he attempted to swallow. "No more dreams for Pazzi's Calabrian princess. Only revenge."

"You would have sold us to them." Chiyoh's voice rose behind them, soft and deadly. "You might have made a handsome profit. If they hadn't killed you afterwards."

Haai's eyes narrowed. "I am the best at what I do, kleine meid," he spat. "My partners can't afford to lose me."

"Was," Hannibal corrected. He curled his hand across the entirety of the Dutchman's throat, grinding down on his trachea. He withdrew the boning knife with one swift motion, unleashing a fresh torrent of blood and a strangled groan from Haai. He extended his other arm, holding out his hand palm up.

"You've spun us an interesting story, captain, and I thank you. It may prove beneficial. Now, Chiyoh—the syringe, if you will."

Haai's eyes shot to Chiyoh. Behind him, Hannibal heard the sound of his duffel being unzipped. Then the thick, cool weight of a hypodermic syringe was slipped into his hand. Chiyoh's fingertips were warm as they brushed his palm. He sensed her step away, bringing both hands back to the pistol.

"No—no, what are you doing! Ben je helemaal gek geworden?"
Hannibal raised the needle over Haai's face. The light from the hallway filtered through the twenty-milliliter glass barrel, illuminating the clear liquid inside.

"I would rather have savored your lying tongue as gyuutan. Grilled bare, thinly sliced, and garnished with sea salt, in the Japanese style. But as we're woefully short on time, a taste of your own product will have to do."

He gave the needle a slight shake. The Dutchman's eyes filled with panic as he saw it was completely full.

"Uncut and undiluted, and far purer than your intentions."

Haai wriggled beneath him, color rising back into his face. "Val dood! The Brotherhood will find you. They'll kill you, and your kutwijf. Then your flikker!"

"Mond dicht," Hannibal answered smoothly, leaning forward and grinding his shins against the Dutchman's shoulders. He thrust his fingers into Haai's stringy hair and pulled, exposing the left side of his neck. "You'll feel a bite."

Hannibal pressed the tip of the needle to the large vein bulging under Haai's skin. Beneath them, the sea slipped and pitched, seeming to lift and compress the space inside the cabin; moments of weightlessness, followed by a stiff pressure.

Hannibal tightened his grip on the man's hair and pushed the steel shaft into his vein, then slowly compressed the plunger with his thumb. Haai moaned, his neck muscles straining as he tried to turn his head.

Behind them, Hannibal heard Chiyoh shift in her stance. He could smell the sharp, tangy aroma of curiosity leaking from her skin. She'd likely never witnessed a psychostimulant overdose.

Hannibal withdrew the needle and laid it to the side. He could feel the pooled blood around his ankles beginning to cool. The captain fell silent, panting between anxious swallows. An acidic wave of pheromones struck Hannibal's nose.

Finally frightened, he observed, with satisfaction. Yet still unwilling to show his fright. I can smell your fear, little shark. Soon, you'll stop swimming.

Five seconds ticked by. Ten. Then, without warning, a strangled cry burst from Haai's bloodstained mouth as his body lifted in a violent convulsion. The movement unleashed a fresh spurt of blood that seeped immediately into Hannibal's trousers. Hannibal ground down on his shoulders with both hands, fighting the invisible current tearing through the man's bloodstream.

Haai's hips bucked upward, slamming between Hannibal's thighs—and he had a sudden, repulsive vision of Will underneath him—Will inside of him—Will invading him, and then leaving, once again.

Hannibal gritted his teeth. He shook the images away with a snarl. No—it wasn't death we made that night.

Haai's eyes rolled back in his head, the yellowed whites standing out in stark contrast to the red rims of his eyelids. Two-hundred milligrams of high-purity cocaine would have been enough to induce cardiac arrest. Four-hundred milligrams was overkill—which was exactly what Hannibal wanted.

A gurgling sound came from deep inside the man's throat as he thrashed underneath Hannibal's body, all sharp hipbones and jutting ribs. Sweat streamed from his face in salted chemical trails.
Hannibal silently urged the Dutchman's heart to seize before he started vomiting.

His wish came true. Not half a minute after the convulsions had begun, Haai's body froze, his spine arched in a hard U against the floor. His mouth opened and closed, like a fish's, choking on a breath that didn't come.

Hannibal lifted his hands from the man's shoulders. Haai's body sagged against the carpet as the air hissed from him. Pink-tinged sputum bubbled from his nostrils and parted lips. The reek of freshly evacuated bowels reached Hannibal's nose, and he was suddenly thankful he hadn't pinned the Dutchman on his belly. *Eet stront*, Haai had invited him. While not quite the same effect, Hannibal supposed Haai's ordurous exit *did* give the man something of a last word. The thought amused him.

Hannibal grabbed the boning knife from the floor and pushed himself off of the fresh corpse of their captain. His right trouser leg stuck to his shin and thigh where Haai's blood had soaked through it.

Chiyoh lowered the pistol. They were safe, for the time being. She winced as her arms relaxed.

"Are you injured, Chiyoh?" Hannibal asked, scanning her sloped form.

"Only a muscle strain. It will pass."

"Good," he said, wiping the blade clean with the bottom of the parka. "That takes care of our untrustworthy crew. We have a long and scenic two days ahead of us. We should make some headway on the roads while we still have the dark."

Chiyoh was silent. She flipped the safety on the Bernardelli and tucked it into the belt around her coat. "So, Will Graham has led the mafia to you," she said, looking up. "And to me."

Hannibal cleared his throat. "Inadvertently, it would seem."

"Are you going to forgive him for that also?"

Her eyes were inquisitive and hard. Hannibal switched the knife to his left hand and took both of Chiyoh's hands in his right. *Pale and slender, with long fingers—like Mischa's.* They fit into his own as naturally as his sister's hands had. But, unlike Mischa's, Chiyoh's hands were deadly, capable of bestowing heart-stopping epiphanies upon those who fell into her disfavor—or into Hannibal's.

Chiyoh looked at him, her stone-like gaze reflecting the blinking light from the hallway as she waited for him to speak.

"Chiyoh. *Watashi no imouto.* This new enemy is mine, not yours. I wouldn't ask you to share its burden. But I *will* watch over you, as you've watched over me." Hannibal paused. He stroked his thumb across the smooth tent of her knuckles. He had missed Chiyoh after he'd left home. More than he'd shown to her—more than she'd understood. *Perhaps it's time to change that,* he thought.

"We'll divide up the ship, as we agreed," he continued. "Bring anything useful and portable you find in the chart room and the wheelhouse. I'll check the cabins. Fifteen minutes—then we vanish into the night."

Chiyoh nodded. *Ryoukai,* she said, her face softening. She withdrew her hands and slipped silently into the hallway towards the hatch ladder.

Ten minutes and a change of trousers later, Hannibal returned to his own cabin with a laptop, a cell phone, two charging cords, and several rolls of five-hundred and two-hundred euro notes from Haai's cabin.
He stuffed the electronics and bank notes into his duffel and slung it over his shoulder, along with Chiyoh's rifle bag. The stillness of Haai's corpse in the middle of the carpet arrested him. *I would rather have savored your lying tongue.* Hannibal grinned to himself. No time for meat preparation or preservation—but he *could* leave a message for the 'Ndràngheta.

He set down the duffels and fetched the boning knife from his bag. The corpse's mouth gaped at him as he crouched over its cooling form. The jaw muscles were softening, along with the rest of the body, in the onset of post-mortem flaccidity. He rolled up the sleeves of his parka and went to work.

He sliced down either corner of the Dutchman's mouth, gifting him with a wider smile than he'd ever shown while alive. The cuts bled little. If the Brotherhood had done their research, the parallel to Donald Sutcliffe would be difficult to miss. Then, using both hands, Hannibal cracked open the corpse's jaw. Haai's tobacco-stained teeth were small, but sharp. They dug into the meat of Hannibal's palm, leaving tiny impressions that would soon fade. *Now for the tongue.*

The organ was sticky with half-dried phlegm and blood from where Haai had bitten into it during his seizure. Hannibal sawed quickly through the frenulum, freeing the tongue from the bottom of the jaw. He reached into the back of Haai's freshly opened throat and grasped it in his fingers. Rough papillae grazed his skin. He used the knife to slice through the adipose and connective tissue, then the glands, lingual artery, and skeletal muscle. Blood lined the squares of his nails and greased the pads of his fingers, making the disconnecting cut a slippery one. When he was finished, the shark's rubbery, brown-tinged tongue hung limp in his hand, as useless as his lies.

He bored a small hole through the middle of the organ with the tip of the knife, before tucking the meat into the zippered front pocket of the senior Graham's fishing parka. The pocket itself was riddled with inexplicable holes, as Hannibal had discovered early on their journey across the Atlantic. However, the slice of Haai he'd taken was large enough to rest inside without falling through.

He wiped off his hands on the parka, then cleaned both the knife and his nails in the cabin sink. After repacking the cutlery in his duffel, Hannibal hoisted the bags over his shoulders and made for the hallway. He stepped over Adham's graying, crumpled body and ascended the hatch ladder.

The crescent moon glowed behind the gauzy winter clouds as Hannibal poked his head above deck. Less than half a mile in the distance, the lights of Gioia Tauro's cargo port shone in invitation—one they would have to decline. After he and Chiyoh reached the shore, they would need to travel on foot—*around* the port, rather than through it—to avoid detection. Then they would procure a vehicle to transport them to Panevėžys.

Chiyoh was waiting for him at the stern. A brisk, choppy wind had already teased a few strands of hair loose from her bun. She eyed Hannibal through the darkness as he unstrapped her canvas bag from his shoulder.

"Did you find anything?" she asked, taking the duffel handle and slipping it cross-wise over her chest.

"Cash. A computer and a phone. We'll see if we can crack into them later. And you?"

"A few printouts," she answered. "Only navigational data—no correspondence. The ship would have looked clean if someone had come onboard to inspect it. I dropped the anchor, too. You probably felt it."

Hannibal nodded. "Very good. Now, did our dear, departed sailor also give you an idea of how to launch the lifeboat?" He eyed the small, orange craft hanging along the wall of the wheelhouse.
Will would know. The thought came unbidden, bringing with it a stiff ache. Will isn't here, Hannibal reprimanded himself. He didn't want to be.

"Yes," Chiyoh answered. Then, as though she could sense his thoughts, she added, "It doesn't require the expertise of a sailor. Just one of us at each davit. Are you ready?"

"Almost," he replied. He set his duffel down and shrugged out of the fishing parka. He'd been wearing it daily for the past two weeks, almost as if it were a uniform. The faded, forest green fabric had practically molded to his body. It was a hideous and surprisingly comfortable jacket; worn out in spots, but it kept out the weather. The fact that it reminded him of Will was purely incidental, he'd told himself.

The breeze bit at his skin through his pullover. He clasped the parka in his hands, categorizing the texture and weight of the fabric. *Time to go*, his sterner voice reminded him. He unzipped the front pocket and withdrew the Dutchman's cold, spongy tongue. Chiyoh made a small noise as he knelt down.

"What is that?"

Hannibal smirked. The fascination in Chiyoh's voice was not unlike Mischa's. His sister had still been learning the names of things at the age she was killed. Walking through the Aukštaitijan woods, she would often point to a bird or an insect and ask him, *What is it?* The question was usually followed by another: *Will you catch it for me?*

Hannibal swallowed. "When my sister and I were young, she used to invent nicknames for me," he said, weaving the laces of the parka's hood through the hole he'd bored in the middle of Haai's tongue. "It helped her remember words she liked. Her favorite—one she used often—was *vilko nosis.*"

He knotted the ends of the strings in a square. It would prevent the meat from slipping off, once he rigged it. *Wolf's nose,* he clarified. "Even as a young child, Mischa was aware of my keen sense of smell. She used it to her advantage. She would ask me to tell her when the nurse was heating her bathwater, so she could run and hide."

Hannibal went to the stern flagstaff, carrying the parka with its fleshy ornament in the crook of his elbow. The cable was grimy and roughened by the salt air. He lowered the striped *Nederland* banner and unhooked it from its fastenings, and then tossed the tattered rectangle overboard.

Chiyoh tucked her hands into her pockets, staring skeptically at the tongue swinging from its hooded perch.

"Similarly, my sister and I used to creep down to the kitchen, after I knew the cook had set the baking out to cool," Hannibal continued. "Mischa was always disappointed when the biscuits had raisins instead of chocolates or jam. That didn't stop either of us from stealing them, of course."

He threaded the cable through the sleeves of the parka, tying the cuffs to anchor it in place, and then zipped up the front. The tongue flapped over the neck gaiter, a pink sag of flesh twisting in the icy wind.

"So, what have you taken now?" Chiyoh asked, in a measured voice.

"*Gyuutan*. Raw. Haai's hospitality was in poor *taste*, wouldn't you agree? Let's see if his Calabrian friends can use their wolf's noses to trace the scent of his failure."

Hannibal pulled the cable down, hand over hand, until the parka was flying against the night sky in
place of the ship's flag. The Dutchman's deceitful tongue bounced merrily against the flapping canvas fabric. It was a suitable ensign for the kingpin's bloodied craft, Hannibal thought. He was almost sorry he wouldn't have time to see whether the 'Ndràngheta or the Guardia di Finanza was first to discover the *Golem*'s secrets.

Chiyoh quirked an eyebrow at his satirical design, but didn't comment. "I'll take the crane closest to the bow," she said. "After we hit the water, the hooks will detach automatically. The steering should be simple enough."

Hannibal slung his duffel over his shoulder. Gratitude tugged at him, sharp and bittersweet. *Little Chiyoh, ever practical. Ever watchful. How many times have you risked your life to protect mine?*

"Let us go then, you and I," he said.

Chiyoh answered—not with an echoing line, as Will had—but with a swift nod, and solemn eyes that reflected the moonlight.

For once, Hannibal found himself thankful for a lack of poetry in his companion's reply.

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—*One week earlier, thirty-three days after the fall—the first of December—*

The cool, humid breeze stirred the high branches of the longleaf pines bordering the edge of the interstate rest stop. It tangled in Will's curls and danced along his forearms below the bunched-up sleeves of his raglan.

In the blueing dusk, the dogs chased one another through the rain-dampened grass. They sniffed at the fallen pinecones already working their way into the dirt, seeking to spread their seeds.

He sat atop a concrete picnic table, warming his hands around a muddy cup of vending-machine coffee. His steel flask rested beside him. It was a fifth emptier than when he'd stopped.

Both the whiskey and the scenery had eased the first half of his drive through Chattanooga, though they hadn't succeeded in shutting down his mind. When he'd seen signs for the welcome stop in Cuba, Alabama, he'd decided to pull off and let the dogs run. And allow himself a proper drink.

Next to the flask sat his discarded sweatshirt and his phones—his own cell, and the burner. Both had remained dark for the past five days. He'd texted Molly the day before, out of courtesy if nothing else. *I'm heading down to Louisiana for a little while. Just wanted to let you know.*

Molly hadn't replied. She didn't need anything from him. Not anymore. And Hannibal was in the middle of the ocean somewhere with Chiyoh. He likely wouldn't have a cell signal. Not that Hannibal would have any reason to contact him. Will had already made clear his decision.

*Would you kiss me again,* Hannibal had asked. Snowflakes had drifted onto the porch, settling into Hannibal's hair and melting along the silver-gray strands, further saturating Will's picture of the eternally complex man before him—his lover, now—in his mind's eye.

*I would want to, if this wasn't where our path was ending.*
Not the words he'd wanted to say; the words he'd forced himself to say.

*Abandonment requires expectation.* No expectations, no intentions on Will's part—or so he'd claimed.

*And on Hannibal's part—?

The thought hadn't settled well. Not well at all. So he'd kept drinking, between the long bouts of clarity required for the road. The numbness of the whiskey had mingled with the numbness in his brain. He'd driven and driven, and kept on driving.

The dogs hadn't been thrilled about riding in the camper van, but neither the Subaru nor the pickup would've fit all of them. *We won't stay long,* Will had promised them. *Just long enough.*

Wally Oswalt had provided him with one more reference—this time, a landlord in New Orleans' rebuilt Gentilly neighborhood. The man had a small shotgun house for rent. Wally had promised to take care of the arrangements on Mister Gigliotti's behalf, which Will had agreed to without a second thought. He would've taken even an apartment, as long as it was big enough for the dogs.

He almost didn't hear the patrol car pull into the deserted parking lot. When Will lifted his head, a state trooper in a navy uniform was walking toward him with a measured swagger. His hand rested on the butt of the gun hooked to his utility belt. The tassels on his duty hat were loose, skewing his otherwise impeccable appearance.

*Might want to glue those down,* Will thought to himself.

"Evenin', sir," the trooper called out. A bark sounded from the tree line at the words. Will shoved the flask underneath his crumpled sweatshirt as the trooper's head turned.

"Evening," he said, as the man looked back. Will took another swig of his cooling coffee and studied him over the brim. The trooper was tall, broad-shouldered, with thick-set eyes and a thin mouth. Will guessed him to be in his early thirties.

"Where y'all headed?" the officer asked, stepping toward the picnic table. The light from the nearby lamppost threw a shine over his face and the double-eagle badge on his right sleeve. He didn't smile.

Beyond the parking lot, Winston and Delilah's heads poked up from a scrub of bushes, their ears perked.

"New Orleans," Will said. "Just stopping for a stretch."

"Uh huh. Warmer down there right now. How long you been on the road?"

Will scratched the back of his neck. The humidity was prickling his skin, bringing back the phantom mosquitoes from the southern winters of his youth.

"A few days," he said.

The trooper glanced toward the trees bordering the picnic area. Wilhelmina and Bowser had joined Winston and Delilah in scrutinizing their uninvited guest. Zoe, Simon, and Bowser were still off in the woods somewhere, tracking down the scents of rural wildlife and long-gone dogs. Their quiet grunts and whuffs were audible on the night air.

"These dogs should be on leashes." The trooper's gray eyes pinned Will in a stare. "It's illegal for animals to be runnin' around loose at an interstate rest stop. Could hurt somebody, or get lost."
Will looked into his cardboard cup, then back at the trooper. "Sorry. They needed some air. Been cooped up most of the day. There's no one else out here, so I thought—"

"You thought wrong. There's fines associated with this kinda thing. ALDOT takes it pretty seriously. So does the highway patrol."

The brusqueness of the man's words startled him. Will reigned in his knee-jerk response before it could fly out: You try driving for two days with a van full of restless dogs and broken memories, and see how much you care.

Behind them, Zoe gave a low growl.

"All right," Will said. He felt a faint buzz of anger spreading inside his chest. "I'll finish my coffee, and get them back inside. Then we'll be off."

The trooper stepped closer, allowing the light to fall across his face. The shiny bronze pin on his front pocket read DAWSON.

He squinted, lending an otter-like look to his features. "I've seen you before."

Will flashed his most polite feel-free-to-fuck-off smile. "We haven't met."

He raised the coffee cup and blew over the top, pretending to cool the lukewarm liquid inside. The thought occurred to him that his revolver was stowed inside the glove box of the camper. He wished, now, that he'd tucked it in his waistband.

"No," the officer said, jutting his chin and stepping inside the two-foot personal space boundary to which most people held. "Your face. You've been on TV. The papers."

Will stared back, waiting for the trooper to make the inevitable connection. Years ago, he'd had a ready arsenal of responses: Not official FBI—a consultant... I'm the guy who didn't kill all those people... No, I didn't catch Hannibal Lecter; he surrendered.

Which lightbulb would go off inside the officer's head? he wondered. Perhaps this one would ask about something else. Something more recent. I'm not really the guy who caught the Tooth Fairy—but I did help kill him... Yeah, the guy who took a swan dive off a cliff with Hannibal-the-Cannibal Lecter... And the guy who couldn't hold his family together because of it—him, too.

The burst of recognition on the trooper's face didn't surprise him; the accompanying noise of disgust did.

"Wait—you're the guy who worked with the FBI! Graham. The one who got all tangled up with that psycho cannibal, Lecter."

Will cleared his throat. "It was a thorny situation," he said, without offering more information.

The trooper shifted. From the corner of his eye, Will saw the man's thumb move to the latch on his holster. His forearm muscle tensed with the movement.

"But Lecter escaped. That prison he was in up east—it burned down. It was all over the news, as far down as here. There's a countrywide manhunt going on. Sure you're already aware—'specially seeing as how thorny things got with you two." He paused. "That was in the papers, too."

A low whine from the edge of the clearing hit Will's ears. Winston. He looked over the trooper's shoulder. In the shadows beyond the trees, a dark, solid shape loomed. Eyes like burning coals...
glittered beneath a twisted calligraphy of antlers. Winston stood stock-still, looking at the creature in curiosity. The black stag didn't seem to notice the dogs this time. He was staring straight at Will, as if awaiting his next words.

Will looked back at the trooper. He knew the other man wouldn't be able to see the stag.

"Yes, I'm aware," he said, keeping his voice level. He could feel black roots unfurling inside his chest, stinging sharp and earthen. Poison seeped into his bloodstream from the yawning darkness. "Well aware."

The officer smirked. He tipped his head toward the camper parked by the trashcans at the edge of the lot. The spinning blue lights from his patrol car whirled across the green metal hood.

"That your van?" he asked.

"It is."

The trooper squared his jaw. A shift in his demeanor—the alpha-male face-off, typical of rural cops with chips on their shoulders or bones to pick. Will had seen plenty of it during his time in NOPD Homicide. Had run into it more than a few times in his youth, too.

"Mind if I ask where you stayed last night?"

The cardboard flexed between Will's fingertips. "Outside Chattanooga," he said, then added, "The Holiday RV park off seventy-five. Anything else you want to know before I get my dogs out of your rest area?"

"Hmm," the trooper hummed. "Seems like I could call and ask the campground if I wanted to verify, Mister Graham. But I guess there's no point in me askin' if you had anyone with you. Besides your pets, of course." He glared down at Zoe, who'd sneaked up during the conversation and was now growling at him quietly from underneath the picnic table.

Wouldn't look at her crosswise if I were you, Will thought. She's the smallest, but you wouldn't know it if she got her teeth in you—she doesn't let go.

"I'm traveling by myself," he said. "Who else do you imagine would be with me?"

The trooper cleared his throat. "Well, things can get thorny, like you said. Sometimes that makes us wanna help people we shouldn't help—for a slew of reasons. Sometimes unnatural ones."

Will stared. His eyeballs itched with heat. He felt a sudden splash of chilly liquid down his arm and realized he'd crushed the coffee cup in his hand.

"I take it," he said slowly, "that you're a fan of TattleCrime and Freddie Lounds' reporting—if you want to call it that. Which I don't."

The trooper's eyebrows shot up. Underneath the table, Zoe snarled. The remainder of the pack had gathered around the officer and Will in a loose semicircle. The man straightened, flashing a false smile. It was mostly teeth.

"Mind if I take a look at your van, Mister Graham? And your license and registration, too."

Back to playing the straight cop. "Yeah. Sure thing," Will said, not bothering to hide his exasperation. He wiped his coffee-stained hand on his jeans and pushed himself off the picnic table. "Registration's in the glove box," he added.
The officer stood outside the van, as Will unlocked the camper door and slid into the driver's seat. Will could feel his eyes on his back.

"Hand over those documents once you've got 'em out. Then I'll have a quick look while you wait outside. And then we can both be on our way."

"Sounds like a plan," Will grumbled under his breath, as he fiddled with the ancient latch to the glove box. The drawer popped open with a rattle. Barney's manila envelope lay on top, inconspicuous in its plainness. Inside were the photocopied drawings the orderly had put in his SUV on the night of the fire, along with Hannibal's letter. He'd thought about throwing them away, but they'd ended up in one of the half-empty boxes he'd taken with him to Lake Barcroft. Better than Molly finding them in the trash.

Atop the envelope lay a folded sheet of paper. Traces of a boot print were visible along the edge. Its hidden caption whispered to him, like a curse.

At several points along the drive, Will had imagined tearing the drawing of Hadrian and his dead lover into a thousand pieces and letting the scraps stream out the window, like confetti. Instead, he'd kept it locked in the glove box with the others.

Beneath Barney's envelope peeked the wood-and-steel bulge of his snubnose. Will fingered the curve of the handle. The rest stop was empty, except for his dogs and the trooper. The camper was parked at the dark end of the lot, its left side hidden from the security cameras. Not very smart of Trooper Dawson to stand on the driver's side.

The invisible roots snaked up his neck and along his chin, tangling into an oily grimace. If Hannibal were here, would he have made the decision for them, as he had with Doctor Schneider? Would the two of them have reveled in the chance to kill again together, as they had in the hospital? Will knew Hannibal would've considered the trooper's insinuations rude.

But Hannibal's not here, his inner voice reprimanded. You didn't want him to be.

Didn't I? A smaller, less certain voice replied. Will felt a sharp and sudden flash of pain inside his gut. He pushed his palm to his temple. No. You were supposed to leave... You did leave... I made you leave.

The heat inside his skull was threatening to split. The snubnose's safety was solid beneath his thumb—inviting.

Flame and rage, or salt and tears—or both. Which will it be? Are you a killer, Will?

I was. We are. And now loving you is changing the way I think.

A flutter of movement broke the thrum of voices inside his head. Outside the windshield, the feathered stag turned and galloped into the trees, leaving his sightline empty. Leaving him blind.

Isn't that what love does? Leaves you sightless and open and raw?

Will shivered. The wood of the revolver brushed his fingertips as he pulled away.

Not this time, he thought. Not without you.

"Found your registration yet, Mister Graham?" From outside the van, the annoyed lilt of the trooper's voice buzzed in his ears.
Will reached under the manila envelope and grabbed his insurance card. He slammed the lid closed, hard enough to make the latch stick. He didn't need Dawson asking about his gun or poking through his Lecter art collection.

"Yeah." He jumped down from the driver's seat and handed over the card, then fished his driver's license from his wallet.

Winston trotted up, nosing into Will's hand. Will ran his fingers along the dog's silky ears and waited as the trooper squinted down at the two plastic rectangles.

"Fine," he said, handing back the cards. "All that seems to be in order."

"Not going to run my ID?" Will scoffed. "I might have an unpaid parking ticket from a couple years ago. Could be your lucky day to catch a criminal."

"No need for sarcasm, Mister Graham."

Officer Dawson was beginning to sound more irritated than intrigued, Will noted—which, all things considered, wasn't an unwelcome turn of events.

"If you'll just open up the back of your van for me, I'll have a look inside."

Will reached through the window of the driver's door and toggled the lock and the lights. "Help yourself," he said, stepping back.

Winston started after the officer as he climbed inside the camper, his Glock twenty-two drawn. Will whistled. "Stay, Winston." The dog turned back with an imploring glance, then plopped down on the asphalt when Will shook his head.

The pinched crown of the trooper's hat was visible through the windows as he poked around the back of the camper. Will took out his flask, unscrewed the cap, and took a quick swig as he watched the patrol car's lights flash along the tree trunks with disinterest. Around him, the songs of night birds—ones whose calls he didn't recognize—drifted from the pines and leafless oaks.

After a few minutes, Dawson's hat poked from the door of the camper. He holstered his gun as he stepped down, his face devoid of expression.

"Looks like you're clean, Mister Graham. Clean as you can get. 'Cept for the dogs—make sure to leash 'em next time you stop."

Will could feel the whiskey simmering just below his thoughts. "As you can see, officer, I'm not transporting any fugitives in my camper." He smiled. "Just a whole lotta puppy chow. The two don't really mix."

Dawson eyed him with a grimace. It was the same look most people gave him when he failed at making a joke. It was probably a good thing the trooper wasn't standing close enough to smell him, Will thought. He could tell the officer was chalking up his rudeness to what Freddie had written about him. 'Doesn't play well with others.' 'Thought to fall somewhere on the spectrum between autism and Asperger's.' 'Not considered suitable for FBI field service.' 'Failed psych eval after psych eval—except for Hannibal Lecter's, of course.'

Yeah, I'm that guy, too, Will thought to himself. The whiskey tugged at his empty stomach.

The radio on the trooper's belt suddenly jumped to life. Zoe yipped at the burst of static as a tinny female voice crackled from the receiver.
"State Troop D to two-eighteen."

Dawson unhooked his radio. "Go ahead, State Troop D."

"Two-eighteen, we have a possible stolen vehicle. Silver two-thousand-six Acura Integra, Alabama registration three, O–Ocean, U–Union, one, zero, three, zero. Vehicle last seen traveling southbound on I-fifty-nine from highway eighty, approximately two minutes ago. Suspect is a white male around nineteen years old, brown hair, wearing a red hoodie. He'll be coming your way in a couple minutes."

"I'm on the way, State Troop D." The trooper shoved the radio back into its clip. "I believe you're not runnin' anywhere with him, Mister Graham," he said, the curiosity flattened from his voice. "But maybe you're still runnin' from him." He paused, raising an eyebrow. "Either way, you're free to go. You got a lonely drive ahead'a you."

Will opened his mouth—then closed it, not knowing what he was going to say. A heavy, hollow feeling rose up inside his chest, into his throat. It was strangled—choking—just like the water in his dream. Both Hannibal and Molly had been there with him, in Wolf Trap. Now, neither of them were.

The realization pummeled him, stiff and cold: I'm going to drown alone. Because I chose to.

"I'm—I'm just trying to get to New Orleans," he said weakly.

The trooper nodded. "Safe travels," he said, and headed back to his patrol car.

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–Forty-three days after the fall, evening–

"This doesn't feel like a celebration."

Chiyoh traced her finger around the rim of her wine glass, smearing a stray droplet of the Don Melchor Cabernet Sauvignon along the diamond-and-wedge-cut crystal.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "You were always partial to zrazai. I thought it an appropriate homecoming dish. Did you not enjoy it?"

The stewed beef roulade, stuffed with pork and boletus mushrooms and garnished with kasha, was one of the few meals Simonetta Sforza-Lecter had always insisted on cooking herself. But she'd stopped making it after Mischa's death, and had forbidden the estate's head chef to prepare it.

It was also the same meal Hannibal had made for Will and Chiyoh, in another time and world, on their first night at Lecter Castle. Neither of them had been particularly happy during that dinner, either. But Chiyoh hadn't shown that she understood the night's choice of dish to be symbolic. Hannibal and Will were the only ones who seemed to share any awareness of that veiled past—if it was, indeed, past.

Esoteric. Baffling. Intriguing. And yet Will had refused to discuss it with him at the cabin. That's not a memory, Hannibal. It wasn't real... There isn't any point.

Isn't there? he'd wanted to say. As you wish, he'd yielded, instead—not for the last time that night.
Chiyoh's eyes flickered up, shining like stones in the yellow light from the chandelier. Her hair was combed to the side, hanging in a loose, glossy sheet down the side of her face. It was longer than he remembered. Rare of her to leave it unpinned. It suited her, he thought.

"I am partial to it," she said. "And I did enjoy it." She paused, assessing him from across the table. "Your mind is elsewhere. In Italy. Or Virginia." She brought the wine glass to her lips and swallowed. "Or both."

Hannibal considered the suggestion, twining the stem of his own glass between his thumb and forefinger. In a minor miracle, their madcap, thirty-hour drive from Gioia Tauro to Panevėžys had yielded few surprises, in terms of either transportation or enemy appearances. They'd reached Caserta before dawn on the morning they'd vacated the Golem. Hannibal knew that Allegra Pazzi's old 'ndrine wouldn't have given up hunting them at the Calabrian border; but he could tell that entering Campania had put Chiyoh slightly more at ease.

He was sorry to speed past the volcanic Tufa walls and labyrinthine tunnels of Orvieto. He hadn't studied the medieval frescos of the Chiesa di San Giovenale in more than two decades. Now, there was no telling when he'd have the chance again.

When they'd grown too tired to drive, they'd stopped at a small hotel in Ostrava, close to the Czech-Polish border. The garishly styled inn was built atop a nineteenth-century coal mine, and the walls seemed to echo with canary song and black lung croup.

They'd taken turns showering off the dried blood and travel sludge in the marigold-tiled bathroom, and then slept for a few hours each in the soft double bed, before cheating the sunrise to the road.

Thanks to Schengen, neither Chiyoh's legal passport nor Hannibal's recently procured false one had occasion for use. Still, Chiyoh's eyes had brightened when they reached the Budzisko-Kalvarija border crossing. Almost home.

For Hannibal, however, Lithuania's forested embrace had felt chilly. He'd pictured driving down the A2 from Vilnius, with Will by his side in the silver Mulsanne, basking in the moonlit glow of the Aukštaitijan night. Speeding towards an uncertain future, yes, but a future together.

Chiyoh had chosen an inconspicuous Fiat Tipo with tinted windows. The drab cloth interior had reeked of cigar—Dominican Romeo y Julieta, Hannibal's olfactory memory supplied. It had made him more eager to shed the last of Bill Graham's second-hand clothing upon reaching the estate.

When they'd at last bypassed the Panevėžys city limits and crossed the Nevėžis River, Chiyoh's grip on the steering wheel had tightened unexpectedly.

What is it? Hannibal had asked.

I have to check something, she'd answered, offering no further explanation beyond her whitened knuckles.

She'd parked the Tipo off the side of the road, underneath a cluster of trees, a little less than a kilometer from Lecter Castle.

Stay here, she'd said, strapping her rifle over her back and Haai's pistol into her belt. If I don't return in half an hour, start driving in the opposite direction.

Hannibal had raised an eyebrow, but didn't argue. Chiyoh was tense—tenser than she'd been after discovering their Atlantic reroute, tenser than before their blitz attack on Haai and his crew. Something in her determination to protect him better this time touched him, in a way he hadn't
And so he'd waited. The interior of the rental car had grown chilly as the night's silence had sharpened his senses. He'd listened to the breeze whispering through the dehydrated pines, and caught the sharp, airy scent of forthcoming snow. He'd heard Chiyoh's returning footsteps well before she came back into view, twenty-seven minutes after she'd darted off into the forest.

*You look considerably more at ease,* Hannibal had said as Chiyoh slid back into the driver's seat. *I take it your expectations were satisfied?*

Chiyoh's dark eyes had darted to meet his. Her cheeks were two pink spots in her pale face. *I set spring-guns and snares at every entrance to the house,* she'd said. *I needed to make sure none were disturbed.*

She'd turned her face away then, peering out the windshield as she'd restarted the car and steered it back onto the road.

Hannibal's reply had died in his throat. The thought had come again: *Little Chiyoh, ever practical. Ever watchful.* It appeared his guardian sparrow and his absent lamb had been grooming him for this gilded cage ever since his rescue. A loss for Chiyoh, perhaps, that he wouldn't be staying long enough for her to clip his wings.

"Anata no tame ni shinpai shiteiru no."

The syllables broke Hannibal from his reverie. *I'm concerned for you.*

He looked across the dinner table at his sister. Her eyes, hard and liquid, were tempered by an uncharacteristic tenderness.

He swallowed. Flashes of Florentine nights, bathed in low lamplight and rich wine, and Bedelia's cold yet pitying glances, spun through his head. Reassurances Bedelia had never spoken. Questions she'd never asked. And yet, here was Chiyoh, speaking them aloud, as if serving as his confidant and conspirator were natural—even comfortable—for her.

"Is that why you killed with me?" he asked softly, watching the star-like refractions of light from his wine glass scatter across the table.

"No."

Chiyoh's expression was patient—almost placid—when he looked back.

"I killed with you because I—because we—had no other choice. Violence can be necessary for protection. But protection doesn't always require the destruction of life." She paused, then pointed out, "I didn't kill Will."

Hannibal smirked. "No, you didn't. I think you surprised him with that. *Both* times."

The trace of a smile flickered across Chiyoh's face. Then her eyes grew serious again.

"Unless uninvited guests arrive," she said, "this is where my participation in that killing ends."

Hannibal looked back into his glass. "I understand."

A sudden chilliness seemed to settle over the dining room. Decades-old echoes, from when the house was full of bustle and vigor, seeped from the walls and along the floorboards. They mocked his and
Chiyoh's quiet, distracted supper with claustrophobic glee.

The 'Ndràngheta won't find you here, imouto-san, he thought to himself. You are protected in this house—by too many ghosts.

Chiyoh sighed. "I will keep watch over us as long as you need. But I can't help you with Will Graham."

"I don't expect you to," Hannibal replied. "I don't expect him to, either. Will is in too great a state of moral confounding to come to a satisfactory conclusion. And you've already borne an enormous burden for me, Chiyoh."

"So, then," she said, her eyebrows lifting a fraction. "Do you know what you're going to do?"

The corners of Hannibal's mouth lifted. A rush of nostalgia, excoriating and raw, tugged at his memory. It had the sound of Bedelia's voice.

He lifted his napkin and folded it neatly on the table. "I need to get my appetite back."

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–Later that night–

Hannibal's breath drifted in a pale cloud on the night air, punctuated by snowflakes. The sky was dark, and the slopes of Kaimiškis village, trimmed in patches of larch and spruce, were also dark. The new moon leant no glimmer to the snowfall, making it look like rain.

The strains of the final Allegro of Bach's first harpsichord concerto drifted from the small wooden house. Even through the double-pane windows, Hannibal could discern an audio recording at play. It took him only a moment to place. Ottavio Dantone—a modern master of harpsichord and fortepiano. Hannibal himself had been in attendance at Dantone's La Scala debut of Rinaldo.

He nudged closer. His boots crunched against the ice as his breath frosted the lighted squares of glass.

A second harpsichord crashed over the recorded melody, stalling the rhythm of the cadenza. The sound was amateurish. Imploring. But not entirely unpleasant. Here, the absence of nearby neighbors made it possible for music to be played long into the night.

"Ne, Tomas!" A voice reprimanded.

The syllables, muddied by the thick glass, jolted Hannibal. The live harpsichord halted as quickly as it had begun. The interruption was followed by a slap and a small cry, barely discernable beneath the charge of the recording's closing ritornello.

"Roll the melody, don't punch it!" the voice scolded, in Hannibal's native tongue. "Listen to Maestras Dantone. Feel his fingers on top of yours. Now try again."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. In the center of his chest, a coldness gathered. The unseen harpsichordist hadn't protested. This didn't surprise him; as a boy, neither had he.

He listened as the recording was rewound, then restarted; and then the strings of the living
harpsichord joined back in. They tentatively followed along with Dantone's closing fermata, before strengthening with the Accademia Bizantina's violin-swept tutti.

"Grok, grok! Na, taip jau geriau!"

With a start, Hannibal realized that he hadn't heard his own language spoken aloud since his last conversation with Vadim Stonys. Mister Graham's family requested that I don't speak about it to you. I'm sorry, but I have to respect the wishes of a family in mourning.

It had been a diplomatic half-lie—one meant to protect both Hannibal and Will, but mostly Vadim himself. It was nothing new. Hannibal's childhood tongue had been smothered in lies since his ninth year of life.

Mamytė will be better soon. She needs rest, Hannibal. Be a good boy and give it to her.

Quiet, now! Be a good boy—it's not going to hurt.

If he closed his eyes, he could still feel the scrape of stale breath against his cheek and the itch of moist fingers around his hips.

Hannibal shifted the leather satchel strapped over his shoulder. He hadn't visited the Šilaičiai cemetery this time, nor the church. He knew he wouldn't find a headstone, and it was too late an hour for organ music.

Danukas is already dead, he'd told Will the night he'd taken him to the Panevėžys Cathedral—a night that Will maintained existed only in their minds. He died when I was nine years old. Before his hands ever strayed from the organ's keys.

Will had dismissed Hannibal that night, too. Just as he'd dismissed the idea of the other future trapped within the shared rooms of their memory palaces. He'd even denied Hannibal's request for a last press of lips before the sea took them away from each other.

I'm just trying to be practical—for both of us. Will had spoken the words in the cathedral's courtyard after dragging him outside, away from the pipe organ's piercing melody. That night had been as cold and as dark as this one, but snowless. It had never snowed in their other future. In this one, it seemed never to stop.

Intimacy isn't meant to be practical, Will, Hannibal thought, closing his eyes against the blur of wind and snowflakes. It straddles the edge of violence and ecstasy. By nature, it is an unstable element of human connection—our connection.

He slipped his hand inside his coat pocket. The plastic guard on the syringe's needle tipped between his fingers. He pulled it off. Cold flakes drifted onto his nose and cheeks and melted into his hair as he paused. Listened. Waited for young Tomas' recital to conclude, and for his old dėstytojas to issue the assignment for the next lesson.

He waited for the BMW sedan that pulled up to the house—and the mother who stepped out of it to collect her son—to drive away. As the crunch of tires faded, Hannibal registered the scrape of wood against floorboards as the harpsichord bench was shoved back into place. Then a cough, followed by the dimming of the lamp in the front room.

He waited until the sound of the BMW's engine had completely disappeared, leaving him alone with the quickening snowfall and the man inside the house. Then he twisted the latch and walked in.

He caught Danukas in the hallway off the parlor. Thick fingers slapped at the needle as it pierced his
neck. He staggered, knees jerking, his movements slower and stiffer than Hannibal remembered. *Nearly seventy, after all,* he marveled.

"I've taken you by surprise this time, Danukas," he said softly, in their shared language.

The man's muddy gray eyes widened as he stumbled back against the wall. A framed sepia picture of some long-lost relative crashed to the floor. The glass shattered with a tinkling sound. It was almost musical.

"Does it make you feel alive?"

Wisps of silver-white hair stuck out at odd angles around the man's face. His liver-spotted hands scrabbled at the place where Hannibal's needle had stuck him.

"Who are you! A thief? What do you want!"

Hannibal strode towards him. "You still don't watch the news, I take it? Not a thief, mano dėstytojas. I've only come to take from you what you stole from me."

Danukas cowered in the shadows, his eyes bright with terror. They shot to Hannibal's hand as he capped the syringe and shoved it back in his pocket.

"What evil is that?" he shouted. "You've poisoned me!" The old man's knees wobbled beneath him. He looked close to collapse.

Hannibal smiled. "No more than you poisoned me," he said. "That was just something to help you relax. Quiet, now—it's not going to hurt."

Recognition bloomed on Danukas' face, like a mushroom spore in the night, as he began to slide. Hannibal caught him under the arms. He shuddered at the press of the man's flesh against his body.

"Do you remember a young boy who came to you for lessons?" he said, as he dragged the man through the hallway and into the front room. The tools inside Hannibal's satchel clanked with the movement. "A boy who lost a sister?"

The Hubbard–Di Veroli harpsichord stood at attention inside the room, in the same corner as when Hannibal was a child. The painted pastoral figures gracing the inside of the lid were as bright as he remembered them, and the wooden soundboard, with its ornamental gold-leaf rose hole, appeared clean and dust-free. The chinoiserie exterior had grown dingy over the years, however. Danukas had been keeping his strings hidden when not in use. *Not so different from your appetite,* he thought.

"You taught this boy how to play the harpsichord here," Hannibal continued. "In this very spot."

He plunked the man down, backwards, on the bench, propping him against the double row of keys. A keening sound leaked from Danukas' lips as his arms slid to his sides, the muscles slackening with the progress of the temporary paralytic.

"And, later, the organ at Kristaus Karaliaus. The concerto your student played tonight was the first this boy performed at his gymnasium's recital."

"I remember," Danukas spat. His eyes narrowed. "Your mother was too crazy to be proud of you. Now you're just like her. Losing that little girl drove her mad. It drove you mad, too. Nothing I did made you that way."

Hannibal smirked. "Nothing made me, Danukas." He slipped the satchel from his shoulder and set it
on the side table. From its well he withdrew a small pair of wire cutters, a zygomatic bone awl, and an assortment of hooks, retractors, pliers, and forceps. "Mischa's death, and your lessons, were things that happened. I made myself."

He placed each instrument on the Queen Anne tea table next to the harpsichord, aligning them in neatly parallel rows. Their steel lines and curves were reflected in the varnished wood—thin gray shapes, distorted by the gloss.

It had been some time since Hannibal had taken the opportunity to use a full craniomaxillofacial set—and even longer since he'd wielded the tools strictly for surgical purposes. An excellent occasion for reacquaintance, he thought, as he held a scalpel up to the light to check its sharpness. Hannibal could hear his old dėstytojas' breathing quicken as he watched him arrange the instruments.

"This will require more improvisation than the last time," Hannibal told him. "The cathedral will keep its pipes. A pity there will be no one to play them at tomorrow's evening mass."

A sliver of drool leaked from Danukas' lip onto his collar. "Improvisation?" he slurred. "What nonsense are you talking? You are crazy. Crazy son of a bitch. Don't touch me with those things."

Hannibal shrugged out of his cashmere topcoat and draped it over the arm of the Victorian sofa. He did the same with his suit jacket.

Then he grabbed the rolled-up neoprene apron from the satchel and unfurled it, shaking out the creases. It wouldn't provide as much coverage as his plastic suit, of course, but improvisation had become more and more of a necessity as of late. First Doctor Schneider, then Haai and his crew. Hannibal had grown bored with spontaneous acts of self-preservation. It was time to create art.

"Ottavio Dantone's recording is a gifted tribute to Bach," Hannibal said. "Shall we listen to it again? Even a maestras like yourself might pick up something new."

Danukas blinked. His eyes rolled like a frightened colt's, shooting between the table of surgical tools and Hannibal. The paralytic had stilled his muscles, though it had left his awareness intact.

"I can't feel my—my hands," he said. "You bastard."

"You will soon," Hannibal assured him.

He went to the CD player on the standing console and forwarded to the tenth track. As the bold opening notes of the ritornelli broke forth, Hannibal drew the last two tools from the pockets of his trousers. The harpsichord on the stereo spun off from the ensemble, chasing the leaping violin strings around the room like a ravenous fox.

"You were the first to teach me how to use the Zuckermann hammer and tuning lever," he said, speaking over the concerto. He laid the hooked instrument and its hollow companion next to the surgical tools.

"And I see you've switched from rose iron strings to red and yellow brass. Superior tonal quality with less breakage—an excellent choice for a Taskin-style harpsichord."

Danukas gave a lopsided frown. His facial muscles were starting to slacken—which meant it was time for Hannibal to begin his composition.

"You're not going to restring my harpsichord," the old man said, with sarcasm, despite his slurred speech.
"Our harpsichord," Hannibal corrected him. "You taught me how to tame it. Then you taught yourself how to tame me." Hannibal paused, running his thumb along the thick circle of brass wire between his hands. "No, I didn't come to restring your harpsichord tonight, Danukas. I've come to restring you."

A strangled sound. "You crazy fuck! You keep your hands away from—"

Before Danukas could finish the threat, Hannibal's fingers were gripping his chin, tilting his head upwards in the soft yellow light. With his other hand, Hannibal plucked the bone awl from the table. His knuckles clenched around the carbon fiber handle.

"You must be anchored to this experience. Learning is effort. Learning causes pain. Only through motivation and discomfort do we expand our boundaries—and our awareness of one another's limits. You saw to it that I understood the complexities of both."

Danukas attempted to twist from Hannibal's grasp, but the paralytic had already taken possession of his motor functions. The awl, sharped to a razor point, punched easily through the hollow of his cheek.

A screeching sound burst from the man's throat as the tool crossed the hollow of his mouth and punctured the other side of his face. His eyes rolled wildly to the ceiling, the whites glinting ivory in the lamplight.

Saliva and blood mixed, creating a slippery film over Hannibal's hands. He wiped one on his apron, then the other, before sliding the awl from Danukas' oral cavity and setting it to the side.

He fixed the flat blades of the stainless steel mouth gag against his molars and ratcheted it open. A wet, red stream dripped from one corner of the man's mouth, pooling on the harpsichord bench between his spread thighs. It was not the first time blood had stained the seat.

Hannibal slid his thumb and forefinger into the circular handles of the forceps. He grasped Danukas' stale-smelling tongue between the serrated clamps. The old man gagged as he pulled the organ to its length. This time, Hannibal wouldn't slice the frenulum, as he had on Haai post-mortem. His dėstytojas would feel every pull, every ounce of pressure—every note—from his own hands.

In the background, the violin strings charged ahead of Dantone's melody—and were then abruptly overcome by the harpsichord's commanding perfidia.

"Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal in das Reich Gottes eingehen," Hannibal recited. He ground the tip of the awl against the groove in Danukas' tongue. "We must suffer much injustice to enter the kingdom of God."

The old man panted, his milky eyes rolling down in an attempt to see exactly what was happening to him. Hannibal ground down. There was a meaty pop as the awl's needle pierced through the mucous membrane and muscle.

"From Acts, chapter fourteen. As you know, Bach's harpsichord in D minor was based on an organ concerto for his Jubilate cantata. The choirs would be singing your fate now, had I chosen the mass version. You, too, must suffer to beg your way into heaven, Danukas."

Blood sponged along the blade of the awl as Hannibal pulled it out. Danukas slumped against the double row of keys, his jaw straining against the steel gag. His tongue poked from the side of his mouth, swollen and red, like a surplus appendage—an extra finger, perhaps, or a vestigial tail. As a resident in a busy ER, Hannibal had once delivered an infant with the latter. The mother was in the
process of dying from an opioid overdose. It had been difficult to predict if the infant would breathe at all after the C-section—but she had, and then she’d promptly seized. The child’s first taste of oxygen had also been her last.

Hannibal set the awl down and unwound two meters of brass wire from the coil, and then clipped it. "Nimmermehr in Frieden—nevermore in peace. Now, let's get you properly positioned, shall we?"

He slid an arm under Danukas’ knees and the other across his back, spinning him around to face the harpsichord. An unintelligible sound stuttered from his mouth as Hannibal propped his elbows on the instrument’s sideboards.

"I've been patient with you, Danukas." Hannibal grasped the man’s wispy white hair in his fist. The texture was like corn silk. He tilted Danukas’ head back and stared down into his panicked, glittering eyes. "Patient for many years. Now I will require you to be patient with me. I know you're uncomfortable, but quite frankly, that is the point."

With his other hand, Hannibal expertly threaded one end of the brass wire through the hole in Danukas’ right cheek, and the other end through his left. He drew the two ends together and poked them through the breach in his tongue, creating an overhand knot.

The man's throaty growl was garbled by the blood welling inside his mouth.

"Allow your throat to open," Hannibal advised. He pulled down on the wire, tightening the knot through Danukas’ cheeks and tongue, and sparking a high shriek. "It will prevent you from choking on your blood."

The old man was panting, his face glowing pink. Hannibal smoothed his fingers along the wire. He could feel it pull against Danukas’ flesh, cutting into the propped-open corners of his mouth.

Around them thrummed the descending scales of the first movement’s closing cadenza, backed by staccato strings. Hannibal could feel the rhythm of his own heartbeat inside his chest. Steady. Quiet. Almost peaceful.

A trickle of brown-tinged saliva dribbled from Danukas' mouth onto the upper row of keys.

"Don't worry about the keyboards," Hannibal said, as he wound one end of the string, then the other, counter-clockwise around the farthest-spaced tuning pins inside the harpsichord. He was careful to leave a calculated amount of slack on the wire.

"The loss of the instrument will be far greater than the loss of your blood, but it is also necessary."

He plucked the tuning hammer from the tea table and tapped on the head of each pin. The altered depth would affect the jack action and the quality of the sound, of course—but some small sacrifices needed to be made.

He nudged Danukas backwards, pulling the wire taut against the tuning pins in a V-shaped arc. The coils tightened as an inelegant howl ripped from the man's throat. Hannibal was pleased to see that both wire and pins held. Danukas’ oozing tongue stretched with his body weight into a straight, red dart. The masseter muscles of his cheeks strained, but did not tear.

Hannibal bent down and tipped his head. "Difficult to properly scream when you're tongue-tied, isn't it? Now I'll prepare you to play."

Danukas' eyes blinked rapidly as the pulp of his tongue writhed, wormlike, against the wire. The closing ritornello of the first Allegro gave way to a sharp pause. Their second movement was about
to begin.

"This is your most crucial performance yet, Danukas." Hannibal's breath brushed the man's ear. "You will want be in top form."

Somber violin and cello ushered in the *basso ostinato* harmony of the *Adagio* as Hannibal pulled away. The light of the room seemed to dim; Danukas' fruitless moans quieted with it. The sedative's efficacy was more than halfway spent. The old *deštytojas* would feel only a vague sensation of pain for the next five, perhaps six minutes. Then, feeling would flow back into his muscles, his skin, his nerve endings—slowly at first, and then in a swooning, symphonic *rush*.

Hannibal turned to Danukas' hands as Ottavio Dantone's harpsichord sprinkled across the air in a darkly meditative trill. He picked up the bone awl.

*The hands that taught me how to play the harpsichord. The organ.*

In his mind's eye, he could see Will staring at him on the steps of Panevėžys Cathedral. His eyes were dark. Uncertain. He was watching Hannibal's tears freeze to his skin, the warmth of his aborted touch disintegrating on the night air.

*They also taught themselves how to play me—although I didn't invite them to.*

Will's eyes had widened, perhaps already sensing the invitation in Hannibal's confession.

*Do it with me.*

The intermingled scents of sweat and old books seared across Hannibal's olfactory memory as his fingertips slid down the paper-thin skin of Danukas' wrist. The veins bulged along the old man's forearms, thick and web-like in the lamplight. *Delicate. Throbbing with life.*

Then he felt Will's wrist drop as the other man stepped back, severing the connection between them, his eyes a sick wash of *sorry, sorry, sorry.*

The rhythm of Hannibal's heart faltered suddenly, as it had in front of the church. His fingertips recoiled from the old man's skin.

*The hands that taught me how to play the harpsichord. The organ. My own fingers flitting along rectangles of bone. Thick hands sliding over mine; dragging across my skin.*

*Feel his fingers on top of yours. Now try again!*

Hannibal blinked. The room blurred. From far away, he could hear Danukas gasping. The cry was slurred by the steel gag and his own impaled tongue.

"*Nelieskite manęs! Eikite velniop!*"

Without warning, something heavy and soft pressed against his knuckles. Hannibal froze.

A hand on top of his. Warm. A hand that *wasn't there.*

"Let me do it with you." A low whisper. A brush of lips against his ear. A voice he knew instantly. *Intimately.*

*I want you to close your eyes, and imagine a version of events you wouldn't have regretted.*

Hannibal's own words echoed back to him from the deep well of years.
He closed his eyes and breathed in.

When he opened them, Will was standing next to him, dressed in the same loose Henley and jeans as the night of the fire. His face was shadowed in the half-light; eyes expectant. Hungry. His palm rested over the awl handle in Hannibal's hand.

Will licked his lips. "Show me."

"Will."

Inside Hannibal's chest, a note like a plucked string reverberated. Music sang throughout his body, anchoring him.

---Five thousand miles away, on a worn mattress in a narrow, brown-brick house on Elysian Fields Avenue, Will Graham tossed in his sleep.

Late-afternoon sunlight slanted through the dingy aluminum blinds, warming his damp skin. The ticking pendulum of the old cuckoo clock in the front room swung in and out of his consciousness. Behind his eyelids loomed an icy, evergreen darkness; but inside Danukas Adomaitis' small, wooden house, even the forested hills of Aukštaitija seemed far away.

Beneath Will's fingertips spilled a kaleidoscope of textures both unfamiliar and forsaken—the sharp slide of brass strings; the cold press of a surgical awl; the slender ridge of knuckles beneath his palm; the press of warm skin. Hannibal's skin.

In the bedroom, Will's hand twitched beneath the sheet, unconsciously grasping at the humid cotton. Tags jangled as a head lifted from the floor. A pair of warm brown eyes watched in silent curiosity as Will turned his head.

*Tick-tock,* whispered the sound from the front room. *Time to turn back the clock.*

He was momentarily surprised when Hannibal's hazel eyes met his own. They were soft and liquid with pain. Then he remembered, with razor-edged clarity, *why* he was here.

His fingers tightened over the tool in Hannibal's hand. Will moved closer. Inhaled. Traces of cedar and snow, sweat and salt air seemed to waft from the other man's skin.


"Let me do it with you," he said. "Show me."

*I'm not letting you go alone this time.*

---In the blood-tainted air of the front room, Hannibal breathed in. Underneath the scent of Danukas' fear, he could smell the faint aroma of Will's own calming, heady scent.

It was a smell he'd memorized and filed away, years ago, for safekeeping. Clean cotton and soft leather and cheap aftershave; motor oil, canine fur, and single-malt scotch—and the ion-soaked chill of river water. Atop it lingered the sharp tangs of cedar and sweat, and the coppery smell of blood that could never be scrubbed off.

*There's something else, too. Something new.* Before he could pinpoint it, Will's voice tugged him
back to the present.

"Show me. All I know is the piano." A faint note of humor in the words, underneath the lamenting of violin strings and Dantone's harpsichord. "Not that well, either."

"You took yourself away from me."

It was meant as an accusation, but Hannibal could tell by the furrow of Will's brow that his expression had betrayed him.

Next to them, Danukas grunted. "Jūs išprotėjot," he spat. Blood and saliva flecked onto the keyboard with the muddled words. "Psichas."

"I'm here now." Will's fingers squeezed Hannibal's own. "With you. For you. And I'm not going anywhere." He paused. "Now show me, before the drug wears off."

Hannibal swallowed. He closed his eyes for a long second, gathering his composure. Beneath his other hand, Danukas' flesh sweated and quivered. The old man's muscles were starting to wake up. They would need to work quickly.

"We will restring him," Hannibal said, opening his eyes. "Danukas will be ensnared by his own instrument. If he could properly speak, he might call it poetic injustice."

Will nodded. "And then?"

Hannibal pulled his eyes from Will's face to look at Danukas. Veins bulged along his neck. The tip of his tongue had turned a pasty gray color, and his cheeks were crisscrossed with dark rivulets of blood where they strained against the taut wire.

Will followed his gaze. Hannibal sensed the surge of anticipation that ran through the other man's body at the sight.

"And then he will play," he replied.

A husky groan scraped the old man's throat. Hannibal ignored it. He handed the spool of wire to Will and pulled the jack rail off of the harpsichord, exposing the instrument's black plastic teeth.

"You can manage the wire work. It bends as easily as leader wire, but is more fragile. Pliers will come in handy. Afterwards, I'll show you how to make a hitch pin loop."

Will's eyes gleamed in agreement. He unwound the wire from the spool as Hannibal lifted Danukas' hands and placed them, palms-down, on the lower keyboard. A jumble of discordant notes leapt from the harpsichord's strings with the move. The jacks remained suspended in mid-air, their tiny plectrums hovering like stingers.

Hannibal gripped the handle of the bone awl in his right hand. He steadied the old man's wrist with his left. A muffled scream squeaked from his mouth as the point of the awl ground through the webbing between Danukas' thumb and forefinger. A jangle of strings sounded atop Dantone's somber playing—and then a small, meaty pop, as a burst of red leapt from the punctured skin.

"Your nerves and tendons will remain intact this time—just like your organ in the cathedral," Hannibal told him. "But these wounds will cause nearly as much pain. Your hands will feel as though they are on fire."

Danukas grunted. His head twitched from side to side, widening the rent in his tongue. His eyes
were fixated and frozen, like those of an animal caught in a trap.

"Be still now, mano dėstytojas," Hannibal directed. "We must make a few more holes to properly string you. Bach himself was loath to leave a composition unfinished, even on his deathbed. Vor deinen Thron tre' ich hiermit. Soon, you too shall stand before God's throne to be judged."

Hannibal tilted his head, considering the distance between Danukas' hands and the jack rail. "Trim eight loops of wire for me, Will, if you would. About three feet each."

As Will set to work measuring and snipping the requested lengths of wire, seven more holes bloomed in Danukas' hands from Hannibal's awl. The old man groaned louder with each puncture.

Hannibal could feel the heat from Will's body stretching towards him, enveloping him. Steadying him. He laid the blood-spattered awl on the tea table as a series of descending trills from the CD player gave way to a swaying flux of cello and violin. The Adagio was more than halfway over. The third movement—the final Allegro—would soon begin.

"Now, Will—each hand requires four strings for our modified instrument. You'll take the left."

Will's fingertips brushed against Hannibal's own as he handed over four curls of cut wire. His eyes flickered up, meeting Hannibal's before he went around to the other side of the bench. A shiver ran up Hannibal's spine at the savage sensuality in Will's glance.

My philtatos, he thought. My hunter. My killer.

Hannibal bent over Danukas' right hand and began threading the wire through the punctures. Will mimicked him, working the tip of the first wire through the hole between Danukas' pinky and ring fingers.

Danukas gasped, his breath hitching in his throat. "Prašau—ne..."

From the corner of his eye, Hannibal saw Will's gaze sharpen on Danukas' trembling hands and the trail of red leaking from the breaches in his flesh. He drew the wire taut, doubling it.

"We string the wire into the flesh of the old man's hands," Will said, in a measured voice. "We are preparing him for his greatest moment, when he will become one with his instrument. His limbs quake as sensation slowly returns to his body. Every nerve is on fire. He knows why this is happening to him, but he refuses to acknowledge his guilt. His hands will sing a confession."

Will's eyes were hooded and gleaming—the same way they'd looked when he'd charged at the Dragon. No moon in tonight's sky, Hannibal thought to himself. Her fair light has been captured by your eyes.

On both sides of Danukas' bleeding body, slim circles of harpsichord wire flashed in the lamplight. The old man was writhing now, the slim brass wire digging deeper into his flesh with every movement. "Prašau!" he pleaded. The sound was a disjointed bubble in his throat. His eyes rolled up at Hannibal, moist with pain.

"All of us are guilty of something, Danukas," Hannibal hushed. "We must find ways to appease the Fates, sooner or later. On Nona's spindle you were spun. Decima has measured you with her rod. And now Morta has gifted us with her shears. But before we snip your thread, we will hear you sing."

Will picked up the Zuckermann hammer from the table. "Is this what we need?"

Hannibal smiled. "Good! Now I'll show you how to make a hitch pin loop. These are for the bridge
pins. For Danukas' final performance, they will rest over the regulating screws at the tops of the jacks. This harpsichord has original Delfins. The jack action is quite pronounced."

"He'll feel every note." A hint of delight in Will's voice.

Hannibal took the tuning lever from Will's outstretched hand. "Yes. We will make sixteen, one at each of the wires' ends."

He looped the end of the closest wire protruding from Danukas' right hand through the hook atop the head of the lever. "Rotate the hammer away from you, spinning the wire into a double helix at a ninety-degree angle," he instructed. Hannibal turned the hammer with a practiced hand, keeping equal pressure along the string. "Make sure the string remains straight. Nine or ten twists should do. Then unwind the tension."

He demonstrated as Will watched, spinning the lever back towards himself. A whimper escaped from Danukas' throat. Salty trails leaked from the corners of his eyes, which Hannibal saw were squeezed shut in pain.

"That must have tickled." Hannibal smirked. "But I'd advise you to open your eyes and watch, unless you'd like more holes punched in you."

Danukas' eyes cracked open. Hatred, bright and pure, radiated like fire from their gray depths.

"Good," Hannibal said, tipping his chin in approval. His heart felt light, as though it were floating.

He turned back to the tuning lever. He could feel Will's eyes on him, studying his hands with the vague familiarity of one who was used to tying fly knots.

"After unwinding, crank the exposed end perpendicular to the length. Twist to tighten the loop at the base of the helix. Unwind, and then bend the end to form a split."

Hannibal kinked the leftover piece of wire with his thumb, folding it back against the shoulder of the helix. "Tear it off to make a smooth edge. Harpsichord wire will break easily, if maneuvered in the right manner." He held up the finished loop so Will could see. "Now you have a hitch pin loop. Do you think you can reproduce it?"

Will nodded, a slight crease in his brow. "Overlap and join. Tighten, then trim. It's, um, not too different from a blood knot, actually."

"Then you already understand the mechanics," Hannibal said, choosing to ignore the unease he'd glimpsed on Will's face. "Danukas keeps his own tuning lever in the top drawer of the cabinet against the wall. Fetch it, and we'll tie the loops."

Danukas shook his head weakly at the words. "Psichas," he croaked again.

Will did as he was bid, returning with the second lever as Hannibal was finishing his third loop. They worked quickly and silently. Will's hands had been wrapping lures and tying lines for decades; his adeptness at twisting harpsichord string came as no surprise.

Danukas struggled half-heartedly, the small movements stoking obvious flares of pain. Blood vessels pulsed pink at the corners of his eyes, which darted in Will's direction only when Hannibal spoke to him.

When the last hitch pin loop was tied, Hannibal gathered the sixteen strands of elegantly knotted wire in his hands. The cello-fueled trudge of the Adagio's ending ritornello swirled around them like
seawater, ominous and deep. It was time for Danukas to play.

"Will, if you would steady the harpsichordist's wrists for me."

Will moved behind the man on the bench. He gripped a blood-streaked wrist in each hand, pressing down on the tops of the knuckles. Danukas moaned as the holes in his skin stretched. His eyelids fluttered, head sagging against the wire holding his face in place. He was having trouble keeping his back straight. Hannibal could tell from his near-constant swallowing that his throat and the split, gray meat of his tongue were beginning to dry.

"This isn't the time to rest, Danukas," Hannibal said, loud, into the old man's ear. Startled fingers twitched against the blood-streaked keys. "Your greatest performance awaits you." The words seemed to infuse new energy into the suffering man. Will held him firm.

One by one, Hannibal hooked the looped ends of the strings around the heads of the regulating screws for the closing Allegro's D, A, and G minor scales, as well as the bridging B section with its thirty-seven-bar segment.

"We match the harpsichord strings with the keys of the final movement, which center around the open strings of the violin," Hannibal explained. Will's eyes darkened as they met his own.

Tonight, your eyes are the beauty of an icy evening sky, he thought to himself, as the ending notes of the Adagio gave way to a brief pause. I could admire them for hours. Perhaps, if we are lucky, daybreak will never arrive.

He did not speak the thought aloud. He knew, from the flush along Will's collarbone, that the other man could read the contemplation in his look.

Hannibal bent close to Danukas as the opening tutti of Bach's third movement burst from the speakers. Violin and harpsichord wove in and out of each other in a wild chase, at once joyous and powerful. Even the lamplight seemed to brighten alongside the sound.

"Are you ready, Danukas? At the start of the solo—play!"

The old man shook his head.

"Yes, you will," Hannibal said, lips brushing the pale tuft of hair above his ear. Danukas recoiled in terror.

Next to him, Will's heat seemed to shimmer and bleed, like a mirage. His hands moved from Danukas' hands to the old man's shoulders, stilling him.

"Or, we can slice off your fingers completely," Hannibal offered. "Though your hands might still heal from these wounds, if you play well enough to please Will. He will make that call." He straightened up, eyes flickering briefly to Will's.

Danukas stared at Hannibal, seeming to consider his offer. Whether or not he believed it made no difference, Hannibal knew; the threat of additional pain would move him. It was enough for most people.

"This is our design," Will said softly. The sound, deadly as the look in his eye and cold as a knife's edge, curled low inside Hannibal's belly.

"Our design," Hannibal agreed. "This time, it truly is ours." Fire leapt inside him at the sight of Will—his Will—ready to kill with him. To kill for him.
Danukas' eyes traveled back and forth, as though failing to comprehend what he was seeing. He nodded slowly. An unspoken syllable hovered on his cracked tongue. *I will play.*

Hannibal stepped back for a better view of the specter he and Will had created. The delicate wires glistened in the light, bending and flexing against Danukas' bleeding hands, as he lifted his swollen fingers into position. Streaks of brownish-red blood were spattered across the ivory and the front of the man's shirt. The flesh of his face, frozen in an expression of forced surprise, sagged in resignation.

Hannibal's heart lifted at the dull look in his eyes. *You'll play for us now. And it will hurt.*

The strings surged suddenly, wrapping the room in a frantic, compelling crescendo as Danukas launched into the cadenza solo alongside Dantone. The theme, reminiscent of the opening of Bach's third Brandenburg Concerto, commanded a rhythmic shift that the *dėstytojas'* wounded hands struggled to replicate.

"Grok, grok!" Hannibal growled. "Feel his fingers on top of yours!"

*Your hands taught me how to play the harpsichord. The organ. You taught yourself how to play me. You died when I was nine years old. You died—I lived.*

Whenever Danukas' fingers struck one of the sixteen rigged keys, the jack would jump, tightening its wire noose. The tension traveled down into the sensitive webbing of Danukas' hands, widening the awl holes and making them bleed anew.

The old man barked at the pain, over and over, as he played along with the recording. Hannibal stared, fascinated. The sound of the strings, though skewed, *was* music to his ears. Fresh moisture welled in the *dėstytojas'* pain-pricked eyes as he stumbled over the *fermata.*

*Torment,* Hannibal mused. *Madness. Terror. As much as you caused, let it be repaid to you a thousand fold.* He closed his eyes, allowing the elemental cascade of the melody to overtake him. His memory swelled and stretched, contorted by decades and the collision of his and Will's disparate, shared futures. Images gathered in the febrile darkness of Hannibal's mind, merging into one another:

*You pressed yourself against me as I sat at your harpsichord. I was surprised. You laid your hand on my shoulder. I wanted to stop playing. I didn't. I never did.*

*A bright, bitter light in your eyes. Did you think I would stop killing simply because we ran together? 'You couldn't bring yourself to stick around on our first night here,' you snarled. 'Why are we even sharing a bedroom?'*

*Your hands were hot and insistent. I didn't understand why you took me to the bedroom. 'But that's not where we play,' I said. I was desperately thirsty. Clothing covered every part of me, except the parts you needed.*

*Your hands were hot and insistent, too. Not like your love—not outside of that moment. 'I want to feel you on your knees,' you said. 'Come in you like that.' Your eyes were black as two ink stains. I wanted everything.*

*'Get on your knees,' you said. 'I'm going to teach you another lesson. First you must learn to play a different type of music. You'll like it. None of the other boys are smart enough to learn like you, Hannibal.' You laughed when I gagged.*

He didn't feel the wetness on his cheeks until Will brushed it away with his thumb. Hannibal turned towards the touch. The press of Will's hand was firm on his side.
"Hannibal."

Will's voice was low, almost inaudible beneath the ornamental trill of the two harpsichords. He leaned into the sound, blinking. Will's warmth pulled at him—a living thing, driven by the unceasing rhythm of his cardiac muscle and ventricular flow. And underneath the sound of Hannibal's own name—a sear of regret. The sting of Will's singular empathy and the smothered embers of desire, all stretching from Will's fingertips into Hannibal's skin.

He tipped his forehead to rest against Will's own, inhaling. The touch burned him. Will pulled closer. Hannibal felt hot breath against his jaw. Fingers trailed along his side, sliding up to his shoulder.

"Touch doesn't always have to hurt," Will whispered. "Neither does time. I remember what you told me, outside the cathedral. That's why I came. I didn't want you to be alone. Not this time."

Hannibal allowed his eyes to close. A curse leapt in the background, punctuated by the quickening pace of the harpsichord, as the concerto swung to the last repetition of the ritornello.

*Keep up, Danukas,* he thought, lip curling. *You're learning to play a different type of music now.*

"The absence of touch can be more harmful than healing," Hannibal said, opening his eyes and looking into Will's own. The other man's gaze was a turbulent canopy of gray waves. "You forced me to go. You took yourself away from me."

Will's fingers slid around to the small of his back, nudging him closer. The heat between them throbbed. "I couldn't…" He trailed off, swallowing. "I thought it was what I needed to do."

Hannibal dipped his chin. He grazed his lips against the stubble on the underside of Will's jaw. He felt Will's breath instantly quicken.

"You refused even to kiss me." The words roughened in Hannibal's throat on the way out. He felt the pad of Will's lower lip against his teeth. He wanted to bite it. To tear it. An unearthed sob rumbled in his breast.

*No,* Hannibal realized. *That isn't what I want.*

Will's lips parted. They were moist and too warm—almost feverish. "I couldn't kiss you," he said, his voice trembling. "I knew, if I did… I wouldn't want to stop."

Heat curled into Hannibal's groin as the impact of the words—and the scent he'd detected, but hadn't been able to place—hit him simultaneously. *Not Virginia. Not Lake Barcroft. Somewhere farther… somewhere* warmer.


He stretched his hand beneath the sheet. Slid it inside the waistband of his boxer-briefs. *Touch me.*

Hannibal's eyes were twin embers, glinting gold and amber in the lingering smoke of his dream. His fingers curled around the stiff base of his cock, dragging upward and stoking a soft gasp. His brain churned with liquor, giving the room a shiny haze. *Too bright.* He shut his eyes against the sunlight, focusing only on the broken decrescendo of Hannibal's voice.

*You refused even to kiss me.*
Will's hand stroked down, rough. A moan leapt to the edge of his tongue. The clink of dog tags sounded somewhere in the background. He ignored it.

*I couldn't kiss you,* he whispered in reply. A burst of liquid heat flared in his groin, spreading through his belly, into his chest. *I knew, if I did…*

And then Hannibal's lips were grazing his own, soft and flushed, silencing him. Will dragged his hand along his shaft, faster, messier, the impossible *wholeness* of Hannibal's touch sending thrills of pleasure through his body.

*Together and apart. Close, and not close enough. Touch me. Just… please. I need you.*

*Don't stop—come back to me.* Hannibal's words, almost audible in the humid air of the bedroom.

A hoarse plea that gave way to a groan from Will's lips, as his climax cascaded over him like a chilling wave.

*I'm drowning in you.*

—The cyclone of harpsichord and violin strings whirled around them, stoking fresh howls of pain from the bleeding man on the bench. The words—Hannibal's own, or perhaps Will's; it was difficult to tell—were silenced by the succulent curve of Will's mouth against Hannibal's jaw.


The lamplight seemed to flicker as the cryptic bouquet of odors and flavors swirled in Hannibal's nose and on his tongue. Will's hand cupped his face, and the acrobatic tempo of Danukas' playing melted into the background.


"I can't stay," Will whispered, breaking away.

Hannibal stared, stunned. *You can read my thoughts.*

Will grazed his fingertips along Hannibal's temple. His skin was moist with perspiration—with humidity. Lust-darkened eyes opened to meet Hannibal's own.

*Pupils wide and black as the night sea into which we fell—into which you pulled us. How many more times will we fall together, Will? I'm drowning in you.*

"The moon is setting," Will said. "The tide's going out. Soon, all of this will be lost to the sea."

Hannibal's fingers tightened around Will's side. "Ask me to suspend it. To stop the motion of the earth, the slipping of time. I will create an event horizon for us, Will. No one will be able to follow us. We'll feed the dogs. Leave a note for Barney. Then disappear. Almost polite."

In Will's eyes, Hannibal glimpsed an ache that brightened as he moved away. Will turned to Danukas. Blood spattered both stretches of keyboard and the flesh of the *dėstytojas'* hands. His eyes were creased in pain, lips and tongue sagging against the gore-tainted wires pinning him to the body.
of the harpsichord. Stiff fingers smeared over the keys, bungling the final series of trills before the strings ushered in the vigorous, final ritornello.

Will lifted his foot and placed his boot on the edge of the bench. Danukas' eyes widened as he felt the seat tip slightly backwards.

"It's time to finish him," Will said, a hint of a snarl in the sound. "To complete our design."

Hannibal swallowed. The heated spark of Will's vengeance would fill the absence of his body's warmth. So be it.

He picked up the bone awl. His fingers clenched around the bulbous handle, the killing lust inside him rising with the concluding swell of the concerto.

"Your recital is over, Danukas," Hannibal announced. The heady taste of Will's lips cooled as Hannibal's heartbeat steadied. "You gave an admirable performance, considering your current handicap. Unfortunately, it will also be your final one."

Will nudged the bench farther backwards with the sole of his boot, tipping the front legs at a precarious angle. Danukas' feet twitched above the cream-colored Aubusson rug. A noise of protest strangled in his throat. "Paleiskite mane!"

A smile cut across Will's lips. "Oh, Danukas, but it wouldn't be poetic injustice if we let you go," he taunted.

Inexplicably, the fact that he didn't understand Lithuanian didn't seem to impede his response.

"You're far too attached to your instrument for that." Will's voice was a struck chord, smothering Danukas' whines with an octatonic weight. "We wouldn't separate you—not now. Not after all you've been through together."

He shoved his foot hard against the bench. Danukas yelped as it lifted and then dropped him. Brass strings tore through the old man's cheeks and snagged on the styloglossus muscle of his tongue, as the seat crashed to the floor. Hannibal saw the wires strain at the tender flesh between his stiffened fingers, like a gore-torn marionette.

He leapt forward, scooping Danukas' head in his hand. His fingers dug into the back of the old man's scalp, ripping at his hair. The dėstytojas' eyes widened as Hannibal lowered the bone awl.

"You taught me to visualize music," Hannibal growled. There was a pop, followed by a high scream, as the tool pierced Danukas' cornea and parted the vitreous. "To see it playing on the air above me."

Fluid dribbled down Danukas' temple and onto Hannibal's apron. Hannibal shifted his grip on the handle and ground down, severing the left optic nerve. Fluid oozed from Danukas' impaled eyeball in an opaque, gelatinous stream. The man sputtered, gasping, as Hannibal angled upward with the awl, slicing through the dura and into the butter-soft tissue of his prefrontal cortex.

The tingling, familiar sensations of light and heat shimmered in Hannibal's mind and spread through his body, down his limbs, in a rush of awareness that rooted him—alive—to the sound of Danukas' wails. The old man's cardiac muscle was about to seize; Hannibal could sense the stuttering blood flow of his coronary artery. He slid the awl out, leaking vitreous humor down the side of his dėstytojas' face. Then he shifted the tool above Danukas' glittering right eye.

"You'll never feel music that way again, Danukas. It will never touch your heart the way your
concerto has just touched mine."

Hannibal thrust the bone awl through the man's other eyeball, quicker this time, eliciting an animal-like scream. The noise was trapped in Danukas' throat as the blade punctured his cerebral tissue. A sound like a hiccough blurted forth; webby pink phlegm came up with it. The mucous slid down Danukas' chin, staining the deeper red of his blood.

Hannibal could feel the man's heart speeding up, elevating to a frenzied whirr, as he pierced upward through his brain, obliterating his reasoning, his memories, his sense of self. Danukas' body gave a futile twitch underneath him—and then his lungs hitched, refusing breath.

This is your ending, mano destytojas—the only one you deserve. Quiet, now. I promise you, it's going to hurt.

Hannibal could feel the smoldering burn of Will's eyes on him—and then, suddenly, not on him.

Leaving. Fading... Gone.

He raised his head, blinking. The room was empty, save for himself and the dying shell of the harpsichordist.

Beneath the layers of chest muscle and the bones of his sternum, Danukas' heart clenched—then stuttered—then stopped. His body slumped in Hannibal's hands, pulling at the mangled strings. They shimmered in the lamplight.

—Will threw his arm over his eyes, blocking out the afternoon light. His entire body was shaking. Warm fluid oozed along his fingers. He pulled his hand from his underwear as the cuckoo clock ticked loudly from the front of the house, echoing his heartbeat.

He could still feel the hot press of Hannibal's mouth against his own. The desperate slide of his tongue, the clench of his hands around his hips. Rekindled embers of lust and smoldering vengeance, merging to a red-hot burn.

Will was certain now that Hannibal was still in Lithuania, and that he'd just killed—no, they'd just killed—the organist from the Panevėžys Cathedral. A place he'd only ever visited in his dreams.

Last time, he mounted the corpse on the organ pipes. He left his display in the graveyard for me. It was dawn. The sky was bleeding orange and red. Chiyoh was there. She told me about the nightingale floors at the castle in Kyoto. It wasn't real. It never happened.

Didn't it?

An echo; a flash of hazel eyes. They were reprimanding. Sorrowful.

A ragged breath shook from Will's throat. Memories—dreams—or hallucinations? The phantom imprints of Hannibal's hands on his body, the invisible hooks of Hannibal's eyes and words inside his mind. No amount of drink or sleep or wandering through the humid, hazy streets of his old city seemed to swallow them.

You need to do something better with your life, Will. He could almost hear Molly's gentle reproach in his head. Could see the sharp flash of her green eyes. Shit or get off the pot, you know? You're not being careful with yourself.
A hint of compassion in the last words. God, he'd missed that.

Will swallowed. It stung his parched throat. Molly's imagined words, while offering a scrap of comfort, did nothing to allay the dull burn of the response that formed in his head:

*I wasn't careful with you—or him. Why should I be careful with myself?*

—In the front room of the small, wooden house, Hannibal pushed himself up from the floor. He slid the awl from Danukas' punctured eye and placed it alongside the other tools.

He would finish his work in a few minutes, after gravity loosened its hold on the corpse's fluids flow. He'd already decided to take Danukas' testicles. With some sautéed onions and balsamic-grilled zucchini, they would make an excellent *huevos de toro* for the morning's breakfast.

The body itself he would leave for stray dogs or distant neighbors to discover. He wasn't overly concerned about whether the *Panevėžio miesto policijos*—or even the 'Ndràngheta, if they were watching—would trace Danukas' murder back to him. He wouldn't be staying in his home country for much longer.

More important, however, was the phone call he needed to make.

The aromas of Cajun spice, moist heat, and sweet-smelling moss mingled in Hannibal's olfactory memory as he wiped off his hands and withdrew the burner phone from the pocket of his suit jacket.

From the file room of his memory palace, he recalled the bite of frigid, smoke-tinged air and the complex flavor of ten hastily whispered numbers. *Obtusely sweet and somewhat salty at the outset, but with a thick reserve of umami underneath: the code for Barney.*

He pressed the international code and ten digits into the keypad. It was just after three o'clock in the afternoon in Catonsville; the orderly was likely either at work or at home.

The line picked up on the third ring.

"He—hello?"

*Suspicious. Uncertain. He knows Will's number, but not this phone's.*

"Hello, Barney."

"Doctor Lecter!" The excited lilt in the man's voice was nearly palpable.

Hannibal's lip twitched in the flicker of a smile. The man sounded genuinely happy to hear his voice. "I take it you're *not* at work," he said wryly. "My name must still be something of a buzzword around your place of employment, hmm?"

Barney huff-laughed into the phone. "Naw, I'm not at the hospital. Just watchin' TV at home. Shift doesn't start 'til eight." He paused. "How're things goin'? You made it over there all right?"

"Yes, things are all right, thank you. Our journey was quite successful." He paused, giving space for Barney to hesitate. To *falter.*

"Good!" came the bright, immediate answer. "I was hopin' you'd make it."

Hannibal could hear the smile in Barney's response. *One test passed. Onto the next...*
"It was thanks to your help that we did," Hannibal said. "I was curious, however, if you might be interested in another job—a more legitimate one, this time. One that would require you to take some time off of work. You would be well-compensated, of course."

He paused as one of the strings between Danukas' left hand and its corresponding jack snapped. The wire flipped up with a metallic ping and coiled back on itself.

Hannibal shifted the phone to his other ear. "I trust that you're enjoying the benefits of your financial reward from helping Will Graham."

"Oh, yeah," Barney said, almost off-handedly. "Had some pretty nice dinners lately. You know, places I wouldn't normally bother to go. And bought a four-K TV. That's what I'm watching now. Only flashy thing, though. People might get suspicious if I went and bought a Maserati or somethin'. Still tryin' to figure out what I wanna do with it all. Ya know, where I wanna go."

"That's understandable, Barney. And also wise. But perhaps you'd be willing to fatten your nest egg by helping Will—and myself—for a bit longer." Hannibal paused again, gathering his thoughts. "I'm worried about Will. He may be putting himself in danger, and I need you to watch over him, Barney. You're the only person who can do it discreetly, and do it well. You'll need to watch for some very specific things. We mustn't let any harm come to Will."

Barney hummed. "Well, seems he'd be pretty easy to keep track of. He's not too far away—just over the Potomac. Somewhere near Reston, right? If you need eyes on him more than a couple times a week, though, I can take a little vacation time."

"Yes, Barney, some off-duty time will be necessary." Hannibal sighed. He felt suddenly weary; the brief spark of adrenaline from Will's touch had all but dissipated.

A second test passed. Now for the final and stickier test—the test of friendship.

"It appears Will is no longer living in Virginia," Hannibal continued. "You'll need to relocate for a time, and quickly. Perhaps a week, perhaps several. Perhaps even longer." He allowed the request to sink in. He could almost hear Barney turning over the idea in his mind.

"Where'd he go?" Barney's tone shifted, suddenly serious—also, Hannibal noted, curious.

"Barney, do you know what wild animals do when they're gravely injured?"

"I've seen lots of dead animals, Doctor Lecter. But not that many hurt ones."

"Their instinct is to return home," Hannibal said. "To burrow away, so that they may expire in peace—and so that predators won't see they are injured. If an animal feels death is near, it always returns to the place it finds most comforting."

He swallowed. The words, spoken aloud, tasted citrusy on his tongue.

"I fear this is why Will has gone to New Orleans."
Acheron and Cocytus

Chapter Notes

This story will be posted in nine parts over nine weeks. It can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics, Of Putrefaction, Saccharine and Interlude: Diary of an Incubus, can be found on this post. Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series A Thousand Savage Futures can be enjoyed on YouTube here. Also, the header arts for Eve of Dreams contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

O brother, help me with thy fainting hand—
If fear hath made thee faint, as me it hath—
Out of this fell devouring receptacle,
As hateful as Cocytus' misty mouth.

—William Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, Act II, Scene III

—Forty-six days after the fall—ten days before Christmas Eve—

Will stared into the picture of the older-model plasma TV, absently tracing the grayish-black trails with his eyes. The color balance had gone to shit—years ago, probably. The landlord hadn't bothered to replace it. However, considering the house had come furnished, the old set was better than nothing.

Above the TV, an old Black Forest cuckoo clock chimed as the hour changed. He'd decided not to dwell on the uncanny parallels between this clock and the one he remembered from the other life—the one he hadn't lived.

It's just a clock, he'd told himself, as he'd carefully taken it down from the wall after settling in. The hands had been frozen in place. It had seemed to Will that his time was perpetually broken, no matter what life he was living.
Unlike the clock he'd found in the basement of Hannibal's cliffside house, however, this one was topped with a stag’s head, in the hunter style, and was weighted with three cast-iron pinecones instead of two. He'd opened up the back to find some of the gears rusted from the humidity. A trip to the hardware store, followed by some work with a miniature toolkit and a magnifying glass, had fixed the problem. Now it was keeping time.

*Our time,* said Hannibal’s voice in his head. *It hasn't run out, Will.*

*No, it did—a long time ago,* Will thought silently. *And you're not here, so stop talking.*

Fixing the cuckoo clock had felt like his only victory to date. *Not much to write home about.*

*If you had a home to go back to,* another voice snarled inside his head. *But you don't anymore. You made sure of that, didn't you?*

Will sighed and pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes, as the cuckoo's closing trill died on the air. *Nowhere feels like home anymore.*

Late-afternoon winter sunlight, not as rare in Louisiana as in Virginia, fell in a wide stripe across the hardwood floor from the picture window. Will blinked, watching the dust motes drifting through the beam. The ever-present humidity and dust, a seemingly contradictory combination, was characteristic of old New Orleans houses—particularly those with a flood history.

The Gentilly district had been hit hard by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Will hadn't been there to see it go under, but he knew that the water damage to the Creole cottages and Victorian houses along Elysian Fields Avenue had been extensive. The houses originally built on supports—like his small shotgun—had fared better than others.

A few of the water-damaged buildings had been lifted on hydraulic jacks so that new foundations could be laid. Others had been demolished, their rotting beams ground into pulp to make plywood for new homes.

*Raze and start over, or rebuild from the ruins?* Either way, it was an unavoidable dilemma. Had Will been a homeowner in New Orleans at the time, he might've erred on the side of salvage. Now, the idea seemed about as pointless as daytime TV.

Will scratched a hand through his hair, brushing the tangled curls away from his forehead. His fingertips came away greasy. He grimaced at the sensation. He remembered showering… two nights ago. Maybe.

*Do you care? Does it really matter?*

At the foot of the couch, Delilah raised her leg and pawed at her ear, mimicking Will's movement. Winston gave a long sigh and lowered his head to his forepaws.

"You and me both, buddy," Will muttered. He nudged his foot along the mutt's side, ruffling his chocolate-colored fur.

He'd thought about taking a day trip out to Stump Lagoon in Biloxi Marsh. He'd overheard some locals at a bar talking about having good luck with redfish on ChatterBait. He could've rented a boat. Spent the day out on the marsh with his rod and his tackle box and a twelve-pack of Abita Amber. It might've been relaxing. Quiet.

*Too quiet.*
He'd ended up on the couch in front of the TV, instead. The bottle of Glenlivet he'd opened two days ago was down to the bottom of the label. He'd finished off the last of his Laphroaig the afternoon before that—after dragging himself up from his nap, hot and sticky and disoriented, the feral taste of Hannibal's skin still thick in his mouth.

He'd immediately poured himself a double on the rocks, pressing the cool glass to his forehead between sips. The whiskey had blurred the memory enough that he was sure, now, it had been only a dream.

He wondered vaguely if he should start keeping track of how much he was drinking.

Why start now? The voice seemed to grin.

Will grabbed the remote. He flipped through the channels, occasionally lifting his glass to his lips. *Soaps, cooking show ("How to roast your holiday lamb to perfection!")), world news (US reestabishing direct mail service with Cuba), E!TV report on a Hollywood scandal involving two actresses, reality show about ranchers in Montana, televangelist with a lisp, foreign period piece.* He swallowed another sip of the scotch and blinked at the screen.

It was an Italian film—a 90s relic, judging by the cinematography. Two brothers, a composer and an opera singer, dominated the narrative with their mingled begrudging and affection for each other. It was the kind of film Will could imagine Hannibal enjoying. He would’ve bemoaned the channel's decision to air it with subtitles, of course. *Probably would've spent half the damn movie correcting the translations.* The thought almost made Will smile. Almost.

His ears perked when the singer, backed by a velvet-draped stage and a spray of peacock feathers, launched into a soprano-esque rendition of a vaguely familiar aria. The sound was melancholy. Lamenting. Sprinkled with harpsichord and strings—baroque, then. He'd heard it somewhere before. Had Hannibal played it at a dinner party? At one of their dinners?

*I don't remember. I don't want to remember.*

The singer paused at the conclusion of the aria, tears glistening in his eyes, as the audience applauded to near-orgasmic cries of *Bravo, bravo!* Suddenly, the scene switched to flashback, and the reason for the singer's tears became apparent. He'd been castrated as a boy to preserve his singing voice—a decision made by his older brother, the composer.

*Clip the bird's wings and cage his song forever? Or drown him in Armagnac, cook him, and savor the fat as it slides down the throat?*

Another unavoidable dilemma—one Will understood, intimately. He already knew Hannibal's preference.

He took a swig, washing away the phantom crunch of the ortolan's tiny bones against his teeth and gums. The scotch crawled down his throat.

On the TV screen, the sky was darkening. A solar eclipse was about to take place. A crowd of lavishly dressed aristocrats stood inside a garden. A man in a long wig—the king—clutched at the opera singer's hand. The older brother stood at the back, watching.

*Is the earth simply a tomb?* the king lamented. *Bring back the sun, Farinelli!*

The crowd raised its plethora of ornamented magnifying circles as the last sliver of sunlight disappeared behind the earth's shadow—and then the singer began to sing.
Ask me to suspend it, Hannibal's voice whispered. To stop the motion of the earth, the slipping of time. One word, and I will do it.

"Get out of my head," Will hissed.

He rolled the tumbler between his fingers. Forced himself to focus on the film. He shortly wished he hadn't. Will watched, helpless, as the older brother swept aside the cuff of his shirt and lifted his own circle of glass to his arm. He dragged the sharpened edge across the flesh of one wrist, then the other, as his sibling enchanted the crowd with his song. No one noticed his blood splattering the dust. The older brother rolled his eyes toward the sky, a painful smile flickering across his face right before he collapsed.

Will clutched at his glass, his fingers whitening at the tips.

I will create an event horizon for us, Will, Hannibal coaxed, inside his head. Both teacups and time can be mended. Forward or backward, memory or dream—no matter the intention, no matter the context, it will be our design.

On the coffee table, Will's phone suddenly lit up. A text.

He stared in disbelief, the movie completely forgotten. It could've been Jack, or maybe Alana; possibly even Molly, by some stretch of the imagination. But none of them knew the number for his burner phone. There was only a handful of people who did.

Will swallowed. Barney, then. Or Chiyoh. Something's wrong.

When he picked up the cell, the sender line read "0." Will's heart flip-flopped. Only one contact in his burner had a code number.

Will opened the text window with a trembling finger. A picture popped up, filling the screen. He widened the image. It was a screenshot of a webpage—one he'd seen before.

The professors from the Collège de France invite you to a lecture organized by Paris Descartes University and presented by Dr Bedelia Du Maurier, DClinPsy, UNC School of Medicine (Chapel Hill, USA), Paul Valéry University of Montpellier (Béziers), private practice (retired). This lecture will focus on the influence of empathic over-arousal on behavioral characteristics of autism-spectrum disorders...

Will's eyes widened as he scanned the words. It was the same listing Hannibal had shown him at dinner, in Lithuania. A dinner they hadn't actually shared. The knee-jerk thought danced through his head, mocking him: She's talking about me, isn't she?

He was so absorbed by the picture itself that he almost didn't notice the text blurb below it.

I'm thinking of attending. Would you care to join me?

Will's breath caught in his throat. Hannibal. Three weeks of silence, of shadowed dreams from impossible worlds—and now Hannibal was asking him to go to a psychiatry talk. Presented by Bedelia du Maurier. In France. Again.

No, his own voice chastised. You know what he wants you to do. He wants you to eat her. To kill her. Just like before. And you remember how well that turned out.

Will felt the blood pumping through his body, racing to his groin, unbidden. His brain conjured images of Bedelia's sagging corpse at the dining table, her chest ripped open in a crimson V by Will's
own hand—and then Hannibal's hands, pressing him up against the bedroom door, rough and insistent, ripping open his shirt with a scattering of buttons.

Will felt himself growing hard inside his boxers. "Fuck," he croaked, between his teeth.

Hannibal between his thighs, licking bloody stripes along his flesh… then moving farther down, to dip his tongue into the tight core of his body. Eyes closed in ecstasy, drowning in the taste of Will's heat as he parted his flesh with his tongue, his lips…

Then an icy rush of air, and the dark flash of Chiyoh's pistol as Will shoved it to Hannibal's temple.

*Will you forgive me?*

Will jerked. His eyes snapped open. His fingers flew to his phone, and he hammered out a reply.

*DON'T go to Paris*

After a moment, he typed:

*And dont text me again*

He pressed send before he could stop himself. He stared at the green text bubbles, feeling vaguely nauseated.

He powered off the burner phone and threw it into the corner of the couch. Thirst and anger clawed at Will's throat as he pushed himself up and headed for the shower. He needed one—a **cold** one.

*You should get out of the house. Somewhere; anywhere. Figure it out on the way.*

Will agreed with the whispering voice. He might not be able to stifle his memories, but he'd be **damned** if he wasn't getting away from Hannibal for the night.

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The street outside of Muriel's was heavy with foot traffic. Dusk had replaced the last trails of sunset, coloring the world a rigid cobalt blue.

Will sat at the end of the restaurant's century-old Courtyard Bar, staring out the tall, rectangular windows. His fingertips warmed the glass of Lagavulin between them. It was better scotch than he usually afforded himself. Tonight, though, he would allow himself a little luxury. Something easier to swallow.

The ceiling beams were hung with red velveteen sashes and festive pine wreaths, woven with strings of delicate white lights. The gaslight lamps lent an almost Dickens-esque atmosphere to the room. *Or Jack the Ripper*, he thought wryly. Christmas was fast approaching, and the entire city was already decked out in green and gold by the time he'd arrived.

The holiday was a time for giving, but also for taking. CDC statistics showed the highest rates of suicide around Christmas and New Year's. It was a busy time of year for police departments and forensics teams; Will himself had been called in on a number of seasonal death investigations with the NOPD. Some of them had turned out to be homicides and, thus, required more investigation. It appeared not everyone took delight in the tinsel and holly.
Muriel's, however, provided a familiar—if only marginally comforting—refuge. Will usually avoided the French Quarter. The noise, the sweaty masses of humanity, and the smell—a unique combination of sewage, smoke, alcohol, perfume, and horse shit from the mounted division—repulsed him.

But with its sprawling, double-gallery architecture and the soaring Saint Louis Cathedral, Jackson Square was a picturesque and well-maintained landmark of the city. Year-round, jubilant wedding parties could be seen in front of the cathedral's white, tri-steepled façade, their foreheads glistening with perspiration from the pervasive New Orleans humidity.

Two blocks down, on Bourbon Street, was where the majority of the tourists' drunken excesses and novelty celebrations took place. Sometimes the revelry turned to violence. That was where Will had come in.

His first case as a homicide detective was the murder of a Tulane student during Halloween weekend—the second-largest holiday celebration for the city, after Mardi Gras. The nineteen-year-old had been shoved under a Harley-Davidson Road King, just down the street from Lafitte's, by a group of college students from Georgia.

He remembered the P-shaped crack the handlebar had made in the man's skull and the pulpy pink fluid leaking from his shattered cranial bones. He also remembered how quickly the kids had sobered up when they'd heard the phrases second-degree murder and hate crime. No more celebratory hand grenades or hurricanes after that.

A stone's throw from the Mississippi, Jackson Square was also the day home to a number of local artists, palm readers, jewelry-makers, and musicians. Painters and caricaturists would come in the morning with their folding chairs and tables, and prop their canvases along the vine-wound, wrought-iron railings surrounding the central garden. They rarely packed up before dusk. By the time nightfall wandered into the Square, their chances of a late sale usually depended more on the intoxication of the passers-by than on the quality of their work.

A few of the other officers in Homicide had started a Muriel's happy hour tradition for a while. Will had joined his partner, a fast-talking farmer's son from Tennessee six years Will's senior, for a few of the meetups. Mitch was rumored to be up for promotion to lieutenant. He was smart enough; a reasonably diplomatic hard-ass who wouldn't take no for an answer when other people were listening. Jack had always reminded Will a little of Mitch, in that way.

On his last night at the bar, Mitch had been running his mouth about Will's insomnia screwing up his target practice. He'd laughed when Tony, a transferee from Baton Rouge, had suggested that Will get a bed partner to "wear him out."

Will hadn't laughed. Mitch had noticed.

Later, Mitch had stopped outside their patrol car. Will had sensed the other man's gin-infused warmth pulling between them, closer than usual. He'd touched Will's arm. The calluses on his fingertips had felt like dry leaves.

If you need something to help you sleep, he'd said. He hadn't finished the sentence. Will hadn't invited him to.

Mitch had dropped his hand, with an expression somewhere between concern and regret.

A small-time meth dealer named Wade Krusemark had put a bullet through Mitch's throat less than twelve hours later. Will was assigned a new partner within the week.
Despite his broken memories from his time as a cop, Will still thought of New Orleans as his city. He'd promised Molly he'd take her. She would've found the French Quarter quaint, he knew, with its myriad of colorful bars, boutiques, and live music on every corner.

He'd thought about renting one of the peeling Creole cottages for a long weekend. They could've had long mornings in bed. A late brunch of Mother's crawfish étouffée and shrimp po' boys. A stroll through the flea market in the afternoon, and Yo Mama's famous burgers for dinner. Then a tour of the Quarter's rock and jazz clubs, and Café du Monde after midnight for greasy beignets and hot chocolate. Somehow, they'd never found the time to go.

*Hardly the only promise to her that you broke,* the voice mocked as he sipped his scotch.

Hannibal, on the other hand, would've preferred the garden district with its grandiose Victorian homes, art galleries, offbeat antique shops, and five-star restaurants. Will could imagine Hannibal studying the wine list in the dining room of Commander's Palace, the bold pattern of his suit contrasting with the cobalt-blue wallpaper and dark wood paneling.

*Split a bottle, or pair with plates?* he'd have asked, his eyes flickering to Will's in invitation. *Your choice, Will.*

He could just as easily imagine Molly leaning into the bar at Yo Mama's and laughing, clutching a bacon-and-Swiss burger the size of a small dinner plate in her hands. She would've made a wry comment on the mishmash of sci-fi and pin-up-girl décor, and Will would've smiled.

*Elvis and aliens and busty redheads,* he could hear her saying, *I feel like I'm in an X-Files episode. Does it get any weirder than this?*

Now, sitting at Muriel's polished oak bar, Will was grateful he wasn't at either establishment. He'd already collected enough ghosts in New Orleans; he didn't need imaginary ones.

*You didn't really think you'd escape them—did you?*

Will scraped his thumb along the rim of his tumbler. He didn't answer. The Lagavulin had blurred his thinking enough that his inner voices were no longer holding his emotions hostage. Another drink, and he'd *drown* them.

He lifted his glass. The amber liquid sloshed and glittered under the light from the hanging lamps.

*Here's to everywhere we never went. Everything we never did... everything we never were.*

He swallowed thickly. The rim of the tumbler crushed his lip like a bruise.

"To whom are you toasting?"

Will nearly dropped his drink at the question. He turned. A man sat two stools down, staring intently at him. The piercing blue of his eyes reminded him strangely of Alana's.

"What?" he asked.

The man nodded at Will's glass. "I can always tell when someone's toasting someone who's not there."

His voice was broadcaster-smooth, without a trace of discernable accent, and deeper than one might expect. Through the tortoise-shell frames of his own glasses, Will could see the man had a slim but athletic build and coarse, salt-and-pepper hair. He looked to be in his late forties, and was very tan.
His maroon silk tie hung loose around his shirt collar.

"I'm—" Will stuttered, intending to follow with Not looking for your input. But something in his chest shifted at the genuine curiosity in the man's eyes.

"I'm just having a drink," he said. He nodded at the glass in the man's hand. "And who're you toasting?"

The man chuckled and laid his arm on the bar counter. "You, at the moment. For entertaining my intrusive question. I'm Anton. Cheers." He leaned in, holding his glass aloft.

Will returned the gesture, clinking the rims of their glasses together. A toast. Why not. It's what people do in bars.

"Will," he returned. He took a sip of his scotch and swallowed, noticing the way the man watched his throat bob with the movement.

"So," Anton said, running his tongue along his lower lip, "who was it, then?" His gaze, sharp as crystal, shot to Will's bare ring finger. "Ex-wife?" His eyes moved to Will's face. "Or—ex-husband, maybe?"

Will laughed darkly. The sound tore at his throat. "Both, probably."

Anton raised an eyebrow. "Well, I can commiserate," he said, lifting his hand and wiggling his own bare ring finger. A white tan line was visible along the skin. "Same here. But only the latter."

"Do you usually ask people in bars if they're drinking to their exes?" Will swallowed the rest of his Lagavulin in one sip. He set the glass on the counter. It thumped against the wood with a hollow sound.

"Not usually in bars," Anton replied. "I'm an attorney. Family law. It's often my business to know what my clients are doing with regard to their exes. Or soon-to-be exes."

Will cleared his throat. "I'm probably going to need one of those soon. A divorce lawyer, I mean."

Anton slid down one bar stool, closing the gap between them. It was the kind of move that would've normally set Will on edge, but the double scotch he'd just finished—and the single he'd downed before that—had pushed his irritation somewhere outside of himself. Somewhere just far enough out of reach.

The thought came, as it often did, when he drank: Maybe this is what 'normal' feels like.

"Do you and your exes have children?" Anton's eyes pierced the faux lenses of Will's glasses, scraping at his expression underneath.


"And the other ex—?"

Will squared his jaw. "Did." His fingers itched for a fresh drink. "She's—she's not here anymore."

Anton twisted his tumbler between his hands. "I'm sorry to hear it."

"It was a long time ago."

"That's an unusual scar," Anton said brightly, in a deliberate change of subject. His eyes combed the
stubble over Will's right cheek, tracing the dark pink slash from Dolarhyde's knife. "Distinctive. But not unattractive."

"It's not supposed to be *attractive.*"

"How did you acquire it?" Anton's smile was bordering on flirtatious.

"Someone gave it to me. You could say he wasn't in a very good mood. We were—" Will paused, searching for the appropriate word. "*Adversaries.*"

"I see," Anton said softly. His eyes drifted to Will's forehead. Without hesitation, he lifted a hand and brushed aside the lock of hair covering the scar from Hannibal's buzzsaw. Will shivered at the contact.

"And who gave this to you? Or was it the result of an accident?"

A sudden vision of Margot Verger's pale, red-crossed skin in the lamplight seared through his mind.

*I'll show you mine if you show me yours.*

Heavy-lidded eyes turning to him with the immediacy of knowing. Of seeing. And of needing to be seen. Vulnerability and lies, twisted into a desperate shot of hope in the dark.

"It was… sort of an accident. Sort of not."

Will paused, considering how much more he could say before his story would start to ring a bell. His and Hannibal's history had been dramatized by every newspaper and tabloid across the country for years.

"A friend gave it to me," he clarified.

Anton leaned back. "Seems like you could use some kinder friends. Or maybe less *generous* ones."

"It was a singularly complicated situation," Will said. His voice sounded faraway to his own ears. "Neither of us were innocent. Neither of us escaped unscarred. He was… more than a friend. He understood me."

The other man's eyebrows lifted. "Ah. Well, he sounds only *slightly* crazier than my ex. Good riddance to bad influences, right?"

Will blinked. "Please don't say 'cheers.'"

"I wasn't going to."

Anton paused, his eyes meeting Will's with a heated stare. His fingertips brushed the inside of Will's wrist. Behind the two of them, the clinking of glasses and the rise and fall of conversation seemed to disappear.

"I was going to ask if your scars ended there."

Will returned Anton's gaze. His eyes were very, very blue.

"No," Will said. "They don't."

"Would you show me?"
Anton's fingers tightened. His thumb slid over Will's radial artery, brushing his quickening pulse point.

Will swallowed thickly. "What are you going to show me in return?"

Anton's smile was like a gash in his face. "Generosity."

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Generosity.

Anton had pegged him for a masochist, Will knew. A down-and-out head case with nowhere to be and no one to go home to—not anymore.

The sound of the condom wrapper tearing open in the silence of the hotel room sent a cold shudder of anticipation through Will's body. It felt gratuitous and thrilling and so, so wrong.

Maybe Anton was right—maybe kindness wasn't what he deserved. His head had been spinning when Anton had shut the door behind them, though Will hadn't allowed the other man to kiss him. Not on the mouth. He was glad that Anton hadn't seemed to expect it.

The hotel was near the strip mall along the river—far enough away from the meat market of Bourbon Street that Will didn't have to hear or smell the crowd. He was grateful for the artificial distance from it; from himself. For days, he'd had the unsettling feeling that he was being watched. Followed. But prying eyes couldn't follow him behind the drawn draperies of Anton's hotel room. They were invisible here, like ghosts.

The other man had made a short, seductive show of undressing him on the bed, licking a line along the smile-shaped scar on Will's abdomen. He hadn't asked where it had come from. Now, Anton was naked except for his dress shirt, which hung halfway off his shoulders.

"You're tight," Anton purred behind him, as he slipped a lubricated finger inside Will's body.

Will didn't have time to fully register the sensation before a second finger entered him, twisting him open wider. He couldn't actually feel much, thanks to the scotch—which was, perhaps, a blessing. Or maybe not.

"It's been a while," Will lied.

In truth, it had been never. Not unless he counted his hallucinatory memories with Hannibal at the cliff house and in Paris—which he didn't. The heat that had locked them together then had never touched Will's body—not in this way; not in the waking world. Only the clenching, desperate tightness of Hannibal's thighs around his hips at the cabin had been real.

Was I your first? Will wondered. Did you give yourself to me, the way I gave myself to you in our dreams?

You were, Hannibal's voice whispered, an ache in the sound. You are. You always will be. The first I allowed.

Flashes of Danukas' bleeding, wire-strung hands spun through Will's mind, like images from a
twisted phenakistoscope. *He knows why this is happening to him, but he refuses to acknowledge his guilt... It's time to finish him. To complete our design.*

Will knew he would never be able to forget the adoring gratitude in Hannibal's eyes, or the stab of guilt it had brought him.

"Will."

Anton's silken voice dragged him back to the present. He reached an arm around to Will's front. The pull of his hand was smooth and firm. Long, easy strokes that stiffened him, but in a way that was nothing like the fire of Hannibal's touch.

"Try to relax. Okay?"

Will hung his head, teeth clenched as a single, dry kiss was deposited on the small of his back. The stroking halted as Anton withdrew his fingers.

Then an incredible pressure followed that Will *did* feel—all at once, and with blinding force. It was as if his body were being split in two and scorched at the same time.

The sound that escaped his mouth was more of a cry than a moan. Anton seemed to interpret it as the latter. He pushed in deeper, tilting Will's hips upward, hands clamped tight around his ass. Hot tears prickled the corners of Will's eyes.

The other man's breath rushed hot across Will's back. "All right?" Anton asked, breathless. Without waiting for a reply, he growled, "This is good. You're—you feel fucking amazing."

Will shoved back, *hard.* His body opened wider—a seemingly impossible feat. He ground against Anton, caught and pinned, feeling the solid, downy planes of the other man's groin against his ass. Anton slammed back in, seemingly delighted at Will's sudden seizure of control.

It hurt worse than anything Will had imagined. Worse, even, than the tear of Hannibal's knife across his gut. At least he'd known, in that moment, that Hannibal had cared for him. Or something *akin* to caring.

*You are loved, Will,* came Hannibal's voice inside his head, quietly. *I never stopped.*

"Harder." Will growled. "Make it hurt."

Anton hesitated for only a fraction of a second at the command. Then he drove into Will with the brunt of his own wild need, pumping heavier with each thrust.

Will accepted the rending of his body with as much acquiescence as he had the linoleum knife. Flashes of red and orange spun behind his closed eyelids—the mimicry of blood and flame. Lube and sweat trickled down the insides of his thighs. His cock was aching.

Before Anton finished, he spared a few charitable strokes for Will. It was enough to tip him over the edge, into a cold and efficient climax. Will shuddered as his cum spilled over the blanket and Anton gasped wordlessly behind him.

He wiped his eyes before turning around. Anton didn't need to see the traces of moisture there—and Will didn't need the other man to care, or *not* to care. He just needed confirmation that this was done. *Over.*

"I'd invite you to stay, if I thought you wanted to." Anton's silver-gray hair hung in strips across his
forehead. His pupils were wide in his glacial eyes.

"I have to get home," Will said. "I've, uh, got dogs."

Anton nodded. His chest was flushed underneath his white dress shirt, underneath his fake tan.

_How much of anyone is real?_ Will felt as though all of the air had been suddenly sucked out of the room. Only the Louisiana humidity remained, stifling in its perseverance.

He winced as he climbed off the bed. The backs of his thighs were smarting; the inside of his body felt bruised. Will fished his clothes from the floor and dressed quickly. Anton tossed the spent condom in the trashcan and pulled on his pants.

The other man ran a hand through his own hair, smoothing it back into place. "I'm in town pretty often. You could give me your number. Or I could give you mine, if you prefer."

Will unfolded his glasses and shoved them onto his nose.

"Thanks, but I don't think we'll see each other again," he said, trying for a lopsided smile that he didn't feel. "I'm just passing through."

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It was nearly two a.m. by the time Will parked the camper van in front of the house and stumbled inside. A blur of brown, white, and black fur greeted him in the hallway. A chastising bark—Zoe's—resounded inside his head with the fierceness of a gong.

"No," he snapped. "Quiet, Zoe."

She hung her head, tail drooping. Winston eyed Will with curiosity. His nose worked at the air, grasping at the unfamiliar traces of cologne on Will's skin.

"We'll go out in a minute, okay?" Will told him, forcing a gentler tone.

He crossed to the couch without kicking off his boots. The burner cell lay in the corner, where he'd tossed it. He grabbed it and powered it back on, pacing to the kitchen as he waited for it to boot up.

He stood in the dark by the stove for a full minute, staring at the digital clock on the phone's illuminated LED screen. No new texts. No calls.

He opened Hannibal's message. The wild hope that a notification had failed to appear on reboot held for exactly half a second. Will stared down at his own words with dry, unfocused eyes:

_And dont text me again_

Apparently Hannibal had taken his request to heart. Or perhaps he _had_ decided to go to Paris, leaving Will to stew in his own melancholy. He knew it was unlikely that Hannibal would tell him if he decided to leave Lithuania. Unlikely that Hannibal would tell him much of _anything_ , after that last text.

Will set the phone on the coffee table. He decided to leave it on.
He called the dogs and hooked them up to their leashes. His fingers shook on the snaps. He took them outside, and far enough down the block for them to relieve themselves and sniff around a little. Then he turned back.

The shortness of the walk earned Will a few odd looks, which he mostly ignored. The humidity was stifling, despite the chill that had taken over the nighttime air. His body hurt. His head hurt. He didn't have the patience to think anymore, or to keep lying—even to himself.

He kicked off his boots in the foyer and unleashed the dogs. His feet felt numb as he trudged to the master and climbed into bed, fully clothed and reeking of Anton's spicy, high-end cologne.

He felt underneath the neighboring pillow for the piece of paper he knew was there—Hannibal's last drawing. He couldn't explain why he'd stashed it underneath the pillow. He hadn't even looked at it. But every night when he pulled up the sheets, he heard its slight crinkle.

He took it out now, eyes tracing the graphite rolls of waves surrounding the Roman ship. The gray shades of sorrow in the emperor's eyes, as he clutched his drowned lover in his arms, widened the hole in Will's chest.

*Why have you taken yourself away from me?* Hannibal's handwriting whispered, in silver curves, from the bottom of the page.

*Because you can't love me,* Will pleaded. *And you won't leave me. And I don't know how to do either of those things without killing both of us.*

Will allowed the illustration to fall from his hands. With a choked inhale, he unfastened his pants and shoved his boxer-briefs down.

He gripped himself in his hand. A moan escaped his lips as his fingers curled around his stiffening flesh. He allowed himself to feel the aching heat of Hannibal's hands on his body; the hot slide of their lips and tongues intertwined.

"You asked me to kiss you," he whispered, to the empty room. "I *couldn't*—not then. Not to say *goodbye.*"

*Then it wasn't the last time,* Hannibal murmured against his mouth. His hand moved over Will's cock, rough, dragging punishment into pleasure. *Though you still haven't defined your intentions. Or given us a context.*

*But if you came back to me, or I came back to you?* Will gasped.

Hannibal's hand worked his cock with quick, luxurious strokes. His orgasm was building fast.

*Suppose we did. And then—?*

The words trailed from Hannibal's lips, over the scar on Will's cheek—somewhere between a prayer and a plea. Everywhere Hannibal's skin touched his own felt like it was on fire.

A moan wrenched from Will's throat. Inside his body, the tidal wave of his release threatened to spill. He could barely bring himself to form the question he needed to ask:

*Would we still hate what we've become?*
Interlude: The second installment of A Thousand Savage Futures falls right around here. Please see Interlude: Diary of an Incubus for a short, surreal foray into Will's mind. Or skip, if you prefer to continue with the main narrative.

As Memnon's lofty pyre collapsed, consumed by leaping flames, rolling clouds of black smoke darkened the sky, just as when rivers breathe out the fogs they produce, and prevent the sun from shining through. Then the black ash flew upwards and, packed and compressed into a single body, took on a definite shape: It acquired heat and the vital spark of life from the fire, while the lightness of the substance gave it wings. At first resembling a bird, and then, in fact, a real bird...

—Metamorphoses, Ovid

Forty-eight days after the fall—eight days before Christmas Eve—

Hannibal pulled his overcoat tighter in the doorway of the dark librairie. A poster in the window advertising the year's popular fantasy titles, with names like Le Premier and Le Roi des Fauves, was partially obscured by frost.

Paris had been graced recently by snow—perhaps just three or four days before he'd arrived. It would have been picturesque on the day it fell. Now, however, the streets were a mess of gray footprints and slush lumped along the curbs of the normally colorful Latin Quarter.

It had not been so cold, last time. Nor had there been any snow. Many things were different in Paris, last time, Hannibal reflected. Will had been with him. Chiyoh had been with them, as well, although Will had purposely kept that knowledge from him. He'd asked her to follow behind to protect them—to protect Hannibal.

She almost succeeded, he thought ruefully.

Inside his right coat pocket, he fondled the smooth, round barrel of the hypodermic syringe. Its tactility stirred an odd feeling in his chest. How much of what we believe is dream? How much, memory? How does one cleanse the mind of its future, and the future of its savagery?

Across the street and half a block up, yellow light spilled from the etched windows of Le Quinze Vins' glass-paneled storefront. Although he couldn't see inside, Hannibal knew his quarry was browsing. Tasting. Likely sampling the merchant's recommended Chablis. She would take her time. Perhaps she would leave with a bottle of two-thousand-two Bâtard-Montrachet Chardonnay and a bottle of two-thousand Pauillac Bordeaux. Perhaps something entirely different. Hannibal found his inability to predict the outcome as distracting as it was alluring.

A vibration from his trouser pocket shook the thought from his mind. Hannibal pulled out his burner cell. The mingled flavors of salt and sweetness rose on his tongue as the sender's number stared up at him from the text notification.
Ten digits. The code for Barney. For friend.

He smiled, thinking of the letter he'd mailed to Jack Crawford earlier that morning. It would travel by express air to the Behavioral Analysis Unit at FBI Headquarters in Quantico. It might make its way to Jack unmolested, though it was more likely to be photographed, dusted, swabbed, and X-rayed before Jack unsealed the glue with his own fingers.

Inside, he would find commendation for his and Bedelia's ruse, and the folded drawing of _La Braschi Antinous_ with Barney's thumbprint in a charcoal stain in the upper right corner. _Might want to ask Barney about the boiler, Jack_, Hannibal had penned at the bottom.

He knew Jack would have a veritable field day with the letter. And Hannibal himself would be far from France by the time it landed in his hands.

He tapped the answer button on his cell and raised it to his ear.

"Good afternoon, Barney. How are the Cajun cuisine and humidity treating you?"

"Afternoon, Doctor Lecter. Or evenin' where you are, prob'ly," the other man said. "S'all right. Temperature dropped last coupl'a nights. Gettin' chilly."

Barney's voice was absent of its usual brightness. Perhaps the demands of his new employment were wearing on him, Hannibal reflected. Or perhaps Jack had already put his detective skills to work—a wonder of wonders that would be—and had sniffed out a connection between the orderly's temporary relocation, and Will's. _Which would not be entirely disadvantageous_, he thought to himself. If Jack had already pressed the iron to Barney's hands, it would only make the validity of his reports from New Orleans more transparent.

"The southern winter is as capricious and untamed as a brush fire," Hannibal said. "Tomorrow, it may feel as warm as if such a blaze were hovering nearby. Tell me: how is Will?"

Barney cleared his throat. "Doesn't leave the house that much."

"Lotsa TV. Or sleepin', sometimes it's hard to know which. Goes up to the corner mart. Comes back with paper bags. The thin ones. Not too many groceries, though. Walks his dogs up by the marina parks and the lighthouse. Sometimes City Park, too."

"A solitary existence with beasts and drink," Hannibal mused aloud. _Not so different from before Molly Foster._

"Well, he goes out to bars sometimes, too. Doesn't seem to like the French Quarter too much. Kinda sad, there's lotsa stuff to do. He was there a couple nights ago, though. Some big old place in Jackson Square—Musial's, I think." Barney paused, then added, "No—Muriel's. I was thinkin' of the baseball player." He chuckled at his own mistake.

"Yes, Muriel's. A tourist-friendly bastion of the city's social and culinary heritage," Hannibal supplied. "The ghost of a suicidal gambler is said to haunt the premises. Will must have many old haunts in New Orleans. Perhaps Muriel's is one of them."

"Yeah, maybe." Barney fell uncomfortably silent.

From thousands of miles away, Hannibal caught the whiff of words unsaid. _Uncertain. Something he doesn't want to tell me._ Hannibal had sent Will a text two nights ago. His response had been… less
than desirable.

"What did Will do after Muriel's, Barney?"

"He left," Barney said. "Went to a hotel. With, uh, someone."

"I see." Hannibal paused. "And could you discern the identity of this other person?"

"No clue—never seen him before," Barney said, in a rush. "Little older. Silver hair. Seemed like they didn't know each other that well."

'Him.'

A man.

A man Will didn't know well.

Hannibal squared his jaw. The event was likely inconsequential, he knew. To speculate on anything aside from the obvious would be petty.

He swallowed the knowledge whole, before it could worm its way into his brain. His gut. The hollow of his chest.

"Well, then, it seems you've given me everything you have on Will at the moment," Hannibal said, curbing the sharpness he felt on his tongue. "Keep watch on him, Barney. Close watch. But ensure he doesn't see you lurking. Will needn't know we're looking after him."

"Will do, Doctor Lecter. I'll let you know if he does anything outta the ordinary."

"Thank you, Barney. I greatly value your assistance."

"No problem, Doctor Lecter. I appreciate the job."

"And Barney?"

"Yeah?"

"Enjoy the city, while you have the time. The Quarter is especially festive during the holidays."

"I definitely will, Doctor Lecter." The grin was back in Barney's voice. "Might'a made a couple'a rounds of Bourbon Street already."

"Good man. Have a Sazerac on me."

He ended the call without waiting for Barney's goodbye.

He tucked his phone in his pocket as a blonde woman stepped from the lighted square of the wine shop onto the sidewalk. She hugged her thick, Persian blue overcoat around her and shifted a paper sack in the crook of her elbow.

Hannibal fixed his eyes on her petite form. You may make a meal of me yet. He could hear her final words to him in his head; could envision, without effort, the sensual slope of her waist and the place where it met the swell of her hips. He remembered the way the curves of her body had felt between his hands; the husked whisper of her last kiss against his mouth. Her lips had been dry; not from fear or lack of lingering desire, but from knowledge.
All of our endings can be found in our beginnings. History repeats itself, and we can't escape it.

This time, history both would and would not repeat itself. Will's own temporary replacement for companionship had not been a woman with an easy smile and a love of stray dogs. That in itself was telling—if not vaguely consoling.

For Hannibal himself, there would be no Bedelia. No Antony. He did not have a replacement for Will.

Hannibal closed his eyes, remembering. Bedelia had known from the moment he'd chosen the generic gold ring on the Champs-Élysées—his armor—that their sum would never quite equal the subtraction of Will, in Hannibal's mind. She'd toyed with that knowledge in Florence; turned it over in her hands, where he could see. Tried to wash it down with countless glasses of Lambrusco. None of it had made any difference. Bedelia knew that she would never be first choice.

Afterwards, Will was the only one of the three of them who seemed not to understand. It was why he'd plunged the knife into Bedelia's chest, in the other Paris in the other world. Why he'd allowed his rage to overtake his anxiety. A red haze, tinted with the green of jealousy.

I guess we both surprised you, then.

The image of Will's lips curving in a tremulous smile filled the darkness of Hannibal's mind with a warning light.

Yes, he answered. You did.

Hannibal opened his eyes. Up the street, he saw that his exotic bird had already taken flight towards Notre-Dame. It was time to resume his shadow game.

He followed at a distance, retracing his steps down the avenue that led towards the Seine, past the brightly illuminated cathedral's southern façade. If his quarry had any sense that she was being followed, she refused to give a sign.

Her honey-colored hair bounced stiffly against the back of her coat as she turned onto Quai de Montebello. She moved the paper sack to her other arm, balancing the weight as she picked up speed.

Two bottles, then, Hannibal thought, with a smirk.

He followed her off the main street, through the trees bordering the walkway at the Seine's edge. The breeze from the river carried with it the crisp, cold scent of untarnished snow on rooftops and high windowpanes. Come summer, the mingled aromas of lilies and palms would drift across the water, infiltrating the city with a melodic perfume. Parisians would throw open their windows to bask in the fresh fragrance and sunlight. Now, there was only ice and the closed warmth of apartment buildings.

To Hannibal's left, the Pont de Sully arched out into the night. Not far now. If his avian mistress' flight pattern proved to be as reliable as her mating call from the Collège de France, then she would soon alight beneath the willow in the Jardin Tino-Rossi.

Hannibal's fingers curled around the syringe. A moment of truth—and memory.

The click of her heels was a staccato against the stone mosaic of the platform at the river's edge. She paused underneath the snow-crusted boughs of the willow tree to fish her cell phone from her purse.

No cigarettes this time, Hannibal noted. A wiser choice for your lungs, my songbird.
She raised the phone to her ear. The glow from the single lamppost cast her hair in a white sheen, reminiscent of the coolest part of a flame. Just as last time, Hannibal was far enough away that he could make out only an indistinct murmur of conversation. Not that it mattered; he already knew who was on the other end.

The Seine sucked at the concrete ledge of the platform as she clicked off the LED screen and went to slip her phone back into her purse. Then she stopped. She turned at the exact moment Hannibal emerged from the trees.

"Hello, Hannibal."

"Bonsoir, Doctor du Maurier."

Hannibal's fingers froze on the needle in his pocket. The coolness of her tone, and her smirk at his greeting, seemed almost preternaturally premeditated. For one heart-suspending second, Hannibal wondered if she, too, carried the altered memory of Paris in her mind.

Then Bedelia's eyes widened as he strode towards her, and he caught the first acrid whiff of her fear. Not a memory, then. He and Will were the only ones who carried the fragments of that other world, lodged in their brains like broken glass.

He plucked the phone from her fingers and tucked it into his pocket. Her gaze followed his hands in silence, then came up to rest on his face. She made no move to stop him, or flee.

"Did I surprise you?" he asked.

"No." Her blue-green eyes deepened at the question. She moved the paper sack in her arm, causing the bottles inside to clink together. "I saw you at the lecture, at the back of the auditorium. Not your usual spot."

"The pleasure of your company sometimes requires precautions." Hannibal tilted his head, studying her. Nothing in her expression or body language suggested that they were being watched, or that she anticipated company other than his own. They were alone in the garden.

"As does yours," Bedelia replied, in the airy tone she used to mask her anxiety.

He decided to give her a respite. "A common thread has led us both back to Paris. I had hoped to speak with you about our man behind the curtain. This is a picturesque and private enough spot for such a conversation, I think. Don't you?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "What would you like to know about the man behind the curtain?"

The breeze stirred Bedelia's pale hair against the azure fabric of her overcoat. Lamplight, scattered by the willow's branches, played around them. Her eyes seemed to shine. Almost angelic, Hannibal thought to himself. Almost.

"It's not what I would like to know, but what I would ask you to tell him," he replied. Inside his pocket, he moved his hand from the barrel of the syringe to Bedelia's cell phone.

"You would make me your messenger. The teller of your version of events. Again."

"Yes." Hannibal withdrew the phone and held it in front of her.

"I want you to tell Jack Crawford the truth. Tell him you saw me in Paris." He paused, inhaling. The dense aroma of silty river water filled his lungs. "Tell him I'm looking for Will."
Bedelia shot him a critical look. "If you're so curious to find Will, then what are you doing in France?"

"Finding someone and reaching them are not necessarily the same thing." Hannibal swallowed. It was unclear how much Jack had told her, or what he'd guessed. Impossible to know, at present, how far the 'Ndrángheta would pursue them. Until the waters cleared, it would be necessary to preserve Will's innocence. "I don't wish to cause Will undue headache—or heartache," he added.

"That's a first."

"I'm aiming for more of a reprise." Hannibal licked his lips. "A redux, if you will. I would like you to talk to Will. Listen to his voice. Prod him. See if he bites back—and how hard." He paused. "This would not be for sharing with Jack, obviously."

Bedelia sighed. The sound was just short of exasperation. Hannibal looked with affection on the storminess of her eyes, the crease in her brow. He remembered the expression well. His own Sabina, annoyed as ever at her emperor's distraction over his erômenos.

"You are not asking me to do this for free."

"No."

Bedelia cleared her throat before continuing, her voice growing chilly with the sound. "If I'm to be your messenger, I need to know why."

"You have access to Jack and Will. Both of them will listen to you, just as you are listening to me now." He added, "I find myself in need of a second opinion on Will."

Bedelia looked at him a moment, as if in assessing. She nudged the Le Quinze Vins bag higher on her arm. Hannibal could tell the bottles were growing heavy.

"What will you give me in return?"

"Your future," he answered simply. "One without culinary threat."

*Carry these messages in your talons for me, my clever bird, and I will not hem your wings—I promise. And I always keep my promises.*

He looked into her eyes—past the blackness of her pupils, blown wide by the dark and also, perhaps, by his presence—and glimpsed the same surrendering of trust as she'd shown on the plane to Paris. She'd been wise to help him then; she would be even wiser to do so now. Bedelia had already demonstrated her tenacious and convoluted will to survive. It had the flavor of a particularly rich Kashmiri ristra, hand-pounded and fire-hot at the outset, but yielding a variety of hardy, herbaceous flavors as it was consumed.

"It seems I can't refuse your offer, considering the alternative." Bedelia's mouth curled at the corners, her expression relaxing into something akin to amusement. "I'll tell Jack I saw you. And I'll speak with Will—though I can't promise any relevant insight. He and I parted on somewhat complicated terms."

"I assumed as much." Hannibal swallowed, relishing the taste of the promise. Although he'd given Bedelia his word that he would not mar her flesh, he could still savor the taste of her fealty.

"You should know that Jack has the DCPJ on alert," Bedelia said, as he handed her cell back to her. She slid it into her purse. "They'll shoot on sight."
"I wouldn't expect any less of Uncle Jack." Hannibal smirked, slipping his hand back into his pocket. Bedelia took a step back as he withdrew it. The sudden, citrusy aroma of renewed adrenaline rose on the air, tainting the breeze.

Bedelia eyed the handle of the corkscrew in his gloved fingers. "Are you already reconsidering your offer?"

"Non, mon oisillon. But I thought we might as well open the white, since we won't be dining together."

Bedelia's eyebrows lifted. "How did you—?"

"Bâtard-Montrachet? Two thousand two?"

She nodded.

"Appropriate for a spontaneous celebration of life, don't you think?" Hannibal smiled.

The Seine murmured noisily behind them, lamenting and rejoicing with the confessions of thousands of lost and recovered loves. Here, in this spot, I place the cornerstone of your temple, my phíltatos, he thought. It is not a grave, but a monument to our future.

"We don't have any glasses." The laugh that punctuated Bedelia's words was light and fondly girlish. He'd heard that laugh exactly once before—the first time she'd allowed him to taste her. Her skin had been ivory-pale against the deep green sheets; her flavor rich and complex on his tongue. There had not been a second time.

"The bottle will suffice." Hannibal bent down to brush the snow from the planter stones surrounding the willow. He sat, patting the space next to him. "We are not strangers. And I suspect neither of us has had much wine, yet, this evening."

Bedelia's eyes flashed with disbelief as she took the offered spot. She withdrew the chilled bottle of Chardonnay from the bag and passed it to him. Hannibal could feel her eyes watching him as he set upon it with the corkscrew.

"You really are reaching for Will, aren't you?" she asked softly, turning her head to look out over the dark water. Her voice held a trace of awe.

Hannibal didn't reply. The river's roiling song answered for him. When Bedelia spoke again, it was slowly, and with precision.

"From the few naked glimpses I've caught of your heart, I see it as a high stair. One without railings or anchors. There are wide gaps where steps are missing. It is a precarious climb for anyone, especially one who values steady footing."

Her hypnotic voice filled Hannibal's ears, drowning out the lapping of the water. She paused as he pulled the cork from the bottle. The escaping vapors met atmosphere for the first time in thirteen years, dissolving to a swirling, smoke-like mist.

He set the bottle on the ground between them, allowing it a moment to breathe. "Would you have tried to climb it, if we'd remained together in Florence?" he asked, low.

A mixture of nostalgia and pity shone in her eyes as they met his own. They appeared almost gray in the half-light, he noticed. In certain lights, Will's eyes assumed a nearly identical color.
"No," she answered. "You might have eaten my own, along with the rest of me." Her brow twitched, then relaxed as she continued. "Will has chosen to follow this unsteady path. But is he ascending or descending your stairway this time, Hannibal? And what will you do when you discover the answer? Those are the questions you need to ask yourself."

Hannibal picked up the bottle of Chardonnay by the stem and handed it to her. "The first taste is yours, mon oisillon. You've plucked seeds of wisdom from the past to sow into the soil of our futures. Let's water them now, together. Perhaps inspiration will blossom."

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–Fifty days after the fall; six days before Christmas Eve–

A coil of wind rippled through the long grass on the banks of Lakeshore Drive. From where Will was sitting, it made the greenery appear almost as fluid as the water beyond it.

His eyes shifted to the muddy blue of Lake Pontchartrain stretched out before him. The lake's sheer size surprised most people. Its opposite bank was hidden by the earth's curve, tucked away somewhere beyond the horizon. In that way, Pontchartrain had always reminded Will of the sea—fathomless and never-ending; a provider of infinite escape. At least it had seemed so, when he was a teenager.

Back then, many things had seemed bigger than they were. His mother's absence. His father's laugh. His first girlfriend's declaration of love—and her subsequent move to a better-dressed senior with a large social circle and a Nissan 300ZX.

Some things, though, had seemed smaller. Less troublesome in the face of youth. Like the lake, they had continued to expand into his adulthood, stretching out beyond their visible endings.

Back then, when he shook the sapling trunk of his sanity, strange fruit would fall. He found his thoughts grew significantly less tasty as the years went by. At some point, solitude had turned to loneliness, and loneliness to isolation.

And then Jack Crawford had called him into his office to meet a strange man, a man whom Will would begrudgingly allow to psychoanalyze him; and then, less unwillingly, to befriend him.

Will had never before felt wholly understood or entirely seen, in his abstruse singularity. But the man who became his doctor and then his friend had a secret, too. Will was no longer a singular point on a dark horizon.

Still, he couldn't help feeling tainted by what he saw. He'd been trained to turn the poisoned thoughts that fell from his sapling tree to fertilizer; not to peel back their rotten skins and scatter the seeds to the corners of the earth, as was Hannibal's way.

Hannibal ate of the fruit and then fed it to others—and then ate of them, too.

Jack believed Will to be as skeptical as the Biblical Adam. Hannibal had hoped for a more curious and yielding Eve.

In the end, Will had tossed aside the apple and accepted the goring poison of Hannibal's fangs. Their friendship had ended as quickly as had the heartbeat of a girl who hadn't deserved to die. A girl who
might've become their daughter, in another world and time.

When he'd resurfaced, Will had found a skinless mass of meat and muscle, twisted into the shape of a heart and placed before the altar of a chapel in Sicily. *He left us his broken heart,* he'd told their imaginary daughter, in a reverent whisper.

For the same reasons Hannibal had placed the body there for Will to find, Will forgave him. For Abigail, for the smile-shaped scar on his own stomach. For the Chesapeake Ripper and his dark little cell in the BSHCI, and the fire in his brain that Hannibal had stoked instead of smothering.

He'd never before felt the capacity to give so much of himself to anyone, so incautiously.

Forgiveness, Will had found, was very much like falling in love. And, like falling in love, it was as impossible to understand as it was exhilarating. It was *too much.*

When Will had walked away, Hannibal had chosen to surrender—a revolt against the very action Will had threatened when he'd refused the apple. But Hannibal's banishment to the BSHCI's basement had done little to stifle Will's awareness of him—until Molly. Tough, tender, fierce, easygoing Molly. Her volley of beautiful contradictions both set him at ease and disoriented him. After Hannibal, he didn't have to wonder *why.*

He'd never been very good at appreciating the pictures of himself his lovers created. No matter the canvas or the choice of paint, he could see only a twisted Dorian, glowering at him from the brushstrokes.

Hannibal's composition had been vivid beyond imagination—thick with chiaroscuro and shaped by palette knife, brush, and hands. Molly's had been lacking in contrast, but the watercolors she'd chosen for Will's portrait had complimented her own nicely.

He couldn't stand to look at either painting. He'd thrown both of them into the water, where the salt of his and Hannibal's sea ate away at the oils, and the river's freshwater muddied his and Molly's hues. Will's hands were stained by the dark rainbow of his double murder. No matter how many times he washed them, he knew they would never again be clean.

*So much for infinite escape.*

A jerk on his arm startled Will to attention. The strap of a leash—Bowser's, he saw—pulled on his hand, followed by a disgruntled whine.

Will sighed. The dogs were getting restless. They were unused to being leashed. It was one of the things he preferred about rural Virginia to a large city like New Orleans—the dogs could come and go as they pleased, without being restrained. A freedom he'd carefully ensured for his dogs, but had somehow neglected to secure for himself.

He took a swig from his cup and grimaced. The whiskey was just short of chilled, thanks to the recent drop in temperature. He curled his hands around the plastic, hoping to warm it.

Most of the dogs were sprawled out on the grass, looking bored. Only Winston and Bowser stood at attention, as the sun sank lower and filled the sky with fiery streaks of gold and rose. It cast the red double roof and white walls of the New Canal Lighthouse into silhouette. The tri-tiered tower, elevated on nine concrete stilts, was hung with green garlands and red bows for the upcoming holiday. The strings of white lights woven through the garlands hadn't switched on yet.

*Probably on a timer. Not dark enough. Not yet.*
He'd been semi-neglecting his pack amid the scores of nightmares plaguing his sleep. He'd gone through half a week's worth of towels in the past two nights, and twice as many t-shirts. He'd even dreamed once of Anton, although the details—like much of waking life—were fuzzy.

Today, though, the guilt had finally broken through his sleep-deprived, liquor-fueled haze. Will had thrown on an old t-shirt and a wool beanie to cover his matted curls, and crossed the Seventeenth Street Canal into Metairie earlier in the afternoon. The dog park near Bonnabel Boat Launch was a short drive from the lighthouse and home. The dogs had enjoyed their free-range romp in the winter sunlight, and Will had enjoyed his sixth of whiskey—until it had turned sticky with the humidity. The temperature, though, was dropping quickly with the approach of nightfall. *Time to go home and warm up.*

His right pocket vibrated as he pushed himself up from the ground. A sickening jolt of hope stabbed him, before he remembered that he'd left his burner phone in the van's glove box.

*Still reckless and twitchy as ever.* Bedelia's voice buzzed inside his head from nowhere. They were words she'd spoken before, but not in the context of a sacrificial dinner, as he'd dreamed—or remembered.

*Do you understand what Hannibal truly cares about?* she'd asked, her eyes flashing like sirens. *I don't think you do. Not really.*

"That makes two of us," he muttered absently, as he pulled his phone from his pocket. The dogs jumped up, sensing the opportunity for a change of scenery.

The text notification hadn't come from his address book, and he didn't recognize the number—except for the area code. *Baltimore.*

He thumbed to the message screen as the dogs wandered around him, twining their leashes around his legs.

*Check your email,* the text read.

Will glared down at the screen, brow furrowing. If it was Jack or Alana, they would've messaged him from their cells.

His ankle jerked under him as Bowser strained against his leash. He caught his cup before it dropped. '"Just a sec, guys—be patient," Will mumbled, as he shook the loop from his ankle and thumbed into his email.

At the top of his avalanche of unread messages was the subject line *For your reading pleasure...* Will's eyes moved to the sender. *Bedelia du Maurier.* His eyes narrowed as he opened the attachment. A mobile PDF popped up on the screen. He took a sip of his Laphroaig as he squinted at the header text.

*The influence of empathic over-arousal on behavioral characteristics of autism-spectrum disorders: A lecture by Dr Bedelia du Maurier, DClinPsy, UNC School of Medicine and Paul Valéry University of Montpellier, presented at Collège de France, 16 December 2015.*

Will nearly choked. He punched out of his inbox, not needing to read the rest. He went back to Bedelia's text and pressed the dial button.

"Hello, Will."
Her tone was cool and smooth, halfway to gloating—just as when she'd caressed his shoulder in the lecture hall.

"What the hell, Bedelia?"

"Good evening to you, too. Or, rather, good afternoon, where you are."

"What's your angle this time?" he growled. The wind was picking up, trilling cold fingers along his arms and the back of his neck. Around him, the dogs grew quiet, their ears lifting. "Trying to wriggle your way back into Bluebeard's good graces? Or are you just trying to fuck with my head?"

"Neither. I sent the full transcript of my lecture, along with some feedback from the Descartes University organizing committee. I thought you might be interested in their impressions." A slight pause. "And I can tell from your reaction that you were already aware of its presentation. I assume Jack Crawford wasn't the one to inform you."

Will's rage caught in his throat. He scratched his fingers under the edge of his wool cap. He couldn't play dumb about knowing. But he could lie.

"Jack may have implied there'd be an attempt to catch Hannibal in Europe. It wasn't hard to figure out who they'd be using as bait. Especially since you advertised your availability so well online."

Bedelia hummed, a touch of humor in the sound. "All right—if that's your cover story. I'll do you the favor of not asking Jack to confirm that. But you may be interested to know that the lecture was very well received. Several attendees called the primary case study grotesquely fascinating."

Will's jaw tightened. "How kind of them."

"The only thing missing was Hannibal himself. His non-appearance was something of a surprise. Both the FBI and the French authorities were disappointed."

Will tucked the cell against his chin and wound the dogs' leashes tighter in his palm. His fingers had begun to shake. He knew it wasn't from the whiskey.

"I'm not involved this time," he said. "I don't want to be involved. I don't know where Hannibal is, or what he's doing. So if you're trying to trick me into saying something in flagrante delicto about his disappearance, you're out of luck. For all I know, you're busy pulling off another Lydia Fell."

"Disappearance? I think the word you want is escape. And no, I haven't been drugged and coerced into believing I'm someone else, this time. Nor am I currently masquerading as someone's spouse—which, I believe, makes two of us."

The words stung, just as she'd intended. Will grimaced. It seemed Jack had caught wind of his and Molly's separation. Nice of you to share that information with Bedelia, Will thought darkly. He recalled the skeptical look in Jack's eyes as they'd stood together on the BSHCI lawn, surveying the carnage of his fire. What else did you tell her, Jack?

Calm down. Relax with yourself, came the rational voice inside his head.

Will knew control was what he needed. Control and indifference. Bedelia was prodding him—a fact of which they were both aware. This time, he was determined not to follow her to the slaughtering block.

"Disappearance, escape—whatever synonym you prefer, Bedelia," he said curtly. "You've been creative with your retelling of what happened in Florence. What I'm hearing is that neither of us
actually knows where Hannibal is, and you're the only one who seems overly concerned about that. Which seems prudent, in your case."

"Concern would be prudent for you, too. Have you spoken with Jack Crawford lately? Or Alana Bloom?"

Will opened his mouth to remind her that he wasn't involved—and then abruptly shut it. The truth was, he hadn't. Jack had called a few times in the week following the fire, picking at his brain the way Bedelia was doing now, and Alana had left one voicemail that he hadn't returned. But it had been days—no, weeks—since he'd spoken to either of them. He hadn't told Jack he was leaving Virginia. It hadn't seemed important. Until now.

Bedelia paused, seeming to sense the wheels moving in Will's brain.

"The Bureau is low on leads. You may find Jack returning to the unthinkable—faster, this time. They haven't ruled out Hannibal's orderly, Barney Matthews. And they haven't ruled out you."

Will's eyebrows knitted. He scanned the shoreline, half-expecting to see SWAT agents storm out from behind the nearby lighthouse.

"Should I take that as some kind of threat? Or just a bit of friendly advice, bride to bride?"

"Bride to bride, I'll tell you this: you may not know exactly where Hannibal is now, or what he's doing. But you will. He'll contact you, if he hasn't already."

Her voice was thick with something close to irritation—or, perhaps, bitterness. It was sometimes difficult to tell the difference with Bedelia.

"You saved his life, twice," she continued. "Once after your ridiculous swan dive into the ocean, and again with the help of his lawyer. You left him unfinished. If you think Hannibal will settle for that, then you haven't learned anything about the way he loves." She spat the last word, like poison sucked from a wound.

Will opened his mouth. No sound came out. His throat felt dry. The unwritten future seemed to shimmer in front of him, like a mirage. Like the ocean.

Waves of glittering ochre sand, stretching hundreds of miles in either direction... moonlight glinting over the waves, thrashing in the darkness... and a lion in my arms. A lion in my arms. Your claws in my brain and your tongue in my mouth and your heart between my teeth.

He didn't realize how long he'd been silent until the sound of his own name startled him.

"Will?"

He found his voice with a gasp. "You implied Hannibal was in love with me. I didn't. But you never said why." A laugh, harsh and brittle, ripped from his throat. He knew he was talking too fast. "Makes me wonder if maybe you didn't actually know. Or maybe he didn't. Did he talk about it in Italy? Did he tell you what he wanted, or just what he thought you wanted to hear?"

The unspoken question hovered on the distance between them, like a shadow: Didn't know—or couldn't actually love me? Which was it?

Bedelia sighed. The sound was like wind through snow-laden pines. "Love is rarely patient, or wholly kind," she said, measured. "Sometimes it comes in strangling gasps, and sometimes it simmers for years. That doesn't mean it can't grow. Or that it won't bite back, when rejected." She
paused. Will waited, silent.

"You already have scars from where Hannibal's teeth have latched onto you," Bedelia continued, registering his hesitance. "And he, from yours. How many more scars will you collect before you accept what you owe to each other?"

"I don't owe Hannibal anything."

"You do if you plan to finish him."

Will's hand tightened around the leashes. The nylon bit into the soft part of his palm.

"You're not talking about crushing him. Not this time."

"No," she said calmly. "But you would do well to remember that he's relentless. And uncaged. He won't stop until he's found you. And he will desire that you be fully present when he does."

A restless whine—Winston's—clamored in Will's ears. He took another gulp of whiskey. It did nothing to wash away the stain of Bedelia's words. Across the lake, faint stars shimmered in the sky's deepening blue, like grains of sand reflected underwater.

"And suppose I don't want to be found?"

A stilted laugh. He could imagine Bedelia's crooked eyebrow; her icy glare.

"Hannibal's heart beats like a war drum. If you refuse to heed the sound, then you may wake to find yourself in the middle of a battle, unarmed. Which may be exactly where he wants you."

"I'm not fighting," Will said, low. "Not for Hannibal. Not for anyone."

"Then you have already lost the war."

Static crackled over the line as Bedelia hung up.

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_Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo / If I cannot bend the will of Heaven, then I shall move Hell._ —Virgil, _Aeneid_, Book VII

--Fifty-two days after the fall—four days before Christmas Eve--

Hannibal's hand rested loosely on the steering wheel of the Venetian red Infiniti as he curved down Route Twenty-seven towards Okeelanta. The lingering aromas of swamp grass and freshwater filled the car, saturating his linen suit.

He'd rolled down the back windows during the hour-long drive from Miami International Airport through the Everglades. As day had descended to dusk, however, the temperature had dropped from a cool fifty-five degrees to the mid-forties—tepid for southern Florida, even in December.

The sun was a weak, milky ball of light hanging just above the clusters of buttonwood and
bottlebrush trees lining the rural highway. Here, the early-winter sunsets looked exactly like the sunrises, offering little warmth amid their dreamlike haze.

He wondered if the sunset was the same from New Orleans, and whether Will was watching it. Perhaps he'd ceased to look up at the sky altogether. No redemption to be found in earth's heaven—not from the purgatory to which he'd banished himself.

It had taken Hannibal an entire morning to break into Haai's laptop after arriving at Lecter Castle, weeks ago. The captain's sales records were encrypted, but Haai hadn't taken the time to erase his personal calendar—not before meeting the bite of Hannibal's knife and the sting of a needle filled with his own cocaine.

The Dutchman's diary contained two sets of initials on two separate dates: WO, November sixteenth; and WG, November twentieth. If Hannibal had guessed correctly, then the man to whom he would shortly pay a visit was in for a very special surprise. Hannibal was unused to hunting without first studying his prey. If he moved quickly, however, he knew the story would reveal itself without coaxing.

Haai's appointment book had been significantly absent of a BM. Perhaps the WO would fill in the blank; perhaps not. That, too, would come without coaxing—if he was lucky.

Gray-green shades of evening dropped over the golf course out the window to his right. They deepened as he sped past the trailer park across the inlet from Lake Okeechobee's Pelican Bay. He flicked off the Infiniti's headlights and kept one eye on the GPS, tracking the block numbers along Torry Island Road. He recalled the cartoon alligator, printed in green ink on the business card tucked into the senior Graham's memorial pamphlet.

*Never insult an alligator until after you have crossed the river,* the slogan had read.

Hannibal smiled to himself. *A wise motto for an unwise man.*

Four-thousand Torry Island Road was a ramshackle, ranch-style house shrouded by black mangroves at the end of a dirt street. Hannibal pulled into the driveway beside a muddy pickup. A flatbed trailer was hooked to the back, upon which an aluminum boat sat partially covered by canvas. He closed the car door without a noise and went to take a closer look.

A quick examination told Hannibal he was in the right place. While not new, the boat had been spotlessly maintained. The camouflage paint on the tunnel hull had been retouched several times, and the outboard's propeller was clean and free of hard water scale. Hannibal leaned in for a sniff. The faint aroma of WD-40 seeped from the seam in the engine cowling. The boat's owner had likely cleaned it the month prior, at the end of the statewide alligator harvest.

He peeked around the truck to the back of the house. A wooden shed stood in the fenced-in backyard. Beside it sat an orange plastic kayak, tilted on its side. Rancid water was puddled in the bottom, dotted with the corpses of flies. *No love spared for that which does not bring money.*

An ancient porch swing creaked as Hannibal walked up the steps to the door. Strips of paint had peeled from the swing's bottom, bending away from the wood in slender white arcs. They reminded Hannibal of the delicate curvature of skinned ribs. The flicker of a television screen was visible through the blinds. It would be most fortunate if the man lived alone. If not, however, Hannibal would bid his companion an amicable *bonsoir.*

Hannibal clenched the handle of the boning knife behind his back. A grunt sounded over the TV at the doorbell's ring. It was followed by an aggravated, "What in *tarnation!*"
The inside door jerked open. Behind the screen, a man in his mid-sixties stood, clad in gray sweatpants and a long-sleeved thermal. He was bald, except for the twin patches of flossy white hair above his ears. His fading Florida tan had not touched his scalp, and his stooped posture suggested a recently acquired frailty.

The man squinted at Hannibal's linen suit and Panama hat. "You better not be here sellin' somethin'. Or tryin'a get me hooked on that Latter Day Saints crap."

He coughed. There was a stickiness in the sound. Hannibal stepped up to the screen door, inhaling deeply.

*Putrefaction—cellular necrosis. An almost saccharine halitosis. Warm, clotted milk and whiskey. Chronic dehydration.* The man's thermal covered his arms, but Hannibal knew the chemotherapy IV marks would be there if he rolled them up.

"I was rather hoping you might be able to sell something to me," Hannibal replied, keeping just outside of the circle of light cast by the porch lamp. "You are the proprietor of Tail Gator Excursions? Walter Oswalt?"

The man didn't smile, though Hannibal was sure his grin would have matched the man's in the photograph hidden in the cabin's dresser drawer.

Behind the door, the man's eyes narrowed. "It's Wally. And yeah, I'm him. But yer shit outta luck if you wanna go gator huntin'. Harvest season's over. That's state law." He coughed again.

"I wasn't under the impression that you were particularly concerned about the law," Hannibal said, removing his hat and setting it on the porch swing. "Florida's, or otherwise."

He stepped closer, allowing the light to fall across his face. Before Wally could react, Hannibal pulled open the screen door and strode inside. The other man stumbled backwards as Hannibal kicked the inside door shut with his heel, closing them in together. His sunken eyes shot to Hannibal's face, and then to the boning knife in his hand.

A barely-audible whisper: "Yer—yer him. Yer s'posed to be across the ocean. Not here."

"A pity the alligator harvest is finished for the year," Hannibal said. "Perhaps you can sell some information to me instead. I'm curious to know whether you planned to hand over myself and Will Graham to the 'Ndràngheta from the beginning—or if that idea occurred to you only after our late Dutch friend suggested it."

Hannibal's eyes swept the room as he spoke, reading the space the way Will would a crime scene. A compound crossbow hung on pegs by the back door. A variety of other hunting equipment was stacked or mounted along the walls: catch poles, harpoons of various lengths, fishing rods strung with depleted glow sticks, a spotlight, a three-fifty-seven Magnum bang stick. Amid the bachelor's disarray of empty liquor containers and prescription bottles, framed photographs clustered the sole bookshelf and fireplace mantle. One showed Wally and a woman clad in a cloth hospital gown, posing with a newborn. Wally was young—too young; she was even younger. It was the only picture of the family together.

The others revealed a school-portrait progression of youth: a boy at age three, seven, twelve, sixteen. Over the years, his hair had darkened to the color of his father's in the photograph taken with the senior and junior Grahams. It wasn't difficult to see how the Oswalt family's unplanned future had disintegrated. Hannibal wondered briefly how often Wally had begged the boy's mother to send photos—something, *anything*, to remember the child he'd left behind.
A last picture showed Wally's son at age twenty-five or so, with his own young child in his arms. A 
grandson. It was displayed in a cheap silver frame on the center of the mantle. Wally's own son 
would have been several years older than Will. The age difference didn't matter; what did was Wally
 Oswalt's fatherly affection for Bill Graham's son. And your treachery, Hannibal thought darkly,
turning his eyes back to the cowering man.

"Now wait one goddamned second! I woulda never hurt Will Graham. Me an' his daddy go way back. All three'a us. Will's my friend."

Hannibal stalked forward, forcing Wally up against the La-Z-boy in the sitting room. The older man's hands clawed at the chair's threadbare sides.

"He's my friend, too. Perhaps you wouldn't have betrayed Will if you weren't terminally ill. Or if Haai's plan had worked in your favor." Hannibal's fingers curled tighter around the knife. Light from the television gleamed along the blade.

Wally shook his head. The wisps of hair above his ears trembled with the movement. "I don't know anything about anybody's plans. Will asked me to help 'im out. To help you out. I told 'im I knew a guy in the cargo business who might be willin' to make some extra money. Anything after that was Will's show."

"We help our families, when we can," Hannibal said. "But you didn't spare much thought for Will, did you? You planned to leave Haai's Calabrian blood money to your estranged son upon your death. I can smell the cancer eating your lungs. You would have bought residual love and comfort for the child you abandoned, but never forgot. Now Haai is dead. Your chance to help your family is over. You knew Will's plan would trail back to you. So you went to Jack Crawford before he found you, hoping to suck the husks of his good graces in exchange for Will's capture—and mine."

Wally grimaced at the mention of Jack's name.

"An uninspired move," Hannibal continued. His lip curled involuntarily. "Almost cliché. You might have found some success writing television crime drama, if you'd put your ambition to honest work."

Wally's mouth opened and then closed, like a fish's. Finally, he managed, "I don't know what yer talkin' about! I told you, I ain't sold anybody out! Specially not to the FBI. Will works for 'em, for Chrissakes."

Hannibal sighed. "Worked. Which you also know. Your floundering is artless, but informative. Did you also offer your services to the 'Ndràngheta as a part-time distributor? Perhaps you sampled Haai's wares and found them a welcome distraction from the inevitability of death."

A pained, furious expression darkened Wally's face, but he stayed silent. The man's fingers scratched along the sides of the chair.

Nervous now. You give yourself away far too easily, my scaly friend.

"As a doctor," Hannibal continued, "I would have advised medical marijuana over cocaine for pain management. Jack and his late wife took some pleasure in it, prior to her own death from lung cancer. Perhaps he would have shared the story with you someday, had you the opportunity to continue your dialogue."

Wally's eyes widened. "Yer batshit crazy. Don't know why anyone would wanna help you. Thought Billy's son had a good head on 'is shoulders. Seems I was wrong." His eyes shot to the bang stick propped against the side wall, and then back to Hannibal.
Too far away to reach, Wally. Don't be foolish. Hannibal smiled inwardly at the man's desperation. Even those living under a death sentence were so very frightened when Death finally came calling. The panicked surprise in their eyes moved something tender within him every time.

"Both'a you are spinnin' stories," Wally spat. "You and Will. Fairytales!"

"Let it be a fairytale, then," Hannibal said quietly. "You and I are predators hunting predators. Hunting each other. The only person with nothing to gain is Will, and you would have led the FBI and the 'Ndrangheta straight to him. You've been inexcusably rude, Mister Oswalt. Given your friendly history with the Graham family, it seems you're due a comeuppance—as is Barney Matthews."

Wally's brow creased. The lack of recognition in his eyes was genuine, unlike when Hannibal had mentioned Jack's name, or the 'Ndrangheta. It seemed that Wally and Barney weren't connected, after all—which either simplified or complicated the situation. Possibly both, he thought.

"Don't know what yer implyin', seein' as I haven't done anything other than help yer sorry ass. So you might wanna turn around and get yerself outta my house, or I'll be callin' up the sheriff." A coughing fit seized him then, and Wally doubled over against the recliner, shoving his fist against his mouth.

Hannibal waited for the man to finish. When Wally looked up, his eyes were streaming.

"You won't be calling the sheriff's office, Wally," Hannibal said softly. "You wouldn't want to draw attention to your hunting business and its tangled skirting of the law. There's also your involvement with the mafia's cocaine trade to consider. Better to preserve what money you've squirreled away for your son and his family, than to lose it by being convicted of a crime before the cancer ends you, don't you think?"

"I don't think yer in yer right mind," Wally wheezed out, defiant. "And what else I think mostly depends on what yer fixin' to do."

Hannibal held the knife aloft. "I won't harm you, Wally. Not here. You don't deserve to die in this house, surrounded by sickness and sad memories."

Wally's eyes flitted between Hannibal's face and the weapons along the wall. He raked his spittle-scummed fingers through his sparse hair, flattening it against the sides of his skull.

"As for what I plan to do," Hannibal continued, "I think a nighttime sail would be a pleasant way to cap off the evening. The alligator harvest may be finished for the year, but the beasts are still out there. Show me how you hunt them."

Wally's eyes widened in terror. Hannibal grinned.

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The aluminum sporting boat bobbed atop the marshy waters of Lake Okeechobee. Overhead, the clouds had cleared to give way to the swelling gibbous moon. In four more nights, she would be full and glorious, her all-seeing eye opened to the world.

Around them, the lagoon simmered with life: ripened pond apples falling into the water with
gluttonous thunks; the white heads of moonflowers beaming from their vines; the fragrant aroma of Spanish moss. Wally stood at the stern of the boat, scanning the water with his green-tinted spotlight. He'd cut the motor a while back to avoid scaring off the alligators. His mouth was set in a grim line, his legs bowed with fright and illness.

Hannibal watched with interest from his seat at the helm. He had never participated in an alligator hunt, and was looking forward to the process. A vinyl sack of partially frozen beef lung lay open between them in the bottom of the boat. Wally had described, in halting sentences, how to chum the water to lure the giant reptiles. Hannibal had used the boning knife to slice the frozen chunks into smaller pieces, and then strewn the meat into the water off the starboard side. Crickets filled the nighttime air with their violin-like songs, as the boat drifted in a lazy arc.

"Works better fer peg-and-line bait," Wally said, breaking the silence. "After the gator swallows it, you haul 'im in. Gotta be wooden, though. Can't have hooks in it."

"State law?" Hannibal asked.

Wally nodded. He shivered in his blue windbreaker as the breeze picked up.

Small, sucking sounds began to fill the air as the largemouth bass and black crappie pecked at the floating meat from underneath. They were Lake Okeechobee's most famous draw, according to the Palm Beach County Fishing and Hunting Guide Hannibal had picked up at a gas station on his drive from Miami. Will might've enjoyed an evening on the lake with a six-pack and his casting rod, Hannibal thought. The lagoon water, creeping with fresh green, had a surprisingly pleasant smell. Hannibal wouldn't have minded it, himself.

He wondered absently if Will would have ever invited him on a fishing trip. Perhaps he still would, in this world. Or perhaps the next.

The sound of Wally's low whistle filled Hannibal's ears. He turned in the direction of the Q-beam. Several pairs of round, yellow-white eyes glowed from the cattails near the shoreline. Hannibal blinked. In the green light, the eyes seemed to blink back in agreement.

"The gators caught wind'a the chum," Wally said, keeping his voice low. Underneath his trepidation, there was a hint of excitement. "They're just waitin' to see if anything smells wrong before they swim up. But they're out there."

"Yes, they are," Hannibal agreed.

His guide book had also informed him that an American alligator's jaws could impart more than three thousand pounds per square inch of pressure—twenty times the force of a human bite. Like their saltwater brethren, they made use of a twist feeding technique. Famously dubbed the 'death roll,' it allowed the alligator to fatally dismember its prey within seconds. Hannibal also knew that alligators preferred to feed on living animals. Bait attracted them, but distress excited them.

He stood up. In half a second, Hannibal crossed to where Wally stood and plunged Bill Graham's blade deep between his ribs.

Wally gave a startled shout. The spotlight dropped from his hands onto the bench as he twisted halfway around, fingers scrabbling at the knife in his side. Black blood splattered the aluminum with a sound like raindrops.

Hannibal seized the collar of the man's windbreaker. Wally's mouth gaped in surprise. Blood leaked onto the front of Hannibal's ivory suit jacket and spread like an ink stain. Admittedly, it wasn't the
most practical choice of suit for murder, but he'd been anticipating sunshine and warmer weather. He would change and launder later.

"As you know, alligators and sharks share a similar passion," Hannibal said. "They are both attracted by the scent of blood."

Wally attempted, unsuccessfully, to twist out of his grasp. Beyond the boat, the reptiles' fire-bright eyes gleamed in the light of the fallen Q-beam. They were drawing closer.

"In that way, you and Haai are not so different from them. Both of you thought you would feed me to the Calabrian Brotherhood, and shift the fallout to Will Graham. But neither the beasts of the 'Ndràngheta, nor the ones in the water, will dine on my flesh and blood this Christmas."

"You—ungh—you think yer so smart!" Wally croaked, with a sneer. Blood-slick fingers scraped at Hannibal's wrists. "All high-and-mighty, with yer big talk and yer big knife and yer fancy suit!"

Hannibal's fingers curled into the man's collar, partially cutting off his airway. "Technically, it was Bill Graham's knife that bit you. Not mine. I thought the irony rather appropriate."

"Just you wait," Wally wheezed. His Adam's apple bulged against Hannibal's knuckles. "Wait 'til Haai's people get wind'a this. Wait 'til the Brotherhood hears about you traipsin' down here to find me. They're not gonna rest until—unghh—until yer head's on a platter. It's you draggin' Will into this—not me!" He coughed. The sound vibrated through the bones of Hannibal's fingers. "They're gonna get him, too. They'll do him the same way they do you. Just to spite yer corpse!"

Hannibal smirked. "Killers, aren't we all?"

With a shove, he pushed the bleeding man over the edge of the boat. Wally's cry was silenced by the splash of his body, and the bubble of water that immediately filled his throat.

Glowing eyes blinked out as the alligators submerged. Hannibal watched in fascination as the dark shapes sped through the water towards the boat. Wally's head thrust above the surface for only a second, giving Hannibal a glimpse of his wild-eyed panic. Then one of the shapes lunged at him from the side, and his body went under again.

There was a flash of teeth as the beast's jaws unhinged—and then an enormous lurch, as its tail slapped the hull. Hannibal ducked, shooting out a hand to brace himself. The alligator rolled alongside the boat, spinning Wally's body in a blur of black, blue, and red. Hannibal's face and clothing were pelted by droplets of watery blood. Some of it sprayed the aluminum insides of the hull and slid down.

Adrenaline surged in Hannibal's bloodstream. There was a difference between killing someone with his own hands, and watching something stronger than himself kill for him. The sheer power of it was exhilarating—almost voyeuristic. In the face of death, his respect for the beauty of nature had immensely deepened. And he had Wally Oswalt to thank for it.

Hannibal's pulse steadied as the alligator swam off with the corpse in its jaws, streaming red behind its swishing tail. Ragged scraps of human tissue floated on the surface of the lake, amidst the chunks of beef lung. He hoped the alligator would enjoy its meal. The beast's palate was less refined than his own; Wally's cancerous organs would not disturb it in the slightest.

A buzz sounded from Hannibal's trouser pocket as he went to restart the motor. He swept his handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the blood and water from his face and hands. Then he pulled out his burner phone.
New Message: Bedelia du Maurier, the text notification proclaimed.

An unfamiliar sensation washed through him; something akin to anticipation and dread, rolled into one. He tapped open the text.

*I've done as you asked.*
*Will is in love with you. Desperately, I would say.*
*He has absolutely no idea what to do about it.*
*Merde!*

Hannibal drew in a sharp breath, then released it slowly. He closed his eyes, feeling suddenly giddy at the expletive-cum-good-luck wish. Anything less blunt—or less *French*, for that matter—wouldn't have been *quite* Bedelia.

*Will is in love with you.*

*Desperately.*

*In* love.

Hannibal clicked off the screen and pocketed the phone. He stepped to the stern of the boat and turned the key on the motor. It roared to life with a healthy sputter. Cool, green-smelling air caressed Hannibal's face as the craft sliced through the water.

He would return to Wally's house to clean up and, perhaps, to catch a nap. If he was lucky, the house might yield a few useful secrets about the FBI or the 'Ndràngheta. Before the sun rose, he would be on his way north, towards the state line—and then west, across the Panhandle.

*Stay with me a little longer, my phílìatos,* he pleaded.

A fierce and sharpening ache—not unlike that from a knife through the ribs—had reawakened in his chest.

*Don't let the glint of the rail, nor the lull of the water, tempt you. Stay beside me. Within me. Surround me.*

*Stay.*

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--Fifty-five days after the fall—one day before Christmas Eve--

Will opened the door on the fourth knock. A woman, pale-skinned, dressed in jeans and a dark canvas jacket, stood on the sun-bleached front porch. He hadn't recognized her through the peephole. Nonetheless, she didn't seem to be willing to go away.

At his feet, Winston's tail wagged twice, and then went still.

Will squinted. Sunlight the color of spoiled milk cascaded over the carpet, illuminating stray canine and human hairs. "Can I help you?"

"Mister Graham, I'm Special Agent Clarice Starling." The woman glanced down at the barrage of
dogs that had accompanied Will to the door, and then back up at him. Her shoulder-length hair bobbed as she displayed her badge. "I'm working with SSA Foster's task force to track down Doctor Hannibal Lecter—"

Will held up a hand, cutting her off. "I've already helped the Bureau as much as I can with that. I don't know where Doctor Lecter is."

*Which is actually the truth*, he thought. *Funny how you don't have to lie anymore when there's nothing left to salvage.*

Zoe yipped and then sneezed, clearly excited at the prospect of company. Behind her, Simon made a rueful noise deep in his throat. Will turned his attention from the agent on the porch to the pack clamoring at his feet.

"All right, go in and lay down," he commanded. "*Everyone.*" Zoe whined at his tone, but followed obediently as Winston led the other dogs into the living room.

Starling shifted. A Glock twenty-two was fastened at her hip. The safety strap on the nylon holster was frayed from wear. Will could see she wasn't shy about drawing her service weapon.

"I'm here as more of a favor to Jack Crawford, actually," she said, changing tack. The briefest flicker of a smile—one more pleasant than expected—crossed her face. "*May I come in?*

Starling moved a millisecond before Will did, anticipating the invitation.

"Sure," he said, without inflection, as she walked in past him.

He cleared his throat and closed the door, dwelling briefly on the state of the house—the unwashed Tupperware containers stacked along the counter, and the two empty Laphroaig bottles sitting by the trashcan, like physical manifestations of his failures. The house probably smelled, too. He found himself not caring.

"So, I'm getting courtesy visits from the FBI now?" Will asked, as the agent—who looked to be around seven or eight years his junior, the same age as some of his former students—showed herself into the front room. She eyed the folding chair next to the couch before sitting down in it. Will followed, feeling suddenly like a guest in his own house.

"If Jack's so curious as to how I'm getting along, he could've come down here himself." He dropped down, catty-corner to Starling, on the overstuffed couch.

Starling smiled again—a twist of the mouth that was more quirk than grin. Her pale blue eyes had a hard shine to them, like ice clinging to the edges of a lake.

"Agent Crawford said he didn't think a visit would be welcome. Seems like he was right."

Will's eyebrows lifted. "*Agent* Crawford? He's been reinstated?"

"Not as head, but he's back at the BAU. He's working under SSA Foster's supervision."

*Back, full time, on the hunt for Hannibal Lecter, Will thought to himself. That's always produced spectacular results.*

"Do you know Miriam Lass?" Will asked suddenly. She and Starling were probably around the same age. There was a spark in Starling's demeanor—an ambitious, quick-thinking tenacity—that reminded him of Miriam.
"I do," Starling answered. "We had some classes at the Academy together, a few years back. My roommate knew her better than I did, but she seemed like a go-getter. Motivated and intuitive. That's why Crawford hand-picked her for the Chesapeake Ripper case." She paused. "He hand-picked you, too."

Will scrubbed his fingers through his hair. Despite the dehydrated dryness of his throat, he was badly craving a drink. "Yeah, well, Jack doesn't always know how to pick 'em," he said. "Don't let him advise you on any sports bets."

"I don't bet. I prefer certainty, Mister Graham."

Will leaned back and folded his arms over his chest, studying her. His eyelids felt like bricks. He wondered if she'd picked up on his hangover. If she had, she wasn't sharing her opinion on it. Starling met his gaze with equal study, eyes blue as the sky.

"What are you trying to ascertain?" he asked, after a moment. "Here. Right now."

"What Agent Crawford asked me to. Seeing if you could use his help. Or if you might be able to help him."

Will sighed. "The help Jack wants is someone to tell him how to find Hannibal Lecter. I've already done that for him. Twice. If I knew where Hannibal was now, he'd be back in Baltimore with Doctor Bloom, and I'd be back with—" He stopped. The names choked in his throat. Molly and Walt.

It wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the truth, either. Ambiguity chewed at his brain, like a maggot through dead flesh.

"Your wife and stepson?" Starling supplied, softening her tone.

"Yes." The word seemed to float away from him, like a dandelion seed on the wind. He didn't try to catch it.

"Agent Crawford suspected that you and your wife had been having difficulties. Given the situation in the past, with Francis Dolarhyde…"

It was the first time she hadn't finished a sentence, Will noted. It seemed Starling was capable of sympathy, after all.

"They're safer without me," he said. "They have less to worry about. No more dragons chasing nightmares into their dreams." He barked out a laugh. The sound scraped his ears.

You draw nightmares like honey draws flies, a voice hissed inside his head. A slow thrum was building at the base of his skull. He wanted to go back to sleep. He wanted to sleep forever.

Tell me, how would you do it? Another voice, familiar yet false, arose in his head. By your own hand? Or would you allow gravity to take over, as you've twice already done?

Will squared his jaw. It wasn't real the second time, he thought bitterly. But that wasn't entirely true, either. He could still taste the rich swell of red wine on his tongue, tainted by the silt of jealousy. Could feel the hot pump of a heart spilling over his hands, and the heated press of Hannibal's skin against his own. Could feel his own heart, swelling larger than his ribcage could contain. Then shards of glass, raining down like bullets. Voices shouting. Arms encircling. A cold breeze, tinged with the promise of snow. Oblivion.

"Mister Graham? …Will?"
Cool and comforting, like springtime. The sound of your voice on the motel phone was a candle in the dark of a dragon's cave. Molly? No—not Molly.

Will shook his head. The thrumming subsided, but only marginally. He blinked. Starling shifted back into focus. Her quizzical expression matched the sharpness of her gaze.

"Sorry." He cleared his throat. Tried his best to sound halfway cognizant. "I haven't been sleeping that well. I was actually napping when you knocked on the door."

She stared at him for a long second. Then tipped her chin, in what seemed like acknowledgement. "I understand. Stress gets to all of us. I won't keep you."

She stood, adjusting her gun in its holster. Will pushed himself up from the couch, mirroring her.

Starling withdrew a card from her jacket pocket and handed it to him. On the front was her name and contact information in plain type, underneath the header U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the FBI seal, stamped in navy blue. He flipped it over. On the back was scrawled a phone number in black ink.

"That's my personal cell," Starling said. "I don't list it on my card. I recommend giving Agent Crawford a call. But if you ever want to talk to someone who's not Crawford, feel free to call me."

"Thanks," Will said, his voice cracking on the syllable. Then, because he didn't know what else to say, he followed her to the door to show her out, muttering a goodbye as she stepped through it. A flash of pale blue eyes snagged his gaze just before she turned and walked down the porch steps.

He shut the door. The thought occurred to him that he hadn't offered her water, or coffee, or anything else to drink.

Maybe she likes whiskey. The look in her eye as she'd bid him goodbye had been skeptical. Scrutinizing. Agent Starling remains Unconvinced. Good work, Graham.

Will pressed his palms to his eye sockets and pushed hard, making white spots dance inside the darkness of his brain. There were so many voices clamoring inside of it, he'd stopped trying to separate them from one another. Where do all of you end and I begin?

I begin where you begin; I end where you end. We're conjoined, Will. One of us cannot survive without the other. Hannibal's voice, now; oddly benevolent in its choice of words.

I ended you, and so I will begin you; we start anew with each turning of the universe. A sound like sharpened steel; clear as the ringing of a high bell. Will swallowed, his throat painfully dry. The two of us, together.

Why, then, have you taken yourself away from me?

Now three voices—three faces—appeared in his consciousness. He felt rough words murmured against his throat; honey-brown eyes caressing his body and mind from afar. Then Molly's seafoam-green gaze, dull with disappointment. And Walt's young eyes, glaring up at him with steel-blue blame.

Will growled, shoving his palms against his forehead. His skin felt greasy. How many more ghosts would he collect before he was quantifiably haunted? He was too full of missing people already. His years as a detective, his time at the FBI—all they'd taught him was that people disappeared. And that, most of the time, they didn't come back.
The cacophony inside his mind was shattered by the vibration of his cell phone. Will pulled the phone from the pocket of his jogging pants, which he'd pulled on over his briefs before answering the door. He couldn't remember packing them. They'd appeared among his other clothes when he'd arrived in New Orleans—navy blue fleece, a few sizes too big. He'd probably mixed in some of his father's clothes with his own, he'd thought.

His eyebrows jumped at the caller ID. Molly.

Heart racing, he pushed the ANSWER button before he could think.

"Molly."

"Hi, Will." Her voice was stiff. Oddly formal.

"Are you and Walt all right?"

"Yeah. We're fine." A hint of startled appreciation. "I—I have some bad news, though."

Will paused. "It's not about—"

"No." Voice sharp again. "Well, sort of. Someone from the FBI called the house this morning, asking for you. I gave them your cell number. They called back after they couldn't reach you." She paused. The silence stretched out like a tightrope. "They, um. They found your dad's friend. Wally Oswalt. Someone reported him missing yesterday. They found his body. Um, part of it."


"Part of his body? What happened?"

"They said it looked like an alligator attack. The agent on the phone called it suspicious. No one's supposed to be hunting alligators in Florida right now. They, uh—they found his boat out on the lake. The fingerprints were all his. But someone left something at his house. A hat." She stopped.

Will's brow creased. A hat? The strangeness of the detail, juxtaposed with the news of Wally's death, was blasted apart by her next words.

"They did a DNA analysis, Will. It's Hannibal's."

Will opened his mouth. No words came. Belle Glade, Florida—that was where Wally lived, up near Lake Okeechobee. Hannibal is in Florida. Or was. Not in Lithuania. Not in France. Here. Three states away. Eight hundred miles. And he's killed Wally Oswalt.

"Oh," Will croaked.

Wally had provided Haai, who'd provided the boat. The boat had given Hannibal his freedom. Wally had also provided Will with a temporary home—an escape. The amount of money he'd accepted in return for Hannibal's transport had been meager, compared with Barney's portion. Wally promised to help. To help Hannibal. To help both of us. Why Wally? He wasn't to blame.

Wasn't he, Will? Hannibal's voice gnawed at his ears. How can you be sure?

"Or the hat could've been someone else's; it doesn't matter," Molly continued, audibly irritated at his non-response. "He was wearing it at some point. I thought you might want to know. They said the only reason they were telling me anything is because we're still under federal protection." A short
pause. "Walt and me, I mean."

"It's good that they told you." The words fell from Will's tongue like lead. "I'll give Jack a call and see if there's anything I can do."

An exasperated noise sounded from the other end of the line. "What exactly could you do? Tell me, Will. Because I'd love to know the plan. I'd say you've already done enou—"

"Molly."

He kept the warning mostly out of his voice, aiming for sternness instead. Across the room, Bowser and Delilah's ears lifted at his tone. Will still didn't know if the FBI was tapping his cell. Hell, maybe they'd already put eyes on him. That would explain why he felt watched whenever he left the house.

They haven't ruled out Hannibal's orderly, Barney Matthews. And they haven't ruled out you. Bedelia's words clattered through his head like tin cans down an alleyway.

Molly seemed to arrive at the same realization. "Okay," she sighed, the fight disappearing from her voice. "Fine. Just let me know if Jack tells you anything I should know."

"I will. I promise." He paused. The image of Molly's hands, trembling in her green wool gloves as she'd glared from Hannibal to Will in the cabin's living room, seared across his memory. She'd been brave. Defiant. Almost instantly accepting of her life being razed to the ground, burning down around her. Only later would she have cried, Will knew; somewhere out of sight of Walt.

You were the second man to abandon her, and you didn't even die. Not yet. What's your excuse for that?

Will swallowed. He decided to chance it. "Molly, I'm—I'm sorry for everything that's happened. I'm as much to blame for this as Hannibal is."

He expected her to remind him that he wasn't sorry, that he never really would be; and that even if he was, it wouldn't change a thing. You can't un-ring a bell, Will.

Ask me to suspend it, he would've cried. To stop the motion of the earth, the slipping of time. But those were Hannibal's words, not his. The lines between the two of them had blurred beyond recognition. The barrier between himself and Molly, however, had solidified. Thickened. It was smooth now, devoid of handholds.

"There was always going to be an ending for us."

Molly's tone was startling in its sadness. In the background, Will could hear gentle whuffing noises not far from the receiver. Randy.

"And we both knew he was going to be a part of that ending."

"I tried to hold onto us." Emotion welled thick in Will's throat. His fingers curled around the phone, as if they could pull Molly toward him across the miles. Clarice Starling's business card slipped from his fingers and fluttered to the floor.

Molly sighed. "Yeah, well, it's a damn slippery planet. Take care, Will."

She hung up before he could say goodbye.
Stay tuned for the Part IX epilogue next week!

This story will be posted in nine parts over nine weeks. It can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics, *Of Putrefaction, Saccharine* and *Interlude: Diary of an Incubus*, can be found on [this post](#). Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series *A Thousand Savage Futures* can be enjoyed on YouTube [here](#). Also, the header arts for *Eve of Dreams* contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

This story, and this chapter in particular, contain references to several poems, one of which is James Dickey's *On the Hill Below the Lighthouse*—a very beautiful work that everyone should [read](#).

*That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water…*

—Philip Larkin, *For Sidney Bechet*

*Thy hand once more; I will not lose again,
Till thou art here aloft, or I below:
Thou canst not come to me, I come to thee.*


—Fifty-six days after the fall—Christmas Eve—

She was cold and luminescent and full, a distant satellite whispering unforgiving secrets across the
darkness of his vision. He caught her from the corner of his eye when he stopped to discern where, exactly, he was. He could hear her voice in the back of his head. You were in my heart. You were in my light. I look inside you now, and all I see is blackness.

She wavered when he blinked. He tried not to look at her, but he kept forgetting. She'd been his guide for so long. She'd orchestrated the constellations that had ushered him across the ocean; had beckoned him back to Virginia with her radiance. He'd followed her silvery path all the way to the Dragon's door—and then back to Hannibal's.

If he clawed away the milk-smooth skin of her face, would he find glass underneath? Or knife-bright steel?

Who made you this way—too cold and luminous to love?

He'd staggered up the boulevard, across the London Avenue Canal, and along the tail-end of Paris Avenue before he realized that she hadn't answered him. And that he'd forgotten his jacket.

It wasn't the first Christmas Eve Will had spent in the city alone, but it was the coldest. Even the ubiquitous southern humidity had withdrawn, leaving an uncharacteristic chill in its wake. White lights and velvet-strangled greenery glared from every window and corner. He'd stopped to stare into some of the houses as he'd wandered through Gentilly and Saint Anthony. Drapes were open, spilling warm light onto the sidewalks. Rooms full of families, clustered around dinner tables and glittering trees, assaulted his eyes. The hosts were always easy to spot. They appeared the most frazzled, bustling between their guests with cocktail glasses and plates of hors d'oeuvres, and leaving the elder family members to calm the small whirlwinds of children. Cousins and siblings bounded from room to room in their freshly starched clothes, fueled by sugar cookies and holiday excitement.

Will and Molly and Walt had spent two Christmases together—one at Molly's parents' in Harrisburg, and one in Great Falls, when her parents had decided to go to Bermuda for the holiday. The second year, he and Molly had stayed up after Walt had gone to bed, to watch the snowfall and wrap presents. She'd made hot toddies for both of them. He'd teased her about it until she'd straddled him on the floor, among a mess of ribbons and wrapping paper, and silenced him with her honey-warm lips.

Will knew if he thought about it too hard, he'd need to find another drink. He'd already finished what was in his travel mug and thrown it away. There was no room in the sink for another dish. He'd had a couple drinks before that… more than a couple. Maybe just one. He couldn't remember.

There was no snow, and no warm lips or warm drink, to comfort him this year. At least New Orleanians had the decency not to string artificial snow along their bushes. It would've looked out of place amid the austere grandiosity of the old buildings. Garish and unwelcome.

As are you, the moon whispered, smooth as glass. Don't you want to see my face on the water?

Will closed his eyes and reached for a lamppost that wasn't there. He nearly barreled into a trashcan, instead. His head spun as he caught himself.

"I don't," he sputtered. Overhead, the moon seemed to expand and contract, like a pupil in a strobe light. The eye that sees only in darkness. She already knew all of his secrets. She had promised to keep them, but he knew that she would never again cross between her sky and his earth. It was an interminable distance.

"If you see only darkness, how do you see me?" he slurred, his hands balling into fists. His knuckles stung from where he'd scraped them on the can.
Across the street, a middle-aged couple glared at him as they walked to their car. The man shook his head as he slid into the driver's seat. *Christmas crazies.*

Will looked back up at the moon. *I see you as you were, as you are, as you will be,* she answered. *Alone, in a well of nightmares, with your hands around your own throat. You tried to drink of her light, and it choked you. Then you drank of his darkness, and it poisoned you.*

A stiff breeze raked down the avenue, swaying the garlands hanging from the porches. Gooosebumps raced down Will's back inside his t-shirt. He hugged his arms around his shoulders and swallowed. The holiday lights were dancing. Pinpricks of white everywhere, shimmering and blurring. His throat felt raw. Parched. *Too much saltwater. Or maybe just smoke from the fire.*

*Which fire?* chimed the moon overhead. *The one you put out in the hearth—or the one you ran away from, but left burning?*

Will shivered. He didn't reply.

*You could have smothered those fires before they sparked. You could have saved all three of them. You still can. Come to the water. Bathe in my light.*

Will forced his feet to move, to carry him past the roundabout at the intersection of Paris Avenue and Lakeshore Drive, toward the bayou. The fountain at the entrance to Lake Terrace gleamed white inside its circular iron fence. It was silent and dry. He remembered driving past it on patrol a few times when it had been working. *Probably cracks in the pool from Katrina,* Will thought. *No money for repairs, just like everything else.* So many parts of the city had failed to rise again after the hurricane. *Water or fire, it makes no difference. In the end, they swallow everything.*

Across the bayou, the wind whipped briskly off Lake Pontchartrain. The suck of the waves along the concrete seawall chafed his ears. There was a viciousness in the sound; an urgency. He'd heard it on the cliff, high above the clashing Atlantic. But his bloodlust had cooled now, and his whiskey warmth had disappeared. He was alone.

When Will raised his head, a bright blur of light took him by surprise. He stumbled in mid-step, blinking. It was a moment before he realized what he was seeing. Up ahead, the New Canal Lighthouse swam into view in a Rorschach of red and white. The stacked windows and balconies were illuminated this time; the beacon at the top of the tower throbbed with light. Above it hung the moon, indifferent in her spectral roundness.

*If this pilgrim feels a special relationship with the moon, he might like to go outside and look at it before he tidies himself up. Would you like to look at it now, Will? Perhaps from the lighthouse terrace.*

In his mind's eye, he could see Hannibal sitting across from him, hands folded in his lap. He'd just said something to him. His head was tilted, awaiting an answer. Will shook his head. *Not the you I know. Not now—not anymore.*

And then, suddenly, Hannibal's bloodstained head was in his lap, his mouth slack and unconscious, the short tips of his hair plastered to his forehead with saltwater—and there was *so much blood,* more than from Dolarhyde's bullet, more than the blood seeping from Will's own body—and for the first time since he'd stepped foot in the BSHCI again, he'd felt afraid.

*What have you done to us, Will?*

Hannibal's pale face on the hospital pillow, eyelids paper-thin and still. Then his eyes were opening,
unfocused as they met his own—and among the terrible crash of the waves, Will screamed as Hannibal's body began to seize. A hot burst of black, then white, as eyes opened once more—and Will could see through them as if they were his own, could feel Hannibal's coma-darkened vision roaring back in a painful burst of white walls amid the frantic blipping of machines—alone.

Why have you taken yourself away from me?

The wind kicked hard, biting Will's bare arms and lifting the hair from the back of his neck. A tremor skittered up his spine.

"It was my turn to save you," he whispered to the darkness. His throat stung as he swallowed. "Because you couldn't love me. And I wouldn't love you." The abyss did not whisper back; nor did it echo him.

Will ducked his head as his eyes began to water from the cold. He staggered along the path to the lighthouse, clutching his arms around himself. The building was deserted; the keeper's house, too, was dark. Probably fucked off to enjoy Christmas somewhere else, he thought. The nautical flagpole at the terrace's point was hung with the US flag and the ICS India marking the port in bold yellow. No other signal flags tonight; no boats to read them. The beacon didn't need a keeper. It could fend for itself.

As he approached the terrace's guard wall, the smell of lake water curled inside his nostrils. He could scent its greedy darkness underneath the rippling waves. Light glinted off the guard wall's painted ledge. Over it, he could see the moon's dizzying glow, reflected silver-white on the surface of the water. The rest of the lake looked black.

In the darkness of his mind, a scrap of verse came to him suddenly. A poem.

Now I can be sure of my sleep;  
I have lost the blue sea in my eyelids.  
From a place in the mind too deep  
for thought, a light like a wind is beginning…

Something from one of Molly's books. She'd read it to him not too long after they'd started dating. He remembered the way her voice had softened as she'd recited the words; the way her eyes had flickered up at him, and then back down to the page. The spill of lamplight over her hair.

Will's eyes snapped open. The guard wall wavered in front of him. He braced one foot against the edge and pulled himself atop it.

When the moon is held strongly within it,  
The eye of the mind opens gladly.  
Day changes to dark, and is bright,  
And miracles trust to the body.

He stood up, twisting to face the lake and the bright spar of moonlight running down the middle of it. His entire body was trembling. I see you now.

Look upon my face, the moon replied. Look inside. See how black you are.

He closed his eyes, and the light followed him inside. He saw his fever dreams, dappled with dense bursts of color and texture: moonlight on the patio of Hannibal's cliffside house, reflecting pink on freshly-scrubbed stone; the Aukštaitijan countryside rushing by in dark waves of moonlit conifers and mirrored ponds; a spray-painted skull grinning down at him in the early dusk, as he waited for
Hannibal to return with Bedelia.

One life, one story—one they’d never lived, but both knew intimately. Will had ended that life for both of them. And Hannibal had forgiven him, even then. In this life, however, the sky had been too full of smoke and snow to see the moon.

Will wobbled as a gust of wind swept across the terrace. Below him, the water glistened and whispered, swollen with secrets.

Where does the difference between memory and dream come from?

I don't know. There's no difference anymore.

He staggered forward. His feet gave way, and gravity took over.

The freshwater sent a cold shock to his body. It felt clean, despite the silt choking it. No salt this time. No undertow. The water clogged his ears and nose and filled the hollow of his mouth. Adrenaline surged through his limbs, commanding them to move as he sank. He ignored the involuntary panic that arose with his body’s resistance. His arms floated above him, fingers grasping at nothing. Reach out. Take my hand. Take anything.


Then you have already lost the war.

Pressure swelled inside his skull and constricted his throat, like a vise. Just open your mouth. Breathe in. Pretend it's air. His vocal cords would automatically contract at first, sealing his airway. Once they relaxed, the water would rush into his lungs. It would be over in minutes. Before you, and after you—our past, our future. My ending.

The breath of water never came. Instead, a spasm rocked him as something hard barreled into his body from the side. For a second, Will thought he'd hit the guard wall. Then he felt himself being pulled—being lifted.

His fingers scraped at the long, rubbery thing around his middle. It did not recoil. An arm. Will shook his head. No. NO! A hand clamped around his back, gripping the fabric of his t-shirt. His face broke the water line. The air was shockingly cold. He kept his mouth closed, refusing his lungs breath. Not supposed to be saved. Not this time.

He bobbed under again. Then Will felt himself being dragged higher. His legs jerked helplessly as the body clutching his own sliced through the water with powerful strokes. Wind caressed his face a second time, and Will's throat opened involuntarily, sucking the air in great, greedy gasps. Oxygen barreled into his lungs, bruising his throat.

When he felt the muddy bottom of Lake Pontchartrain suck the heel of his boot, he pushed down, propelling his body upward. The arm around his middle dragged him up onto the seawall's slanted concrete steps. The rough stone scraped his back through his t-shirt. I've already lost the war. Leave me here... Please leave me.

Hands pulled him clear of the water. Then the chill air whipped Will's face, giving him breath to cough. His lungs hitched, and he immediately rolled onto his side, hacking as water leaked from his nose, his throat. His chest felt like it was going to implode.

His vision blurred as he lifted his head. He blinked, eyes streaming. An impossible sight greeted him: Hannibal, propped on one elbow against the steps, panting. Water ran down his face and neck from
his flattened, disheveled hair. His clothing was soaked through.

But Hannibal can't be here. He's in Florida. He killed Wally Oswalt.

Only then did the thoughts collide in Will's waterlogged brain: Hannibal had come to New Orleans. Hannibal had come back for him. And Hannibal had fucking rescued him—right when he didn't want it.

"Why the hell are you—" Will growled, but a second spasm seized his lungs, cutting off his words. He coughed so hard, he thought he might vomit. Silt streamed from his nose. His eyes blurred as the wind whipped across his back.

Hannibal was at his side before Will could push him away. He shivered violently. A hand pressed on his back, impossibly warm.

"Put your head down," Hannibal instructed. His other hand smoothed the wet curls away from Will's forehead. "It will straighten your airway."

The touch made something in Will's chest ache. He wanted to scream. He didn't have the breath.

As his lungs finally relaxed, Will took a shaky gulp of air. "Why did you do that," he said, low. He didn't turn his head.

Hannibal's hands were suddenly around his shoulders, turning Will to face him. His eyes were sharp with something between anger and fear. Will stared back, unable to look away. He'd seen that look only one other time—the night he'd left Hannibal at the cabin. I set you free to give you back your life, he'd said. Hannibal had merely shaken his head. A life without you isn't freedom… It never will be, my phîltatos.

For a split second, the eyes that met Will's own seemed to belong to someone else. They widened, as if seeing him for the first time. The lines between dream and memory—present and past—wavered and thinned, threatening to break:

Sunset-colored sand, stretching as far as the eye can see. Wine poured over dust and sweat-slick flesh. The roaring of a great lion across the desert. He remembered how the beast had nearly torn his face in two before his Augustus had dispatched it with his spear. The next memory was of water—water everywhere; the winding swirl of the Nile around the prow of the boat. And nights bursting with pleasure so great, so sacrosanct, that he'd nearly regretted his decision to submit himself to devotio. It's my turn to save you, my Augustus. You can no longer love me, and I love you too much to continue without you.

Will looked away, suddenly unable to hold the other man's gaze.

"Will." Hannibal's voice scratched his ears. His fingertips dug into Will's shoulders. "You need to stop. This isn't the way things end."

"You don't know how anything ends. You should've left me."

"I couldn't do that. If only for my own selfish reasons." Hannibal loosened his grip on Will's shoulders—but only slightly.

Will's eyes traveled over Hannibal's shoulder, to the bobbing surface of the lake. He could hear the water whispering in the back of his mind—quieter, now. His head was spinning. His body was pulsing with anxiety and cold. He couldn't bear Hannibal looking at him.
"You killed Wally Oswalt," he spat. "Don't tell me that wasn't selfish."

"You may begrudge me your friend's life at this moment, although I doubt you will later. But don't begrudge me your life, Will. It is precious to me."

Will chanced a look. Hannibal's face was too serious. Nearly imploring.

"Why?" he sputtered. "Why am I so important to you? I keep pushing, and you keep coming back, and you won't tell me why. There's never any real clarity." A laugh spilled from his mouth, bitter and hard. "It's always drowned songbirds and imagos and topiary corpses and—and fucking teacups. Analogies."

Hannibal's brow relaxed. He smoothed his palm down Will's arm. The touch raised goosebumps.

"My reason is simple." He cupped Will's elbow in his hand. "I love you, Will. That's not an analogy."

"You—" Will's mouth opened, then promptly shut. The ache in the middle of his chest split wide, gushing forth in a torrent of desire and pain that he knew no floodgate could contain.

*You are loved.* Hannibal had said at the cabin. It had been indirect; almost polite. But the words he'd spoken just now had pierced like a soiled blade. They were dirty and awful and throbbing. With every ounce of strength left in his body, Will longed for the words to evaporate. To reverse. To disappear.

"That's not a simple reason." Will shook his head. The movement made his vision tilt precariously. "Not with you."

*Please don't say it again,* he thought.

"It's become increasingly simple since we last parted. And increasingly clear. There is no life, no death, without you in it, Will. We are conjoined by design—not by accident." Hannibal swallowed. Will watched his throat bob, water droplets sliding in a zig-zag pattern down the stubble along his neck.

When he looked up, Hannibal's eyes were searching his face. "If I'm not mistaken, you would agree with me on that."

"I—" Will choked. A great, sinking release swept through his body, and was instantly replaced by a feeling of incredible lightness—and with it, the knowledge that Hannibal was terribly, irrevocably right.

Will pulled him down. The concrete dug into his back as Hannibal's mouth crashed against his own. A half-second of surprise—and then Hannibal's lips parted, and his body sank against Will's own, relenting. Will's eyes squeezed closed, so hard he saw white spots. Everything hurt. It was the closest he'd ever felt to bliss. *A lion in my arms. A lion in my heart. Fire and water brought you back to me—and this time, I'm not letting you go.*

Hannibal's breath was hot against Will's cheek as the other man broke for air. His lips were flushed. *Still hungry.* There was a strange sense of elation in the parting. *More. Soon. Mine.* The space between them seemed to shimmer with energy.

"I will take that as a yes." Hannibal's tone was light, but concern shone in his eyes as they raked Will's shivering frame. With a sudden pang of guilt, Will wondered if Hannibal had been able to taste the whiskey on him.
"Mm," he agreed. His head spun as he sat up. His throat was raw from coughing.

"We could both use a change of clothing." Hannibal eyed Will's drenched t-shirt and jeans. "And you'll need some rest. We still have a night ahead of us."

Will frowned, but allowed himself to be helped up. Hannibal's words were at once foreboding and inciting, buried somewhere in the vast dream of their subconscious. He couldn't discern what, exactly, they'd triggered. *Something from before—something from the other time.*

They made their way up the seawall, Hannibal's arm wrapped firmly around his back. The image of the painted skull flashed into Will's mind, sneering down at him from the tower across from the apartment on the Seine. *Il sogghigno della Morte. The last face you will see in this life.*

"Did you actually go to Paris?" Will asked, stopping. The question seemed suddenly important. The movement made him sway. *Do you feel unstable? Mmhmm.*

"The car is just up the road," Hannibal said, taking his elbow and guiding him forward. "Given our current state of disarray, it's a good thing I chose not to follow you on foot."

Will tried his best to walk a straight line. Hannibal's hand was both steadying and shaming. He decided not to press the question. Bedelia's words on the phone had been inconclusive, while serving to confirm her still-living state. But Hannibal's silence belied a myriad of answers. *Too many questions; not enough time,* Will thought.

Bedelia's call made him suddenly remember his phones. *Shit.* He padded the pockets of his jeans. Both the burner and his own cell were gone, swallowed up by the muddy current of Lake Pontchartrain. No way to call anyone now. No one to call, anyway. It seemed he'd isolated himself to Hannibal's company, once again.

Will made out a dark red Infiniti parked under a cluster of cabbage palms. Hannibal stopped at the passenger side.

"Where are we going?"

Hannibal laid his hand aside Will's cheek. His face was solemn, his lips still reddened from their kiss. "We're going home, my *philhêatos.*" His fingertips brushed Will's wet curls. "To Elysian Fields."

"And then?" Will blinked. The wave of exhaustion that had hit him on the seawall had finally taken hold. His entire body felt depleted and sodden. All he wanted to do was sleep.

Hannibal's mouth quirked as he opened the car door. He gestured for Will to climb inside. "That is a surprise. One best saved for Christmas morning."

Will's jeans squelched along the leather as he folded himself into the seat. In the pit of his stomach, cold anticipation fluttered. Hannibal leaned over the doorframe, his eyes a deep maroon in the half-light.

"I've invited a friend to join us. It promises to be an *illuminating* evening."
Will was assailed by a crush of furry bodies as he walked into the house. Wet noses poked at his even wetter clothing, sniffing at the plethora of unexpected smells. Hannibal closed the door behind them. Winston pushed off Will's knee and padded to Hannibal's side, his tail swishing in welcome.

"Hello, Winston," Hannibal said quietly, leaning over to scratch his ears.

Will watched, saying nothing. His eyelids felt like lead. The drive from the lake had taken less than fifteen minutes, but he'd still managed to fall asleep twice. Hannibal hadn't woken him the second time. Will had been jerked from his doze by Hannibal's arm around his back, easing him from the car.

His brain had been slow in catching up; for a moment, he'd thought he was back on the seawall. A swell of anger had seized him. He'd wanted to scream—*Let me go! Why won't you just leave me?* Then he'd become aware of wet leather underneath him and a vague pain in his head, and he'd realized they were parked in front of the house.

The sight of the dogs stirred something raw and remorseful in him. Had Hannibal not plunged in after him, his pack would've been locked up inside for who knew how long. *Until they started barking, and one of the neighbors called the cops. Or until someone found them, like they found Wally.*

Will shook his head, scattering the disjointed trail of thoughts. *You're still drunk,* came a voice in his head that was neither his own nor Hannibal's. *Don't try to think. Sleep. Rest… It's going to be a surprise.*

He couldn't rest, though. There were too many questions. Too many evaded, fragmented answers. And he needed to take care of the dogs. He'd been neglecting them lately. He knew the house was a pigsty. And the fridge was nearly empty—a shrunken orange, and a carton of milk that had probably already expired.

Will felt eyes on his back. He turned to see Hannibal watching him from the entryway. Now that they were in the light, Will could see the hollows under Hannibal's eyes. There was a sharpness to his gaze that hadn't been there before. He looked about as sleep-deprived as Will himself felt. Somehow, though, he knew Hannibal's ragged appearance had little to do with lack of sleep.

The chiming of the Black Forest clock rose above their silence, accompanied by eight *cuckoos* from its resident songbird. Hannibal's eyes flickered to the timepiece on the wall, his gaze lingering on the stag's head at the top, but he made no comment. He looked back at Will.

"I should walk the do—" Will began.

"No," Hannibal crossed the hallway and turned Will around. "Not now, Will. You need to get warm. And clean. And rehydrated." The words wove through Will's mind like a song. He made a half-hearted noise of protest as Hannibal steered him in the direction of the bathroom.

Hannibal's voice continued in the background of his thoughts, as Will allowed himself to be stripped of his wet shirt. He felt the other man's fingers sliding up his stomach, his sides. Lingering on the back of his neck. Hannibal's breath was warm as it ghosted over his collarbone. The t-shirt made a smacking sound against the tile as Hannibal tossed it aside. Will sagged back against the sink, squinting as the fluorescent light drilled into his skull. His eyelids were drooping, despite the glare.

At the whirr of water from the showerhead, Will forced his eyes open. Hannibal was looking at him expectantly. *He's still dressed,* Will's mind registered vaguely. *Not joining.*
"Shower, Will," he said.

There was a sense of detachment in the command. Will's brow knotted. He opened his mouth to ask—what, he didn't know.

Hannibal swept out of the bathroom before Will could say anything.

Will blinked. He methodically unbuckled his belt and slid his sodden jeans and boxer-briefs down his legs. It took him a few tries, one hand clutching the edge of the sink, before he got them over his shoes. He kicked out of his boots and peeled off his socks. It wasn't the most efficient order of undressing, but it hardly mattered. **Does anything, really?**

Will stepped into the shower and pulled the glass door closed. The water rushed over his face and chest, washing the silt from his skin. Thirst tugged at his throat.

_Maybe he thought I wouldn't remember what he said._ The thought struck him with an ugly, sudden shame. At the cabin, neither of them had drank enough of the scotch to diminish the memory of Hannibal's words, or what had come after them. Tonight, though, Will had been well on his way to obliterated. He knew Hannibal had been able to tell. It was obvious by how delicately he'd handled him.

Hannibal had scooped him out of the water and dragged him to the concrete shore of his humiliation—a waterlogged lemming, instead of a clever mongoose. And Will had bit back, and bit back again, and Hannibal had **still** risked the words. **My reason is simple. I love you, Will.**

Will bowed his head under the spray and braced himself against the tile, letting the water cascade down his back. He hadn't returned the sentiment; not in words. Hannibal hadn't seemed to mind. **Probably thought you were too drunk to really understand him. Or to appreciate it.**

Will closed his eyes as water trickled down the sides of his face. He knew he needed to wash. He could feel sediment in the roots of his hair; an earthy smell that clung to the insides of his nostrils. He tried to rouse the energy. He couldn't. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to _exist._

He froze at the sound of the shower door. It slid open with a squeak, followed by the splash of feet. A tingling sensation rose in Will's chest as his pulse ratcheted up. He felt suddenly very awake.

"You haven't cleaned yourself." Hannibal's voice was steady beneath the murmur of the water.

Will didn't answer. He cracked his eyes open. Between his own legs, he could see the bottoms of Hannibal's shins and his feet. His skin was both darker and downier than Will's own—something he'd barely noticed in the bedroom at the cabin, or when Hannibal had stood before him later in the hallway, naked, a grimace of surprise twisting his features. Will had pulled the door shut on that look, unable to burn it from his mind. **But you didn't put out the fire.**

Will sucked in a breath and closed his eyes again. Skin grazed his own as Hannibal reached for the soap on the wall holder. A moment later, he felt something incredibly soft and cushioned being pressed to his shoulder. The smooth thing dragged all the way down to his thigh, and then diagonally up his chest. He realized, suddenly, what it was. **Where the hell did Hannibal get a sponge?**

Hannibal's movements were careful; almost restrained. It felt _wrong,_ somehow. Will exhaled as water dripped from the tip of his nose. Heat was pooling rapidly in his groin.

He straightened, just enough to feel the press of the other man's body against his own. Hannibal was half-hard himself. The other man stilled, the sponge halting on Will's scarred collarbone. Will could feel Hannibal's erection twitch as he pressed back against his chest.
Then a hand came up to flatten on the small of Will's back. It maneuvered him away.

"Will."

"Please." A choked whisper. Hannibal's fingertips tightened against his skin.

"This isn't the time." An uncharacteristic strain in Hannibal's tone. "There are things you need to understand first. Things you need to see."

Will moved back, flattening himself against Hannibal's chest. Heat jumped between their bodies. Will had relished being inside Hannibal at the cabin—still craved it, desperately, despite all the lies he'd told himself. Now, though, he felt a violent desire to have Hannibal inside of him. To know the way his body felt, moving inside of his own. To allow him to breach the one wall still standing between them; their last physical barrier.

Will shifted, widening his thighs. He heard a sharp intake of breath as Hannibal's cock brushed between them. Not close enough.

"I need you," Will breathed, tilting his head back and grazing his lips across Hannibal's jaw. He could smell the earthy aroma of lake water and the faintly chemical tang of cologne. Not Hannibal's usual brand—or what Will remembered, from the cliff house, as his usual. The life that didn't happen.

Hannibal sighed. Will felt his body relax against his own, just as on the seawall—though the hand on his back remained.

"Do you mean that." The question was quieter than it should've been. Rougher than it should've been. Hannibal's throat moved against the side of Will's neck as he swallowed.

"Yes," Will said, without hesitation. The sponge on his collarbone slipped a fraction of an inch.

Hannibal exhaled, an unsteadiness in the sound. He pressed his lips to the ridge of Will's shoulder. Then he gently nudged Will forward.

"Then allow me to care for you now, in this way."

Fingers slid to Will's left shoulder, anchoring him at a safe distance from Hannibal's body. The sponge dipped down to his belly. The back of Hannibal's hand barely brushed Will's erection before moving to lather the remainder of his chest.

Will gritted his teeth at the loss of contact and the throbbing between his legs, but he didn't protest. Hannibal would have his way. It's the least you owe him.

He allowed himself to be carefully scrubbed and rinsed. Then Hannibal grabbed the bottle of two-in-one conditioning shampoo from the corner and worked a dollop into his hair. Will knew Hannibal was probably wrinkling his nose at the cheap smell, but the soothing strokes of the other man's fingers against his scalp chased all thought from his mind. Even his unattended erection seemed no longer urgent. Will tipped his head back and hummed.

"Do you like this?" Hannibal's silk-smooth voice in his ear, closer than expected. The sound made Will's cock jump.

"Yeah," he sighed, fighting the urge to move back again, and doing his best to appreciate the head massage he was getting. "A lot, actually."
"You don't allow many people to touch you. And not very often." Hannibal lathered the shampoo into Will's curls, twisting the ringlets around his fingers.

A sudden flash of Anton's piercing blue eyes. His too-suave smile. Will swallowed, flicking away the image in disgust.

"I assume you haven't had many professional massages in your lifetime," he continued.

"Lying naked on a table feels too much like being in a morgue."

He shut his eyes as Hannibal tipped his head under the spray, rinsing the product from his hair. Will wiped the water from his eyes as he tilted his head back.

"Perhaps you could benefit from one."

Hannibal's hands slid from Will's skull to the point where his shoulders and neck joined. There, his palms curved over the muscles and he began to rub, fingers still slick from the shampoo. Firm, expert strokes echoed his ministrations on Will's scalp and sent a warm sensation flooding throughout Will's body.

"Are you calling yourself a professional?" Will asked, with a touch of humor. He closed his eyes, wallowing in the perfect pressure of Hannibal's hands.

"I have intimate familiarity with the musculoskeletal system." His hands moved down, bestowing long strokes with the heels of his palms. "The body can be manipulated to great pleasure. Or great pain."

"Of course." Will didn't bother to hide his sarcasm. A _healer with a killer's hands—a killer with a healer's touch. Probably not what Saint Jerome meant when he wrote 'Medice, cura te ipsum.'_

A sudden thought dampened his humor. He turned, breaking the rhythm of Hannibal's hands. The other man's eyes were honeyed rings in his face.

"Were you afraid you'd never walk again? When you woke up—back in the hospital."

Water droplets slid down Hannibal's cheekbones, curving over their sharp planes. The scar at his temple stood out like a stamp on his flesh.

Hannibal licked his lips. "I was alarmed at first, yes. Not as much after learning the exact nature of my spinal injury. The chance of full recovery was marginally greater than that of my coming out of the coma. It was an encouraging prognosis, even if others didn't view it that way."

_**Others.**_ Will knew he meant Doctor Schneider and Alana. Hannibal would have made a far more docile patient in a perpetually paraplegic state. As it was, Alana hadn't gotten the chance to find out, and Garrett Schneider never would. He and Hannibal had seen to that.

"I resolved to regain use of my legs, no matter the cost," Hannibal continued. His fingers slid down Will's arm—a touch so light it made Will shiver. "I knew I would need to walk out of the hospital myself, to find my way back to you."

Will seized Hannibal's hand as it grazed his wrist. He threaded his fingers through the other man's, catching and holding them. His throat was sore with dehydration and the lump he couldn't seem to swallow, but he knew he needed to find a way to translate the fluttering in his chest into words.

"I found my way to you, instead," he said.
Hannibal stared down at their joined hands. "And then you sent me away. For the second time."

Will's eyes snapped to Hannibal's face. His expression had hardened, but in his eyes Will glimpsed a spike of raw pain—a clotted wound ripped open; a flow that wouldn't quench. He wanted to look away. To dismiss the impossible evidence. *I love you, Will. That's not an analogy.*

He didn't. Instead, he looked straight at Hannibal—really *looked*—and saw, for the first time, the emotional ravages of his exile. It was written in the unhappy slant of his mouth and the dark hollows of his eyes; he'd heard it, too, in the solemn timbre of his voice. But Will had been too simultaneously infuriated and *enraptured* by Hannibal's presence to see that the other man was bending under the weight of a burden as large as his own.

Before Will could reply, Hannibal turned him back around to face the shower wall. He resumed the massage, digging his thumbs into the sore spot near Will's lower back.

"A conversation better saved for later on, perhaps," Hannibal said quietly. "I would like to finish before your boiler runs out of hot water. I don't think either of us would find that very comfortable."

Will grunted, half in pleasure, half in pain, as Hannibal kneaded the muscles loose with short, hard strokes.

"*Mmpf.* That hurts, Hannibal."

"Yes. It's meant to." He paused. Hot breath stirred the short, drying hairs on the back of Will's neck as Hannibal leaned in.

"You might want to consider being massaged more often, Will. Your *erector spinae* is deplorably knotted. It's important to untwist from time to time—if only for your own benefit."

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It was quarter to nine by the cuckoo clock in the front room when Hannibal led Will out of the bathroom, draped in a towel. Hannibal himself had washed up quickly, using Will's soap and shampoo, and then went to deposit Will's wet clothing in the laundry room before coming back to collect Will himself.

Will's shoulders sagged beneath the threadbare towel, which had come with the house and smelled faintly of mothballs. Right now, he was too tired to care what Hannibal might think about the state of his towels or his house. It was in worse shape than when Clarice Starling had dropped by, unannounced. If Hannibal had been put off by the dirty dishes, the stack of empty bottles next to the trash, or the clumps of dog hair drifting across the carpet like tumbleweed, he hadn't said so.

He allowed himself to be guided into the bedroom. A small headache was pulsing at the front of his skull. He couldn't remember ever feeling so tired—or so prematurely hungover—in his life. Not even on his off-duty afternoons as a cop.

Hannibal pulled down the duvet. With surprise, Will saw that the bed had been changed; the old cotton linens replaced with sateen sheets of striped indigo. They looked freshly ironed, and likely new.

"You *brought* sheets?" Will asked incredulously, as Hannibal unwrapped the towel from his
shoulders.

"I thought you might like a change." Hannibal folded Will's towel and set it on the seat of the rocking chair next to the bed. Will climbed onto the mattress, his skin sliding against the cool sateen.

"I want you to take these now," Hannibal said, pointing to the nightstand, where three small, brown tablets were laid out on a napkin. "And drink two of these before you go to sleep." An equal number of glass water bottles, labeled with a Scandinavian name Will didn't care to pronounce, were lined up on coasters.

Hannibal uncapped one of the bottles and handed it to Will. "Drink the last bottle after you wake. I'll return in a few hours." The heat radiated from Hannibal's freshly showered skin as he leaned over to pull up the sheets.

Will nodded, soaking in the other man's warmth and marveling at how not even the cheap, pungent bath products could disguise the scent that was uniquely Hannibal's. *Cool air and the sea. Something musky and darkly sweet underneath.* He could remember waking in the cliff house to the lingering scent of Hannibal's aftershave on the empty pillow beside him. *A memory, or a dream?* He couldn't say for sure anymore.

*Maybe the only thing that really matters is what we take with us into the future,* he thought, as he eased back against the pillows. His back hurt where Hannibal had rubbed out the knot. He tossed the pills onto his tongue and washed them down with the bottled water. Hannibal watched him drink. He seemed satisfied after Will had downed a third of it.

The moonlight spilling between the loose muslin curtains cast the side of Hannibal's body in a silver-white glow. It glinted off the graying hairs that downed his chest, the strong curve of his shoulders, and the raised V of scar tissue at his temple. Will's eyes lingered on the wound. It was hard to imagine, now, the amount of blood that had gushed from it on the beach. It had soaked through Will's shirt and pants, covering up the streaks of Dolarhyde's blood. His hands had been covered in it. They'd kept slipping as he'd tried to compress the wound. It had healed cleanly, but was shiny and angry-looking in its newness. *Funny how radiant our scars can make us appear.*

"Where're you going?" he mumbled, mostly from exhaustion. He lowered the water bottle, cradling the cold glass in his hands. He doubted he could keep his eyes open long enough to finish the second one.

"I must attend to a few things. And you would greatly benefit from a few hours of rest. You'll find a garment bag in the closet with a change of clothes for later."

"You brought clothes for me, too?" Will's eyebrows lifted in bemusement.

Hannibal paused. His eyes shifted, before returning to Will's face. "Yes. Just as you did when you rescued me."

Will didn't reply. The remark stung as much as it soothed. The clothing he'd brought for Hannibal had been his father's old leftovers. Nothing from Will's own wardrobe, or Barney's, would have fit him—but Hannibal and Bill Graham were about the same size and height. Will had almost forgotten to grab the extra outfit when he'd run by the cabin the day before the fire. He knew that whatever Hannibal had brought for him would outdo his own meager provisions by a mile. More likely *several* miles.

Hannibal stopped in the doorway, turning his hooded eyes on Will. "We'll leave at midnight. Please be ready." He stepped out, pulling the door shut behind him with soft click.
From the bathroom, Will heard the front door open and close, followed by a series of welcoming canine whines. He peeked around the doorway, where he could see the cuckoo clock hanging above the TV in the front room. True to his word, Hannibal had returned just before midnight.

Will turned back to the mirror. Although his face was still flushed from sleep, it didn't disguise the dark circles under his eyes. The painkillers, and the water he'd gulped down before passing out, had gone a surprisingly long way toward forestalling his hangover, however. Hannibal was a good doctor when he wanted to be.

He smoothed the satin notch lapels of the Italian tuxedo Hannibal had hung in the closet for him. It fit perfectly, as though it had been tailored. In fact, the entire outfit seemed to have been assembled precisely for him—from the pleated white shirt, to the low silk waistcoat, to the polished black oxfords. He wasn't used to seeing himself in a bow tie.

He stared back at his reflection, raking a hand through his hair and undoing his half-assed attempt to style it. He sighed.

"Leave it like that," came Hannibal's voice from the doorway. "Some imperfections serve to accentuate perfection. Not even Antinous' famed beauty could surpass yours."

A flutter of nervousness. Will swallowed, not looking over. He was keenly aware of the emptiness in his stomach. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten. He flattened down the stray curls anyway.

"This, uh, suit—it's a lot, Hannibal. Where are we go—" Will turned, and the word died on his tongue as he took in Hannibal's form in the doorway. His tuxedo was also black, but more tapered at the legs and waist. A trim white dress shirt peeked from underneath the pointed lapels of his jacket, accentuating the broadness of his chest. His hair was smoothed back in silver-gray waves. It had grown, Will realized, in the month since they'd parted.

Will swallowed again. Thoughts he'd barely allowed into his consciousness spilled over one another, fierce and fully formed: I want to tear every piece of clothing from you. I want to push you up against the wall. I want you to feel my heat inside of you. I want to eat you alive.

"As I said, that will remain a surprise until we arrive," Hannibal replied. Amusement crinkled at the corners of his eyes. He was clearly pleased at Will's speechlessness.

Hannibal lifted his cuff to glance at his watch. "Which will be shortly, as it appears we're both ready to go." He looked at Will as he smoothed the sleeve of his jacket. "To meet whatever fate the night may bring."

Will's brow creased. Before he could ask what Hannibal meant, the sounds of nails on hardwood and jingling tags caught his ears. Most of the pack had trotted into the hallway at Hannibal's proclamation, hopeful that ready to go meant them, too. He realized he still hadn't taken them out.

"The dogs—"

"Are walked and fed," Hannibal said.
Will stared, incredulous. "You took all of them for a walk? All at once?"

A pained expression crossed Hannibal's face with the recollection. "Yes. The small one with the underbite is even feistier on a leash. Winston proved helpful in herding the rest."

Will smiled at the Pekingese-pug, who was prancing impatiently at Hannibal's feet. "That's Zoe. And yeah, she's a handful." It seemed she'd finally warmed up to Hannibal, after all. A few white hairs were sticking to the bottom of Hannibal's tuxedo slacks. Will thought it wise not to mention it. "Little shit-stirrer," he said affectionately, bending down to scratch the top of her head. As if to prove his point, she yipped.

The sound of chiming immediately followed Zoe's bark. Hannibal's eyes met Will's, as the old Deutsche clock struck midnight. The chimes gave way to the trill of the cuckoo. In his mind, Will could see the cast-iron weights lowering, one after the other, as the two sets of dancing couples emerged from their doors.

"It wasn't working when you arrived, was it?" Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head. The image of the other clock, in the other time, skated the edges of his memory. He'd left that one unrepaired. Unfinished.

"Nor was its twin, if you remember."

Will gave a slight nod. He did remember.

Did you manage to fix the clock? Hannibal had asked, his breath coming out in shaky puffs as he'd rested his forehead against Will's skull, one arm still gripping his chest.

I couldn't figure it out, he'd answered.

Will remembered the sharpness of the countertop digging into his stomach and the hot press of Hannibal's chest against his back. The hard ache between his thighs where Hannibal still filled him. Tiny bubbles of champagne popping on the floor around his feet.

You will, next time. The memory of the whispered words returned in a chilling rush. Will had been too stunned by the roughness of their consummation, and his vision of Abigail in the mirror, to question what Hannibal had meant.

He looked sideways at Hannibal. His hands felt cold. "Did you know about the clock? About—" he gestured at the space between them, "—all of this?"

Hannibal's eyes gleamed. "In European folklore, the elixir of immortality was stored inside clocks to amplify its effect on the user. Early philosophers and alchemists imagined that the measurement of time could be used to extend it—or to transform it entirely."

The note of scholarly fascination in Hannibal's voice tugged at something familiar in Will's memory. Conversations held in opposing chairs, the firelight cocooning them in some kind of hazy metamorphosis; and then over Hannibal's dinner table, sitting close now, the low light reflecting off the vivid blue of the walls. Too much time later they would talk again, underneath the glowering fluorescence of the BSHCI's ceiling lights, a thick wall of glass and years dividing them. Time measured in light, in the distance between two bodies pulled by gravity. Forever conjoined, and forever circling.

"But clocks, like bodies and minds, break down," Hannibal continued. "They become increasingly disordered with the passage of time. In doing so, they mark it. They create time."
Will cleared his throat. He decided to bypass Hannibal’s non-answer. "So... entropy is what distinguishes the past from the future. The clock winds down, or a teacup breaks, and gives way to a new future."

"Yes. And in a many-worlds theory, the same chiming of the clock, or the shattering of the teacup, gives birth to a thousand different futures." Hannibal tilted his head. "Imagine if time could curve back on itself, to the moment the teacup fell. Or even before the teacup was fired in its kiln. Every future would be possible. Each would lie in wait, ready to strike when fate and circumstance—or fortune and chance—collide with entropy, to split the thread of life. To create time anew."

Will felt something scrape his leg. He looked down to see Winston pawing softly at his trousers, his tail swishing along the hardwood. Patient curiosity shone in his eyes. The sight tugged at something in Will's chest. He didn't want to imagine a life where he and Winston hadn't found each other on a lonely country road in the middle of the night. Or one in which he hadn't been able to try to love Molly, or Walt, or Abigail—or Hannibal. Yet, by Hannibal's theory, such worlds existed, and they multiplied endlessly.

Will looked up. Hannibal's eyes were dark with anticipation.

"This is what you were working on in your notebook. In Wolf Trap. Before…” He didn't finish the sentence.

Hannibal nodded stiffly.

"But it can't go on forever. How many times can the thread split before there's nothing left?"

*Maybe none of us can save ourselves,* Will thought. *In the end, maybe that really is fine.*

Hannibal held out his arm, beckoning Will to join him. His smile seemed full of light.

"Let's find out, shall we?"

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*Who knows not to what monstrous gods, my friend,*  
*The mad inhabitants of Egypt tend?*  
*…They spare the fleecy tribe and think it ill*  
*The blood of lambkins or of kids to spill;*  
*But human flesh—oh, that is lawful fare*  
*And you may eat it without scandal there.*

—from the *Satires* of Juvenal

Magnolia branches, flowerless and green, scraped the shoulder of Will's jacket as he ducked inside the cut section of the chain-link fence. The aluminum screeched behind him as Hannibal fastened it back into place.

Will stepped over the clumps of bushes straddling the fence line and gazed up at the immense stone building before them. Rows and rows of dark, horizontal windows stared down from the walls, like
gapped teeth. Many that still contained glass had been spray-painted with large white X's. The sidewalk leading to the building's curved central tower were overgrown with gristly weeds. The soil had vomited them up in clusters so thick that they appeared almost carpet-like. Above the entryway was carved, in art deco lettering, CHARITY HOSPITAL OF LOUISIANA.

Will had been surprised when Hannibal had started driving south, toward the interstate. Are we going to the Quarter? he'd asked, incredulous. Not quite, Hannibal had said, his eyes on the road. But not far away.

The abandoned, eighteenth-century hospital on Tulane Avenue in the heart of New Orleans' Central Business District had been shuttered a decade ago, after Hurricane Katrina. Will had traded police work for the FBI just the summer before. He remembered watching the endless loops of news updates when the storm hit. At first, he'd been simply concerned for the officers in his former unit. Not many had asked him to stay in touch when he'd left. Of those who had, he'd reached only five of seven on the phone.

By the time the hurricane had swelled to a category three, he'd found himself unable to switch off the TV. The entire city looked like a war zone. His gut twisted at the dark images of thrashing palms lining Canal Street; the bright red screams of streetcars abandoned on their rails; centuries-old houses and trees collapsing; cars floating toward downtown as the water levels rose. And the thousands of abandoned, parched, and dying refugees clustered in and around the Superdome, waving frantically at the news helicopters hovering above. When no help came, the refugees had switched to flashing their middle fingers at the cameras. The news crews had stopped zooming in after that.

He remembered Charity Hospital, too. It had been full of hundreds of patients at the time. When Katrina made its second landfall on August twenty-ninth, the levees holding back the water from Lake Pontchartrain had failed. Millions of gallons of water had poured into downtown. The hospital's lower floors had started to flood, and the power had gone out, leaving the patients and medical staff shrouded in darkness and stifling heat.

Left with no other choice but to evacuate, the staff had ferried critical patients by boat across the flooded roads, to a nearby parking garage. From there, they'd hauled each of them up several flights of stairs to the roof. Aerial visibility meant a greater hope of rescue—or so the doctors thought. The camera crews merely filmed the exhausted doctors squeezing oxygen into their patients' lungs with plastic hand pumps, as the patients from the other area hospitals were evacuated first. It was nearly a week before all of the Charity patients had been airlifted to safety. By that time, their number had dwindled by eight.

"Why are we here?" Will asked in a low voice, eyeing the moss-splotched stones proclaiming the hospital's name. The structure had remained virtually untouched since the hurricane. There was no telling what lay inside.

"If you look up, you'll see a partial explanation."

Will's brow furrowed as his eyes shifted upward, scanning for something, anything, to explain why he was standing on the grounds of a decaying hospital in a tuxedo, at half past midnight on Christmas morning.

Then he saw it—something he'd missed before. A small, bluish light glowed from one of the knocked-out windows on the twelfth floor of the left tower. He squinted. To the naked eye, it looked almost like a Christmas tree. No, wait—not a tree. Wrong shape. Wrong color. Lights, yes. But power—how?

"Is that a generator up there?" Will turned to Hannibal. Without waiting for an answer, he said,
"Why in the hell would anyone need power here?"

Hannibal smirked. "I think you'll find a suitably pleasing answer inside. Come."

The reception area inside the main entrance would have been pitch-black, if not for the moon shining through the broken windows. Half-rusted steel letters mounted above the check-in desk proclaimed: *Welcome to the Medical Center of Louisiana, Where the Unusual Occurs & Miracles Happen.* Will shivered at the sight, though he couldn't say why.

He followed Hannibal through a maze of yellow- and red-tiled hallways to the central floor. The smell wasn't as bad as he'd expected—more rotting wood and stale water than putrefaction. Still, he resorted to breathing through his mouth when they passed by the pathology lab.

Rubble was scattered everywhere. Some was unidentifiable; some, Will wished he couldn't identify. Broken-down gurneys and archaic wooden wheelchairs littered the hallways, along with toppled containers of rotting biowaste, slime-covered syringes, and stained sheeting that had been used to cover the dead more than ten years ago. He sidestepped a full-size anatomical model torso sitting upright on the grime-slicked floor, feeling almost as if it were watching him.

The hospital looked exactly like the insides of buildings he'd seen in apocalyptic films, only worse. Katrina's devastation was real. Here, its aftermath had been abandoned; left to rot in the humidity for a decade—right in the heart of New Orleans.

The sound of squeaking hinges made Will look up. He stopped in mid-step as Hannibal opened the door to a stairwell. He could see the darkness leading down.

"We're not going upstairs to the—whatever the hell's going on up there?"

"No," Hannibal said. "The twelfth floor merely contained the cleanest and most functional room. But it's not where we will hold our celebration, or meet our guest of honor."

Will swallowed. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled, sending goosebumps cascading down his arms. He followed Hannibal down the blind stairwell to a landing, and then down another flight of stairs.

*Our guest of honor.* Wally was already dead. Molly and Walt were safe, presumably in Harrisburg for the holiday. Bedelia was either in France, or at her home in Maryland. And, as far as he knew, Jack was still at Quantico, and Alana was in Catonsville. He didn't know anyone in New Orleans anymore. The only person he'd made any kind of personal connection with since his arrival had been Anton—and he could hardly call that personal. Whom had Hannibal invited to meet them? More importantly, why?

The second stairwell ended in a long, black corridor with a single door at the end. The hallway reeked of floodwater and slime. They were in the belly of the hospital now, Will knew. Underneath the stench, he caught a whiff of something strangely sweet. A warm, *simmering* smell.

"What's down here?" Will asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

Hannibal glanced over his shoulder. His eyes were like stones in the near-darkness of the basement. "The autopsy theater," he answered, and pulled open the door.

A flood of shimmering orange light assailed Will's eyes. He felt Hannibal's hand grasping his own, pulling him through the doorway and into the hall entrance to the amphitheater.

Up ahead, he could see hundreds of burning white candles scattered atop the tiled dividers separating
the circular seating rows. The water line from Katrina was still visible along the walls, a charcoal-
colored streak running high along the wrinkled plaster. The room itself, he saw as they approached, 
had been mostly cleared of debris. Dripping water echoed hollowly from somewhere above them.

"Why no power downstai—" Will began, but his words died sharply in his throat as he stumbled to a 
stop.

In the center of the round room was a row of gurneys, lined up to make a long table upon which a 
dark, damask cloth was draped. The stretchers' rotting rubber wheels peeked out from under the hem. 
Red, white, and gold-colored flowers adorned the inner ring of the amphitheater and table, 
backdropped by holiday greenery. A plethora of covered dishes, some sitting atop portable warmers, 
lined the length of the makeshift table. In the low light, Will couldn't see to count them all. What he 
could see, however, was a figure seated at the head of the table.

*Barney Matthews.*

The man's eyes widened as Will stared back, open-mouthed. Barney was strapped to a wheelchair, 
rolled up to the far end. He was dressed in his orderly's white scrubs, although the fabric was stained 
with sweat and grime, and smears of an unidentifiable, dark substance.

Next to him, Hannibal made a satisfied noise and squeezed Will's hand. "Do you like it?" he asked.

Across the room, Barney writhed with the renewed vigor of a man who'd been held captive for a 
short enough time to retain an unwitting morsel of hope. He wagged his head from side to side, but 
did not call out. Will peered into the half-darkness. He could see a loop of fabric stretched lengthwise 
around Barney's head, running under his chin and over the top of his skull. It didn't appear to 
interfere with his breathing, but it didn't give him much room to move his jaw. Gray water stains 
dotted the shoulders of his uniform—likely from the leaking ceiling, Will thought. His forehead was 
covered in a thick sheen of sweat.

Chiyoh's words in the basement of Lecter Castle rushed back to Will with sudden poignance: *All he's 
allowed is the sound of water. It's what the unborn hear. It's their last memory of peace.*

"I thought you might enjoy a Réveillon feast on Christmas," Hannibal said, turning to rest his hand 
aside Will's cheek. "If an unconventional one. This dinner will be a true 'awakening,' in all senses of 
the word. We have much to explain to you about how all of us have come to be here tonight."

A rude squeal, as the wheels of Barney's chair grated against the concrete floor. Will turned to look. 
The orderly's eyes were bulging—whether in anger or terror, it was difficult to say. Strangled noises 
of protest were audible from behind his pursed lips.

Hannibal tilted Will's face. His thumb grazed Will's lower lip as his eyes dropped to his mouth. "I'm 
afraid Barney won't be talking much, however. He's a bit tongue-tied at the moment."

"What did you do to him?" Will said, in a whisper.

The corners of Hannibal's eyes crinkled in a smile. "Let's go to dinner, and you'll see."

Will felt a creeping sense of surreality, as though he were moving outside of his body, as he allowed 
Hannibal to lead him to the table. He took the offered seat—a normal dining chair, thankfully—to 
Barney's left. The orderly cringed as Hannibal circled behind him to the other side. His beefy hands 
curled around the arms of the wheelchair, and Will saw the wire cables dig into the flesh of his arms.

"Does he need to be tied down like that if he can't, uh, talk?" Will asked.
Hannibal smiled. He picked up a small remote next to his plate, and pointed it at the seating divider at the back of the room. The energetic strains of violins and trumpets poured forth from a portable speaker set atop the ledge.

"Last time, if you recall, we were interrupted by the sting of Doctor du Maurier's ire." Hannibal set down the remote. He poured a measure of amber liquid from a decanter into two round-bottomed glasses. "I would like to avoid a repeat of that unpleasantness—as I'm sure you also would."

In the back of his mind, Will glimpsed the silver flash of Bedelia's oyster fork and the bright bloom of blood squirting from Hannibal's thigh. Go to hell! she'd screamed, her eyes glittering with rage.

From the speaker, the bouncy overture segued into a mournful, string-dense choral passage. Hannibal had played music for Bedelia at their dinner in Paris, too. An opera. Will wondered fleetingly if this meal's musical choice was for Barney's benefit, or for theirs.

His eyes drifted to the middle of the table. It was then he noticed the centerpiece. A wide, silver bowl was filled almost to the brim with clear water. Upon it floated three exotic-looking flowers, large and blood-red in color. Their myriad petals curved upward like small tongues, and their deep red undersides were reflected in the bowl's mirrored bottom. Amid the cluster of blooms floated a shallow dish. Upon it lay several strips of thinly sliced meat, arranged in a fan-like presentation and couched on a bed of greens.

The mirrored reflections of the flowers rippled as Hannibal handed Will his glass.

"The red lotus," Hannibal said, catching his eye. "Not a traditional Advent flower like the others, but one that belongs on our table tonight, nonetheless."

Will looked from the bowl to Barney—whose forehead, he could now see, was also dotted with a thin line of blood—and then back to Hannibal. The syrupy sweet smell of the wine wafted up from the glass. Sauternes, his mind supplied. Same as in Paris. The memory, and the alcohol's aroma, stoked a faint rumble of nausea.

"Why a lotus?" Will asked numbly.

Hannibal tilted his head, considering the question with a solemn expression. "The Emperor Hadrian named the red lotus after Antinous, following the young man's death. He imagined the flower had been baptized by the blood of the lion they slew in the desert—and then by Antinous' own blood. The lotus resurrects itself each day, blooming in the early morning and closing at night. It is considered a symbol of death and rebirth. Also the pure state of the heart. That is why it rests at the center of our table."

"A rebirth can only be symbolic," Will countered.

To his right, Barney moaned low in his throat. A glossy film of saliva leaked down his chin.

The corners of Hannibal's mouth curved, but his eyes did not smile. "And how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the wise?" He paused. Will stared back, silent.

"Tonight will be rich with symbolism," Hannibal continued. "We celebrate your rebirth, and ours. Together, against all the odds of fortune and chance. The alchemical rainbow of blooms surrounding you speaks of the same."

Will turned his eyes to the clusters of deep red and white flowers—and the decidedly un-Christmasy golden and blackish-red blooms—lining the edges of the table and floor. Long, spotted feathers peeked from the sprays of lace-white filler tucked into the arrangements. Somehow, the extra touches
tied everything together. The nearly identical shapes of the larger blooms were vaguely familiar, but Will found himself unable to place their name.

"Amaryllis," Hannibal supplied. "The Christmas flower of France. Each variety represents a stage in the psyche's quest for immortality." Will looked up sharply, almost expecting to hear the chiming of the cuckoo clock.

Hannibal pointed to an overflowing cluster of velvety maroon blooms at the far corner the table. "Black Pearl. The darkest of the Amaryllis family, signifying the first stage of individuation. The White Christmas variety, opposite, represents the second."

Will tipped his chin toward the amber and blood-red blossoms across the table. "And those?"

"Sunrise—and the Red Lion," Hannibal said. He paused a moment, looking at Will. "Do you know the story of Amaryllis, Will?"

He shook his head.

"She was a shepherdess who fell in love with a beautiful shepherd named Alteo. The Oracle at Delphi instructed her to wait at Alteo's door for thirty nights. Each night, in her lovelorn longing, Amaryllis pierced her heart with a golden arrow. On the thirtieth night, when Alteo finally opened his door, he found a stunning crimson flower on his doorstep, sprung from the blood of Amaryllis' heart."

Hannibal paused. A soft look came over his face. "It has been more than thirty nights since we parted, Will, but the flower has not wilted. It still waits on your doorstep."

Will stared, as the satiny fumes of the Sauternes filled his nose and the ache in Hannibal's voice swelled inside him. He felt like a balloon blown too tight—as though all of his organs had been squeezed to make room for a feeling he couldn't contain. Only Hannibal could unspool such feeling inside him with a mere story.

"Mmpf!" Barney's cry jerked Will to awareness. The orderly's brow was creased in pain, the flesh puckering to allow a single drop of blood to slide from his forehead, down his nose. He seemed to want to say something. The sight brought back the memory of the grating whirr of the buzzsaw against Will's own forehead. Hannibal had obviously done something to Barney's mouth, too. None of it seemed to matter.

Will looked back to Hannibal. He felt strangely calm. "Some doors can never be closed after they're opened. Is that what you want?"

Hannibal opened his mouth, then stopped. Will could almost feel the other man's heart rate tick up, as though Hannibal's blood were flowing through his veins, as well.

The lamenting, mezzo-soprano aria drifting from the speaker was suddenly charged with a burst of harpsichord and strings. Hannibal lifted his glass. "Allow me to propose a toast," he said, recouping his air of officiation that Will knew was mostly for Barney's benefit. "To you, Will. And to our long journeys through fire and water and blood, and back again."

Hannibal glanced down at Barney. "From the mouths of liars we have been delivered, to truth and to our future."

Barney whimpered. Hannibal's eyes caught Will's, softening again. "We can go back to the time before the teacup shatters—or, if you wish, to the moment before it was formed. The choice is in your hands, Will. It always has been."
Will lifted his glass. Clocks and teacups and time. And at the center of it all—your wild, warring heart.

Formless shadows danced and warped in the flickering candlelight. He could feel them stretching toward him, reaching for the darkness behind his eyelids. He brushed them away. Inside his mind, a light was beginning to glow. He could feel it brightening at the edges of his consciousness, golden as the sun; spreading in all directions like the mosaicked walls of the Cappella Palatina. Our first memory bridge—our last meeting. We've been here before. We'll be here again. Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.

"A toast," Will agreed, his voice firming as he echoed Hannibal's words. "To whatever fate the night may bring."

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Hannibal watched Will roll the stem of his wine glass between his thumb and forefinger. He imagined the texture of the cut crystal against the sensitive skin of Will's fingertips; could almost feel the slight warmth his hand imparted to the glass.

He remembered how Will used to hold his white by the bowl when they first met. He would gulp it down like whiskey when he was nervous. Hannibal smiled at the memory. He had fallen in love with Will in rumpled clothing and useless glasses; had grown to appreciate the mingled aromas of engine oil and cheap aftershave and dog fur that trailed after him everywhere he skulked.

But now, watching Will sip his Chardonnay, relaxed and effortlessly poised in the Bottega Veneta tuxedo he'd had tailored for him in Paris, made his mouth go dry.

Around them wound the delicate strains of Gluck's French rework of his Italian opera, Orfeo ed Euridice. Orpheus' lament over the lost Eurydice—driven by Richard Croft's tender yet powerful tenor—was mirrored by the pastoral flute and the uplifting chorus of Elysium's blessed spirits. The voices rose and fell, resounding off the circular walls of the autopsy theater. Oh you happy spirits, return to me the one I mourn so deeply. If you could only feel the fire which consumes me, the loving passion which burns in my heart, she would soon be returned to my embraces...

Hannibal had noted how frugal Will had been with the Sauternes, and the Blanc Cassis that followed during their hors d'oeuvre of daube glacé. Given Will's earlier state of intoxication, it was a wise choice to save himself for the Chardonnay, Hannibal thought. He'd been forced to ice the daube glacé instead of refrigerating it. The Creole holiday dish had proven to be a savory starter, despite the slight sweat at the top of the mold.

Will had seemed unsurprised at the source of the jellied rump roast. He'd merely ducked his head to peek under the table, and nodded when he saw Barney's bandaged thigh. He was waiting for an explanation, Hannibal knew. And you will receive one in good time, my phíltatos. We have five more courses still to come.

Barney himself did not appear to be enjoying the meal. This was understandable; Hannibal would not serve him until the end. He'd noted the way the orderly's nostrils had perked when he'd uncovered the duck rillettes entrée. Barney was hungry, although his appetite over the past few days had been significantly curbed by pain and fright.
Hannibal had decided to cook the rillettes as a tribute to Doctor Schneider. A sitting duck in many regards, the physician and his attack on Hannibal's own leg had earned him a slow braise inside the BSHCI's medical ward, courtesy of Will and Barney's fiery collaboration. Barney's reawakened appetite was an interesting contrast, he thought, to when the orderly had tried to encourage Hannibal's own appetite with chicken soup. He'd done the same for Will, many years ago—albeit with a more complex recipe.

_How well we've taken care of one another._ The thought sparked a surge of pride. The orderly had been startled, but happy, to find Hannibal on his Seventh Ward doorstep. Big surprise for Will! he'd declared, after Hannibal had told him of his plans for a holiday dinner. _We can have it over here, if ya want. That way, Will doesn't hafta deal with unexpected company. Or dogs try'na steal our food._ Hannibal had mirrored Barney's grin. _That will be the least of your worries—and ours,_ he'd thought.

Hannibal had pretended to know nothing of Barney's newfound partnership with the FBI, and Barney had pretended to be perfectly at ease with his own lies. He had proven useful in procuring the ingredients and supplies necessary for the crafting of their Réveillon meal. Some of the dishes, such as the daube glacé, demanded advance preparation. Unfortunately, this also meant the end of their amicable charades.

Barney had been in high spirits, right up to the moment Hannibal had come for his first pound of flesh. He was a little sorry to watch the light of friendship vanish from the orderly's eyes as he'd carved the section of lean muscle from his thigh. Barney had been a good caretaker. It was more than could be said for his loyalty.

Will, on the other hand, seemed to delight in the combination of jellied stewed rump meat and pig's feet. He'd also commented on the substitution of sour cherries for juniper berries in the rillettes spread. The mingled flavors of baked pecans, plums, and sea salt caramel nicely complimented the crusted French baguette, Hannibal thought. But he could tell, by the pensive way Will was twirling his wine glass, that his curiosity was beginning to fester.

_In the background, Orpheus and Eurydice's recitative seemed to mimic the mood:_

_I came searching for you in far Elysium, Orpheus sang. Soon you will see our sky, our sun, our own world again._

_I'm alive? You're living? Eurydice cried. How can that be?_  
_Soon, dear one, you will know everything,_ her lover replied. _But not yet._

_Very well,_ Hannibal thought. The third and fourth courses would serve as apt segues to Will's questions.

"Alligator stew?" Will exclaimed, as Hannibal uncovered the tureen with a flourish of steam. Lipid bubbles rose and popped along the surface of the thick, umber-colored stew.

"Yes. A Cajun-style tail sirloin stew with bourbon and bay leaves, served over dirty rice with garlic, green bell pepper, and wild mushrooms. In honor of our recently deceased friend and co-conspirator, Wally Oswalt. He made an unexpected meal for the alligators of Florida's marshlands. And for _le plat principal_—" Hannibal lifted another lid, revealing a serving tray of browned fish, "—pan-seared shark steak in a soy-and-Worcestershire glaze, with garlic, chili powder, and fresh thyme. Served with sweet potato blini, topped with Beluga caviar and buttermilk crème fraîche. A tribute to our late Dutch captain."

Will stared. "I… didn't know Haai was dead." His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"If things had gone according to Haai's plan, he and his smugglers might have joined in dining on
myself and Chiyoh in Italy this past Thanksgiving. And perhaps you, at Christmas." Hannibal placed one of the steaks on Will's plate with the oversized serving fork and slicing knife.

"You're saying that Haai and his crew were—cannibals? Pirates? What?"

The savory-sweet glaze, and the contrasting sharpness of the thyme, sent a heady aroma wafting through the autopsy room as Hannibal placed a steak on his own plate. Underneath the amalgam of scents, he could smell the rats already starting to gather in their hidden crevices. However, the hospital's resident scavengers would have no opportunity to dine on their leftovers tonight.

"Pirates, yes—for the Calabrian mafia. The 'Ndrangheta Brotherhood in Italy is well-known as the largest cocaine importer in Europe. Haai's ship was stocked with several million dollars' worth of the drug."

Will's eyebrows shot up. "His ship was supposed to be carrying coffee."

"It was," Hannibal said. "As for their meat preferences—or those of the 'Ndrangheta—who can say. If their appetites are similar to their Sicilian fratelli, then perhaps cannibalism would not be out of the question."

Hannibal knew the display he'd left for Will in Palermo's Cappella Palatina had made sensational headlines in Tuscany, but fewer in southern Italy. Cosa Nostra's vulgarities had long since desensitized the region's already toughened people, yet had failed to raze their grace. It was one of the things he admired about Sicilians.

Across the table, both Will and Barney's eyes were wide in disbelief.

"At any rate," he continued, ladling a prudent portion of the stew into Will's bowl, "they would have tortured and killed all of us—if purely for Allegra Pazzi's pleasure. You remember the fate that befell her late husband, Inspector Pazzi? She's still angry about that. And, as it turns out, she was a daughter of the Brotherhood. Even prodigal daughters may be granted occasional favors by their families."

Will shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. The mafia is hunting us? Just because you killed Rinaldo Pazzi in Florence three and a half years ago?"

Hannibal cleared his throat. "It may sound like a Hollywood film plot, but I assure you it is not. Unfortunately, Italy's criminal gangs are fond of assigning guilt by association."

"You were supposed to go to Lithuania. Haai was paid to bring you there."

"Haai was paid more to bring me to Italy. There are some favors that money cannot guarantee, I'm afraid. Safety is one." Hannibal glanced down at Barney. "Freedom is another. Wouldn't you agree, Barney?"

The orderly shook his head. Two fat tears were brimming at the corners of his eyes.

"You may be feeling overwhelmed," Hannibal said, bestowing the bound man with a sympathetic nod. "The price of freedom is sometimes severe, and often non-refundable. But you are in good company. Tonight is a time for celebration. Perhaps we'll pick your brain on the subject later."

Barney blinked. Hannibal could almost hear the scream caught inside of his throat.

Will stared at the chunky orange broth in the bowl before him. Hannibal sensed his mind itching to shrink away from the knowledge that had just widened it. The news of Haai's treachery had likely
reawakened Will's fragile sense of guilt. Had they been alone, Hannibal might have silenced the other man's persistent sense of responsibility with a kiss—or, perhaps, encouraged it with one.

*Oh, if only I could calm her sweet distress,* Orpheus lamented from the speaker.

Hannibal smiled at the uncanny parallel. "Eat, Will. The Cajun recipes were crafted especially for you."

"Uh. Wally's not in—"

"No," Hannibal cut in. "I would not have subjected either of us to his meat. He was rotting from the inside. Cancer."

Will forcibly relaxed his expression. He took a slice of warm Gruyère bread from the basket and ripped it in half. *Defensive,* Hannibal noted. He shifted his gaze to the head of the table, where Barney's posture had begun to crumple. His eyes were drooping from fatigue and the loss of several of his physical faculties. *Just a bit longer, dear nurse,* Hannibal mused silently. *Your supper is coming. You won't even need to sing for it."

"So," Will said, tucking his napkin into his collar and dunking his chunk of bread into the stew. "What did Wally do to earn his spot at the alligator feeding grounds?"

Hannibal cut into his steak with a serrated knife, allowing the question to hang on the air. Will brought the bread halfway to his mouth and stopped. Hannibal could feel the other man's eyes watching him as he took a bite of his own steak, savoring the juicy tenderness of the glazed fish. The chili, soy, and Worcestershire combination had been an experiment. He was pleased to discover that his Cajun take on the European recipe had proven equally savory.

Hannibal swallowed. "Do you doubt I had a reason?" He cut another square, watching the meat flake apart between his knife and fork. He wasn't sorry about the lack of time to preserve an actual slice of Haai for the recipe. The Dutchman's tobacco-stained tongue, flapping from the strings of the fishing parka, had been repulsive enough. *No matter,* he thought. *One liar's tongue is as good as another's.*

"I didn't say that."

Hannibal looked up. Will's wrists rested on the table, the hunk of untasted bread between his fingers. His eyes were dark as rough lapis, but his voice had softened.

Hannibal sighed. "Wally Oswalt did not prove as good a friend as you—or your father—might have wished. He was happy enough to pass my name to Haai, who quickly found a higher bidder than you for my delivery. Not as financially valuable as his other cargo, perhaps, but it certainly would have kept him in the mafia's good graces."

From the head of the table, a clotted snore punctuated Hannibal's words. Will looked over.

"That isn't all," Hannibal said, setting his knife and fork atop his plate. "Wally was just as happy to sell our names to the FBI when Jack gave a whistle. But Wally wasn't the only one." He paused, then leaned over. "Isn't that right, Barney?" he said, raising his voice. *Ee Ee Ee,* the walls echoed back sharply.

The orderly jerked awake at the sound, causing his jaw to snap shut with a crack. A pained sound leaked from his mouth as his eyes rolled frantically to Hannibal, and then to Will. The tenor's voice raged from the speaker, underpinned by an angry swell of violin and cello. *How long must I suffer in this funereal place?* Orpheus sang.
"Just a few pieces of silver," Hannibal continued, a snarl hovering in his voice. "Was that all it took? Or did you ask for more to exonerate yourself?"

Barney gave a sound like a hiccup. Wetness welled inside his mouth and spilled down his chin in an oozing red stream. He swallowed fast, nearly gagging.

"This is the price of freedom, Barney," Hannibal said, eyes narrowing as he gazed upon the man who had been his caretaker. His friend. "Yours and ours."

Across the table, Will's expression had gone dark. His eyes were flint-like. Cold. He glared at Barney. "You... you told Jack about us? About the fire?"

Fat tears rolled down Barney's cheeks. He wagged his head from side to side, eyes screwed shut.

"Barney..." Hannibal warned. "Don't lie to Will. Not after the three of us have come so far together."

Barney's chin quivered. Mingled blood and tears dripped from his jaw as he continued to swallow, trying to staunch the fluid welling inside his mouth. Slowly, he nodded. Yes. His eyes remained closed.

Will squared his jaw and picked up his knife and fork. He popped a bite of the steak into his mouth and chewed silently, staring at the orderly. He seemed to be assessing him, the way a spider would an insect freshly snared in its web.

Will chased the bite with a sip of Chardonnay. "Open your eyes and look at us," he said.

Hannibal's pulse picked up at Will's command. He watched as Barney's eyes cracked open. The man's jaw worked soundlessly as his inflamed pharyngeal tissues struggled to form sound.

"You squealed, Barney," Will said. "You thought you were safe in Maryland, with Alana and Jack nearby. And now Hannibal's trussed you up, like a pig marked for slaughter, and brought you down here. What did you think would happen?" Will's voice was smooth, his face calm. Deadly.

Barney's eyes rolled to Hannibal. In them shone a final, dirty burst of hope. It reminded him of the look in Mischa's eyes as the man had taken her, just before slamming the flat of a long-handled shovel into the side of Hannibal's head. Hannibal had later used the same shovel, and his keen sense of smell, to unearth his sister's broken body from the Aukštaitijan forest floor.

He took a sip of the Bâtard-Montrachet, allowing the delicate bouquet of citrus and white flowers to roll along his tongue. He decided to indulge Barney's futile hope.

"Barney was already in New Orleans," he said, looking to Will. "I asked him to come, several weeks ago, to watch over you. I was worried about you."

Will's expression tightened. He glared at Barney. "You were following me?" His eyes flickered back to Hannibal, full of heat. "You asked him to spy on me? What the hell, Hannibal!"

"It was for your own protection, until I could return. Barney proved himself a skilled triple agent, and has earned his place on my table. You remain unharmed, and unmolested by either the law or the 'Ndrangheta." He paused. "I do not regret my decision."

Will stabbed his fork into the side of his blini, spilling the caviar nestled atop the crème fraîche topping. "I didn't ask for protection. Or intervention." He shoved a bite into his mouth and chewed aggressively.
Hannibal stood to retrieve the bottle of 2000 Pauillac Bordeaux, which he'd placed at the end of the table for their final courses. He could feel Will's eyes on him as he turned the corkscrew.

"The last time I killed a friend who wanted to help, it was the poet, Antony Dimmond. I broke his skull with a miniature bust of Aristotle. The irony of it would not have been lost on Antony. He was a passionate and intelligent man, if somewhat cocky."

Hannibal felt Will bristle at the word. He didn't dwell on the sting of smugness that arose. Neither of them had promised exclusivity to each other; both of them had obeyed their animal urges when the opportunity had arisen. If it was a fault, it was a shared one.

"Aristotle proclaimed the act of murder to be vicious and disgraceful, regardless of context. Along with acts of theft—" he glanced at Barney, allowing his gaze to linger a moment before turning to Will, "—as well as adultery. In that sense, the philosopher would consider all of us to be guilty. There is no mean or moderation to be found in murder, Aristotle said. He considered it to indicate an ugliness of character."

Hannibal drew out the cork with a soft pop. He poured an equal measure of the wine into two empty glasses.

"Would you agree with Aristotle, Barney? Or would you say that killing can be justified? Perhaps even artistic, in its justification."

He gave a theatrical pause. Barney shook his head, his brow creased in pain. Blood drizzled from his chin onto the empty plate in front of him.

"Forgive me for not allowing you the means to rebuke. Perhaps it's better if you hold your tongue."

Hannibal turned to the centerpiece, where a heated plate had kept the golden-brown slices of meat warm as they floated atop his miniature lotus pond. The flowers' crimson petals had opened wider as the night barreled towards morning.

Will's eyes snapped up to meet his, dark in the flickering ring of light surrounding them.

"And what would you say?" Hannibal asked, soft. "Would you agree with Aristotle? Or would you say it was justification for art?" He held out the glass of Bordeaux.

Will took the offered wine, seeming to contemplate its rich redness, and the fragile crystal containing it, before answering.

"Ethics and aesthetics are separate concerns. What you do—what we've done together—is outside the conventional comprehensions of both. Neither view is sufficient."

Hannibal smiled, pleased. It was, he thought, an astute appraisal. "Then allow me to introduce our next course. It is something of a culinary alchemy."

He picked up the unused dining plate to Will's left. With a spatula, he deposited several tender slices of meat from the floating dish onto the china, and then spooned a dab of pink, creamy sauce atop each slice.

"Braised spicy tongue with caramelized mushrooms and Creole mustard rémoulade. A modified recipe, with the organ meat in this case supplied by Barney."

He sprinkled a pinch of fresh, chopped parsley atop the rémoulade, and repeated the process for his own plate.

"I apologize for not yet inviting you to partake in dinner," he told Barney. "But as you would require your tongue to swallow, I think the risk of participation far greater than that of abstinence, don't you?" Barney merely whimpered in response.
Will eyed Hannibal over the rim of his wine glass. "Did you cauterize him?"

"Yes." Hannibal sat, draping his napkin over his lap. "It was an effective means of stabilization until a few minutes ago, when he bit open the remainder of it in his fright."

"He's dining on his own blood," Will observed coolly. He popped a slice of the rémoulade-sweetened organ in his mouth. Hannibal watched Will chew, noting the involuntary quirk of pleasure that flitted across his face.

They ate with leisure, savoring the taste of the meat, as the opera rose and fell in the background. Barney watched the cooked portions of himself disappear into their mouths, bite by bite, with a dazed look.

"Do you know what's truly intriguing about you, Barney?" Hannibal asked, after swallowing a sip of the Bordeaux. Its smoky-sweet finish filled the hollows of his cheeks. "Your willingness to meddle without reward. I have to admit, your smaller interferences were unexpected. The white lies. Not only to me and Will—to Doctor Bloom and Doctor Schneider, also."

He cocked his head, fixing the orderly in a reproving stare. "And your plundering of my sketchbook. Psychological manipulations disguised as concern. I think you were simply curious about what the rest of us would do. Am I correct in that assumption, Barney?"

The orderly stared back with a hard look. A trickle of pinkish-red gore dribbled from his lower lip. After a long moment, he nodded. The movement seemed to carry an air of finality.

"I feel a precipitous amount of pride in you," Hannibal confessed. He stood up, catching his napkin before it fell. "I'd like to serve you now, Barney, if you don't mind. This part of our meal represents the clearest moment of our friendship—of the friendship between the three of us. The meat of our shared memories, so to speak."

He lifted the filigreed lid of the last dish on the table—an oval platter no larger than a gravy boat. Will's eyebrow quirked as the contents were revealed.

"Creamed, boiled brain, soaked in milk and sautéed in cognac," Hannibal announced. "Served in a minced chicken-fat bolete mushroom sauce, and garnished with parsley and black truffle shavings. The texture is not unlike ricotta cheese. And so, as with a traditional cheese dessert, we have whole grain bread fried lightly in butter, to accompany our offal."

Barney twisted in the wheelchair, his arms straining against the cables. He appeared eager to put as much distance as possible between himself and the pieces of his mind on the table, Hannibal saw. Blood welled around the seam in his forehead as he struggled. Will's expression was trapped between curiosity and disbelief.

"Have you ever eaten brain, Will?" he asked.

"I've been inside a lot of heads. But never the other way around."

Hannibal grinned at the wit in his reply. He spooned a lump of browned brain onto Barney's dessert plate. "The first serving is for our guest of honor," he said, and looked down at Barney. "Don't worry about the restraints. I will take care of feeding you, as you once took care of me. Your thoughts should be soft enough now to swallow whole."

"He's still cognizant," Will observed, as Hannibal transferred the second piece to his plate. The statement, while obvious, was also necessarily true. Hannibal had been careful to leave the orderly's awareness and major motor functions intact. The human brain could operate quite well with a few
pieces missing; and those pieces could make for a delectable treat, when properly prepared.

"Yes, I ensured he would be," Hannibal replied, cutting Barney's portion with his knife and fork. The orderly's eyes were stretched wide, bloodshot as he stared at the squiggled slices of meat on his plate. "Neither Haai nor Wally were able to enjoy the results of my culinary labors during our special supper. Barney is the luckiest of our colleagues. He has the opportunity to savor the fruits of his betrayal."

Will scraped equal halves of the creamy, sautéed brain matter onto two flats of toast. Hannibal watched as he bit into one, lowering his eyelids with relish as he chewed.

"It's not gamey at all," he said, after swallowing. "The taste is light. Almost sweet."

Will stood, taking the half of toast in his hand. A spark of heat flashed through Hannibal's body as the other man stretched across the table, offering a bite. Hannibal opened his mouth, and his eyes closed involuntarily as he allowed Will to feed him. The mingled tastes of organ meat, cognac, and Will's skin invaded his mouth with a decadent glory.

"I'm sure my thoughts wouldn't have been so tasty," Will said smoothly. "Where did you take the pieces from?"

Hannibal opened his eyes and licked a dab of sauce from Will's fingertip. A dark, heady feeling swelled inside his mind as the memory of the buzzsaw vibrating in his hand rushed back to him. It was a perplexing mix of anguish and desire. He'd kept the saw steady for the first five seconds. Then, right as Mason Verger's men had broken into the apartment, his hand had started to shake—the reason for the upturned tilt at the end of Will's scar.

He'd wondered, many times afterwards, if he would have kept going. The fleeting measure of relief he'd felt before the butt-end of a pistol had cracked against his skull was suggestive of an answer—one he was reticent to acknowledge.

Barney thrashed in place between them, rocking the wheelchair from side to side as a desperate wail ripped from his throat. Hannibal and Will's eyes met and simultaneously traveled down to the struggling man. Blood trickled down Barney's face from his forehead, pooling in the corner of his left eye.

"The cuts are mostly from the prefrontal lobe," Hannibal answered, looking back up at Will. He felt suddenly giddy. "A little here, a little there." He lifted his hand and took the toast from Will's fingers, and turned it back in offering. Will savored the remaining bite, his eyes gleaming with understanding.

"Be still now, Barney," Hannibal said. He picked up the flat of toast from the orderly's plate. "It's time for you to enjoy yourself."

Will's hand flew to the orderly's shoulder, pinning him in place. In one swift movement, Hannibal pushed the brain-smeared toast into Barney's bleeding mouth. The blunt end of the orderly's amputated tongue flicked against the food in protest. Hannibal saw how the blackened papillae were swollen to the size of shirt buttons. Barney gagged as the creamy mush slid off the bread and down his throat. Will grinned. The candlelight glinted sharply off his teeth.

Hannibal ripped the fabric band from under Barney's convulsing throat and threw it to the side. He splayed his fingertips against the man's cranium and pulled. The top of the skull slid off easily, revealing the pinkish-gray dome of Barney's brain nestled inside. Hannibal placed the cap on his plate. Barney gave a choked howl at the sight, his eyes rolling back in his truncated head.
"Do you see the way the brain continues to breathe, even when exposed?" Hannibal said.

Will peered over the top of Barney's head, his palm tightening on the man's trembling shoulder. The gray, compact organ pulsed with a faint but steady rhythm. Hannibal's clippings from the previous day had left dark pink streaks in the tissue. However, the brain had already begun to fold in on itself in an effort to protect its wounded lobe. He'd tied off the major blood vessels and sealed the others under a local anesthetic, both to minimize the bleeding and to keep Barney in good health for their holiday dinner.

Will nodded. "I can see it throbbing with deceit." His voice was on the cusp of a growl. Barney's breathing, Hannibal noticed, was speeding up considerably. He was starting to hyperventilate. His eyelids snapped shut, as if to block out Will's words.

"But he can't see it," Will continued, his voice rising. "I think it's time we showed him."

Before Hannibal could reply, Will darted to the center of the table and grabbed the centerpiece bowl with both hands. He tilted it, spilling the water into Barney's lap. The lotus blossoms traveled with it. One landed in a sodden lump atop the bandage on Barney's thigh. The other two cascaded to the floor, water raining down over their upended petals.

"Look!" Will commanded, shoving the mirrored dish in front of Barney's face.

The orderly's reflection jolted inside the dripping glass bottom, his eyes screwed tightly shut. Hannibal tipped Barney's head forward, causing his brain to jiggle inside its egg-cup of a skull.

A dark fire was burning in Will's eyes. Hannibal felt his throat thicken with pride. *My savage philatatos. Did the Gods realize what glorious horror they'd breathed into being when they created you?*

"Open your eyes, Barney," Hannibal instructed kindly. "Will has something he wants to show you."

Barney's eyelids lifted, one at a time. His pupils dilated, unfocused, as they landed on the mirrored bowl in Will's hands. Then his throat gave a great heave, and the unchewed bite of toast came out, along with a smattering of pinkish bile. The offal, Hannibal was pleased to see, had stayed down.

"See?" Will seethed, pushing the mirror closer. "Bite the hand that feeds, and you become the meal. You knew this from the beginning, Barney. Doctor Bloom put you in a cage with a wounded cobra. You thought it wouldn't bite when you tried to charm it. You were wrong."

A shudder rippled through Barney's entire frame. A groan leaked from his throat as his eyes bulged, darting between Will, his own disfigured reflection, and Hannibal. The sound sharpened to a shriek as Hannibal picked up the oversized serving fork from the table.

"What do you think?" Hannibal asked, settling his hand on Barney's other shoulder. "Shall we bid our guest adieu, Will? Assuming he's had his fill of himself, of course." He cast an amicable glance down at the orderly. "Or is he still hungry?"

Barney struggled beneath his hand. Hannibal gave a soothing pat to the back of his neck, which was greasy with sweat.

"Yes to the former," Will said. "His meal is finished. Ours isn't." His voice was like silk dragged over gravel, and Hannibal found himself growing warm inside his suit.

He cleared his throat. "Very well, then," he said, and drove the serving fork deep into Barney's frontal lobe. The orderly's body jerked with the pressure, though Hannibal knew he wouldn't feel his
brain tearing. He twisted the handle, ripping a wide gash stretching nearly to the premotor cortex. He speared a sizeable chunk of the lobe onto the tines and pulled it away from the surrounding tissue.

Anticipating his next move, Will set down the bowl and grasped Barney's jaw between his fingers. He pulled his mouth open. Without hesitation, Hannibal shoved the long-handled fork, with its offal gift, into the black hole of Barney's esophagus. He stopped when only the silver tip of the handle was visible. Dull, clucking sounds gurgled from the orderly's throat as he slumped in the wheelchair. Cherry-red trails of blood slithered along the sulci of his wounded brain tissue. Then his muscles spasmed, causing his teeth to clench around the handle of the fork with a sharp click.

Hannibal watched the man's death unfold before them, undignified and captivating in its grotesquie. *Perhaps, in another life, blood might have cleansed Barney's brain in another manner,* he mused. The orderly's penchant for manipulation, his carefully cultivated trustworthiness, and his matter-of-fact view of life and death might have inspired him to embrace the role of an "angel of death." In this life, however, Barney would have no opportunity to orchestrate the death of anyone other than himself.

Will released his hold on Barney's face and stepped back. Hannibal watched his eyes scan the room with sudden overwhelm: their makeshift table covered in half-empty dishes, the heaps of flowers and Christmas garlands scattered around the room, the body strapped to the heavy wheelchair.

"What do we do now?" Will said.

"We leave everything behind. I've made preparations for our exit."

Will's brow furrowed, then lifted as Hannibal moved aside a cluster of greenery to reveal a plastic fuel caddy.

"There are several more stashed behind the seating walls," Hannibal said. "Each holds twenty-five gallons of fuel oil. We will replicate your design from the medical ward, and vacate the hospital before the theater ignites. The evidence will be up in smoke before the fire crews arrive."

Will's mouth curved in a jagged grin. "Now I know why you wanted to have dinner in a *hospital.* It was all for symbolism, wasn't it?"

Hannibal's lip quirked in reply. He knew, despite the teasing in the question, that Will found the parallels as ferociously and humorously fitting as he himself did.

They made quick work of emptying the caddies. The majority of the fuel was concentrated in the middle of the room, away from the still-burning candles. The table also received a generous spray, as did Barney—who was, by now, mortally indifferent to being covered in accelerant.

From the still-singing speaker, Orpheus' lamentation over his dying bride poured forth over the splash of petroleum. The sorrowful plucking of violin strings forced a somber contrast to their work. The French rendition of Gluck's opera had served as a fitting accompaniment to his and Will's reunion, Hannibal thought; however, it had not run its course. The lovers had yet to visit Eros' temple. The jubilant third act would unfurl as the fire raged in the circular room of death. He and Will would be far away by then, basking in the cool shade of Elysium's endless fields.

*Again I stand upon the dismal shores of Hades,* Orpheus sang, *but the journey that separates my love from me is not long…*

"Some of these candles are burned nearly to the ends of their wicks," Will said, glancing at the tongues of flame surrounding them. "If we set them too close to the oil—"
"We can make it outside in less than five minutes, if we move quickly," Hannibal said. A spark of doubt lingered in Will's eyes. "We will make it," Hannibal assured. He took Will's hand in his own and lifted it, pressing a kiss to his knuckles. Beneath the aroma of fuel oil on the air, he caught the warm scent that was Will's, and Will's alone. It smelled like home.

The other man nodded. Together, they plucked a score of still-burning candles from the dividers lining the room. The tallest they placed just outside of the pool of fuel oil shimmering on the floor. The wicks would ignite the vapors after burning down further.

When the last candle had been set in place, Hannibal grabbed Will's hand. "Let's go," he said. Will smiled at the words—his own, echoed from the medical ward—as they rushed towards the hallway to the corridor.

Behind them, the triumphant strains of Eros' proclamation to the reunited lovers rang from the speaker: *Adventurous lovers, go back into the world! A love that is returned repairs a thousand sorrows.*

In both Gluck's world and in theirs, a lost man had been saved from taking his own life, and two lovers had been resurrected by divine intervention. *A fortunate exodus from Hades on both accounts,* Hannibal thought.

He led Will up the stairwell and through the cluttered hallways, towards the hospital's main entrance. They passed the reception desk with its signage notifying visitors of Unusual Occurrences and Miracles. Will glanced at it as they swept past. Perhaps, Hannibal mused, the words held some allegorical meaning for him, in the same way Gluck's opera did for himself.

Outside the hospital walls, the night was bright and empty. No police strobes or semi-automatic weapons greeted their emergence, nor hindered their way through the weed-choked pathway to the fence line. They had been lucky so far, Hannibal knew. It was now up to the Fates to decide whether or not their luck would hold.

He went to grab the cut section of the chain-link fencing, when a calamitous crash—and then a loud *WHOOSH!*—pounded their ears. They ducked reflexively, Hannibal's fingers sliding down the gritty aluminum wire as both he and Will glanced over their shoulders.

The fire had already taken hold, working its way through the basement and ballooning upwards in a rush of smoke and flame. The sounds of unseen things collapsing were audible from inside the building. Rotted caulk dripped in warped, gray lines down the window glass along the first floor. Orange tongues of light licked around the edges of the broken ones, contrasting with the silent, steady glow of the full moon overhead.

Somewhere in the distance, the wail of an emergency siren cut over the furious rumble of the fire. They would be safe under the cover of the trees for a few minutes more, Hannibal knew—but only a few.

"Our holiday dinners always seem to have fiery endings."

Hannibal turned at the faraway sound in Will's voice. He was watching the flames leaping along the outside of the stone, transfixed. The light reflected in his pupils, orange-red and flickering. The blue of his irises appeared as vivid and dark as the Mediterranean, as glimpsed from the shores of Sicily. Hannibal had missed the vision intensely; had dreamed of it many nights in the hospital, and of the strikingly similar hue of Will's eyes—*always* Will's eyes.

It had been the dead of night when he and Chiyoh had made landfall at Gioia Tauro, and the sea had
appeared black. No Mediterranean blue in sight. The color had not returned to him until he'd pulled Will from Lake Pontchartrain, half-drowned and half-ready for a fight. But when Will had opened his eyes, Hannibal's blue had come rushing back to him, and he knew he could no longer hold back the current threatening to sweep him away. *I love you, Will.* And, because he'd asked for clarification: *That's not an analogy.*

"I wonder," Will continued, his eyes fixed on the burning building in front of them, "in another world, if I'd known you were coming back for me—would we still have needed to kill him?"

Hannibal considered the question. Smoke drifted to them on the wind, rot-tinged and fetid. It wound through the yellowing weeds along the building's foundation.

After a moment, he replied, "If Orpheus had not looked back in Hades, would Eurydice still have died? The Greeks believed that only the Gods could answer such questions. The Fates were kinder to the lovers in Gluck's opera. Eros was sent to restore Eurydice's life, and to prevent Orpheus from ending his own." Hannibal paused. "All those I've killed or pardoned have been to protect you, Will. To save you."

"That wasn't the reason for Danukas."

Hannibal glanced sharply at Will. The other man's brow was creased, but his voice held a soft warmth. "We did that to save you."

Hannibal's breath caught in his throat.

*We.*

In his eyes he felt a sudden burning, as though the fire from the autopsy theater had caught in his head.

*You were there. We were there—we did it together. You remember. 'This is our design.'*

Hannibal looked back to the smoke curling from the lower windows of the hospital. He closed his eyes and allowed the burning feeling to pass. His heart swelled with unrestrained emotion, and he knew with certainty that of the many moments he would remember with Will, this one would remain at the forefront of all.

"Someone from the Bureau visited me a couple days ago—an agent," Will said quietly. The dense aroma of smoke drifted to them on the breeze, stinging their eyes. "Her name was Clarice Starling. She said she was working with Jack. She reminded me a lot of Miriam Lass." He paused, glancing sideways at Hannibal. "Do you think they're watching us now?"

Hannibal breathed in. The hospital grounds were starting to smell like a funeral pyre. "It is possible, but unlikely. The FBI would have prevented us from setting fire to a building in the center of New Orleans. Even one as decrepit as Charity Hospital." He paused, the urge to hold back the next words clenching his throat. "But they know where to find us, Will. The 'Ndrangheta also know about the house on Elysian Fields. Both sides will wait until they have the opportunity to take us securely, and together."

Will laced his fingers through Hannibal's own; warmth upon warmth in the smoky morning air. He met Hannibal's eyes with a resolute stare.

"Then take me home," he said, "and get me out of this damn tuxedo."
...Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you have bid your servant once adieu...
    So true a fool is love that in your will,
    Though you do any thing, he thinks no ill.

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet Fifty-seven

–Fifty-seven days after the fall—Christmas morning–

Will's left hand, clasped loosely in Hannibal's right, had been almost feverishly warm on the short drive back to Elysian Fields. The night seemed to have sharpened since they'd emerged from the hospital. The air was dense with a thousand smells, among them the oily smoke from their fire and the scents of sautéed, baked, and boiled flesh still clinging to their dress clothes. Soaring above all of them was the coppery aroma of freshly spilled blood. Barney Matthews, friend and traitor. We have made a fine meal of you tonight, Hannibal thought, as he shifted the car into park in front of Will's shotgun house.

Underneath the frantic perfume of Barney's blood, Hannibal could smell the hot thrum of Will's living blood in his veins—a rich and aromatic bouquet that sent his senses scattering. He'd had to pull both hands to the wheel at one point to correct his steering, and Will had smirked as he'd turned to look out the window. Hannibal didn't blame him. In each intake of breath he caught whiffs of the flesh they'd devoured, both animal and human; the wine they'd shared; the twin pulses of Will's rage and lust, simmering underneath it all. The last had not abated; but instead transformed into something more primal, more deadly, than even their shared urge to kill. Hannibal could almost hear Will's thoughts: I want you to feel my heat inside of you. I want to eat you alive.

But would Will harbor the desire for more, once day dawned? Nighttime and the heat of flesh and spilled blood had their ways of feeding one another; but they could also appear stark once the heat had faded. It had happened before. Hannibal remembered the creases of dried blood in the lines of Will's palms as he'd placed Chiyoh's pistol in his hands. And he could recall, with perfect clarity, the bite of the Parisian air and the cold light spilling into the room as they'd stepped outside the bedroom door. Would the morning feel that cold again?

Will hadn't panicked, but his decision had been as ambivalent and self-righteous then as it had on the cliff.

It's beautiful...

Will you forgive me?

The window loomed large in Hannibal's mind. Unyielding. Solid. He found he couldn't see through it. For the first time since he'd watched Mischa's milk teeth sink into the cold Aukštaitijan mud, he felt at a loss for direction.

He walked beside Will up the path to the house. He thought of the cuckoo clock on the wall, of the time it was keeping for them in this world. The time it hadn't kept for them, in the last.
A snippet of poetry circled back through his thoughts—the same he'd mused upon while waiting for Will to emerge from the bedroom at the cabin. The words danced before his eyes, as if the page were right in front of him:

…There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate…  
Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse…

Would there be time? The front door opened, and Hannibal walked through the low light spilling out onto the porch. Did he dare disturb the path upon which fate and circumstance had set them? He could smell the bowl of freshly cooked chili steaming between his hands, simple and spicy and warm. He didn't feel like eating, but perhaps Will would… The snow was falling thicker now, bleeding through the sky's indigo haze with stubborn persistence. He'd knelt down in snow once, for Will. He knew he would do it again.

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin…  
And how should I presume?

The shock of Will's hands jolted Hannibal from his reverie. His shoulder blades hit plaster, and then he was pinned on the wall—and then Will's lips were on his throat, rough; one hand cupping Hannibal's cock through his trousers. The instinct to wrap his hands around Will's neck was instantaneously replaced with the urge to push him away—and then wholly overthrown, as his body and brain came rushing back together in a furious clash of awareness—and desire.

"Will," he gasped.

The hairs along Will's upper lip tickled his skin as he sucked a heady kiss from Hannibal's mouth. When Will pulled away, Hannibal caught a sharp flash of Mediterranean blue. He breathed in, deep. He felt as though he couldn't get enough oxygen. He became aware of the rapid swell of blood in his groin and the murmur of Will's mouth against the corner of his own.

"Can we please. Now. Without the sponge bath."


He whirled the two of them around, slamming Will against the wall. Will's eyes widened as Hannibal thrust a knee between his legs. He could feel the other man's hardness through his trouser fabric, bulging against his own intruding thigh. He pressed a searing, breathless kiss to his mouth. His own bow tie was growing uncomfortably tight. Waves of heat passed back and forth between them; tension demanding release.

Hannibal tipped his forehead to Will's. "I had the tuxedo tailored in Paris especially for you," he said. "I related your measurements to the tailor in exact detail, from memory. Are you sure you want out of it?"

Will's reply was a smoldering glance and a flash of fingers at Hannibal's throat. The woven silk tie disappeared from around his neck in an instant. Then his hands moved to the onyx studs along the
pique bib of his dress shirt. It seemed Will was intent on stripping Hannibal of his own tuxedo, as quickly as possible.


Before Will could protest, Hannibal scooped him into his arms and made for the hallway to the bedroom. A storm of curious dogs barked at their heels.

"Nng—Hannibal—careful!" Will cried, clutching at his shoulder as though afraid he might drop him.

"I'm quite recovered from our fall," Hannibal said, smirking. He kicked shut the bedroom door behind them, closing out the yipping canines. "And I've carried you like this before, over a far greater distance."

He tossed Will onto the bed, and shed his own tuxedo jacket before sliding atop him. Their starched fabric crushed together, the scents of meat and cologne and arousal thick on their clothes and skin. Will's mouth seemed to be everywhere at once. His hands bunched into the fabric of Hannibal's shirt and pulled the tail from his trousers. Hannibal shivered as Will's fingers slid underneath and up his sides.

Amid the ravenous pull of Will's mouth, Hannibal stripped them of their accessories—Will's tie, their cufflinks and shirt studs, his own watch. He poked buttons through buttonholes and arms from broadcloth and silk, until they were both free of their waistcoats and shirts. Will's fingers pulled at the waistband of Hannibal's dress pants, insistent.

"Patience is not getting you naked any faster," he growled.

Hannibal grinned, pushing Will's hands from his waist. "Nor you," he agreed.

He stood and toed off his shoes, and then unfastened the top of Will's trousers. Will squirmed, and the small, pleading noise that strangled from his throat derailed every conscious train of thought in Hannibal's head. His erection twitched inside his boxers. Hannibal swallowed, suddenly struck with the certainty that he'd never seen a more beautiful sight: Will, splayed out on the bed before him, spread-legged in his tuxedo pants and high-polished oxfords, eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

"Hannibal," Will urged.

_Please. Now._ The words pulsed through Hannibal's consciousness like a mantra. He'd never had any trouble concentrating during physical intimacy; but it seemed _everything_ Will did had the capacity to dismantle him. _So be it_, he thought.

He wrenched off Will's oxfords and then stepped back, pulling the last scraps of clothing from his body. He let them fall to the floor, which was now decorated with more than twenty-thousand dollars' worth of fabric and leather. Hannibal pushed the silk of his own boxers down his thighs, and with them his dress pants. Will's eyes traveled down his body, unabashed. They lingered on his cock, and then flicked back to his face. He pushed himself up, fixing Hannibal in a dark stare.

"Come here. Make me yours."

The command, an inverted echo of Hannibal's own words at the cabin, came almost as a challenge. The thought of the unknown man Barney had seen at Will's side flitted briefly through Hannibal's mind. He pushed it away. _No—there's no place for anyone else now. Only us. Always us._

Hannibal's cock throbbed as he stepped out of the silk pooled at his feet. He slid onto the mattress and over Will's body, lit golden in the glow of the lamplight. He inhaled, allowing the heady-sweet
aroma of Will's arousal to fill his olfactory cortex—and nearly lost his balance at the burst of heat that flared inside him at the scent. He could imagine pheromones racing to his amygdala for identification and processing, where they would be translated into chemical impulses by his delicate stria terminalis, and then on to his pleasure regulator—the hypothalamus. The same regions of the brain that controlled appetite and physical arousal were also key in the formation of emotional attachment.

_Hunger. Desire. Love._

_You_, he thought, pressing a kiss to the dip between Will's hipbone and thigh. _All you. Always you._

Will's spine arched, aching for more contact—but Hannibal wasn't about to relent. _Not just yet._ He crawled up, pressing delicate kisses between the ridges of Will's ribs. The other man's eyes slipped closed as Hannibal's lips grazed the rosy stripe of scar tissue below his collarbone.

With a blind hand, Hannibal slid open the drawer in the nightstand. He groped until his fingers closed around what he needed. When he'd stashed the bottle there earlier in the evening, he hadn't known if it would prove necessary, or merely superfluous. He knew Will hadn't been exactly _happy_ when he'd pulled him from the lake—but Will had also grabbed him and kissed him as though he might drown if he didn't. He'd decided it was better to be prepared.

Hannibal flipped the cap with his thumb and nudged Will onto his side. He slid in back of him, dragging his lips across the strong ridge of his shoulder. He worked the lubricant between his fingers to warm it.

"The last time we touched each other like this," he whispered against the shell of Will's ear, "I made a promise to myself. A promise to come back. Even if you sent me away again."

"You thought I would?" Will asked, low. He swallowed. "Send you away, I mean."

"I didn't think, I knew." Hannibal sighed. The memory twisted like a thorn in the center of his mind, oozing and sharp. "And I knew you would do it right after you finished taking me apart, piece by piece." He traced a slick fingertip along the underside of Will's cock, sparking a clipped inhale.

"I'm—_mmhn_, Hannibal—"

He silenced Will's protest with a soft kiss to the side of his jaw. _"I forgive you, Will."_

He slid his fingers back, into the hot space between Will's thighs, slickening him. Will hummed and widened his legs to allow Hannibal more room.

"I wanted to surprise you tonight," Hannibal whispered. He slid a finger inside, testing Will's response. Will's hips jerked, but the muscle gave more easily than he expected. _Not like in Paris_, he thought, with a mixture of intrigue and pride. This time, Will's body was already loosened by desire.

"You did—_uhn_—more than that."

Hannibal licked the pheromone-dense canvas of Will's skin. "I pulled you from the water, just as you did me, after the Dragon. Now I'm going to pull you _apart._" He slid another finger in, spreading Will wider, twisting and stretching the soft flesh.

"_Fuck,_" Will gasped. His arm shot back, wrapping around Hannibal's side to pull him nearly flush against his body. The bones of his sacrum ground painfully against Hannibal's cock. _"Hannibal, it's—please._" Hannibal could feel the fluttery vibration of Will's words through his chest. "I want you. _All of you,_" he said. "_Now._"
Hannibal sucked in a breath. *Bossy,* he thought. *With a bad mouth.* Will's boldness was becoming increasingly delicious—and dangerously addictive. He slid his fingers out, and slicked himself with the rest of the lube in his palm.

"If all of me is what you want," he said in a husked whisper, grazing his teeth against the curve of Will's jaw, "then you shall have *everything.*"

Hannibal wrapped a hand under Will's thigh. The head of his cock grazed Will's entrance, slippery and hard. He felt nails digging into his skin, commanding him—begging him. *Fuck. Please. NOW.*

Waves of sensation battered him between heartbeats as he slowly pressed inside. Will's breath leaked out in staggered—almost frenzied—gasp.

"Will…?" Hannibal murmured against his skin.

Will's fingers shook as they clenched at his hip. "Don—don't stop. *Don't* stop."

Hannibal closed his eyes as thrills of raw, racing pleasure flooded his body, pooling where he and Will were joined. He bit a kiss onto the side of Will's neck. Tension built and ebbed and then built again; a relay of sensations that made him want to *howl.* Instead, he forced himself to slow—to concentrate, to move with the give of Will's body. To *focus,* harder than he had in a long while—maybe harder than he ever had.

A swollen feeling rose in his throat, and Hannibal suddenly realized that he was holding his breath. He exhaled against the back of Will's neck, writing silent words into his skin. *I love you. Stay with me. No analogies. Just us.* Then he rolled his hips forward, sinking in with a deep thrust.

"Ohh—*fuck.*"

"Mmm," Hannibal agreed. He was more than willing to excuse Will's limited vocabulary. A curse was hovering on the tip of his tongue, too. He felt as though his entire *body* was on fire.

He licked and sucked at Will's skin as open-mouthed arousal overtook him. In his chest he could feel Will's heartbeat dashing against his ribs, the vertebrae of his spine, like a trapped bird.

He heaved his hips, rocking out and back in again. A shallow cry escaped Will's lips—familiar in its near-desperation. It was not unlike the sound he'd made as Hannibal had pulled Chiyoh's bullet from his shoulder in Florence.

Hannibal pushed a hand into Will's hair, crooking his fingers against his skull. The skin there was tight and pliable. Hard bone vibrated underneath his fingertips. In Doctor Sogliato's apartment, Hannibal had sorely wanted to enjoy the feel of Will's pain-flushed skin under his hands as he'd worked the bullet through muscle and tissue, but the buzzsaw was already whirring in the back of his mind.

*I'm sure my thoughts wouldn't have been so tasty,* Will had said at dinner, as he'd hand-fed the slice of Barney's brain to him. In a different world, the offal would have been Will's own and Hannibal would have been dining solo, with Jack glowering at him from the other end of the table.

It was better this way, he decided. So much better. *Your thoughts are much tastier inside your skull, my love,* he thought, pressing his lips to Will's curls. *And so many things have changed between us.*

"We've pulled each other from waves and fire," Hannibal said, the words grinding in his throat. He shifted a knee between Will's thighs, spreading them wider, and drove into him again. A strangled noise arose at the snap of his hips. "We give ourselves back to them now. Just as we give ourselves
to each other."

Will used his free arm to drag Hannibal back against him, pulling him deeper with the movement. "We're burning," he gasped. Hannibal pushed up high inside him, jarring his next words. "DeSTROY—destroying. And creating." Will swallowed, with a wheeze. "Over and over again."

And I am still drowning in you, Hannibal thought. He rolled his hips, his vision blurring at the deep, dizzying wave of pleasure that spun through him. Will carried the motion, making a rhythmic swell with their bodies. Over and over again. Different dawns, different darknesses. Different lives. I would burn beside you—drown within you—in every one, my philētatos.

Hannibal curled his arm around the other man's chest, clutching at his unscarred shoulder. Will's heart was racing. It mirrored his own. I would die with you—freely.

He was struck by the sudden and staggering knowledge that it was not poetry; it was true. The thought, unlike so many of his others, was not an artistically arranged composition. There was nothing praiseworthy about it. It was stark and hard and shaped by bulging, irregular angles. He would not have been able to hang it on a wall. But he could wrap it around himself and wear it like a shield. Wounded or not, the heart would always storm back to what it truly desired. "Will, I—"

The other man's head turned at the broken syllable. Hannibal pulled Will tight—so tight, he could feel the curve of his ribcage cutting into his forearm, and the rapid drumming of Will's heart in his hand. "I missed you so much. More than I could—" Hannibal's throat burned as he swallowed the last word whole. He buried his face in Will's shoulder, in the scent of Will's sweat-slick skin. He shut his eyes. He felt heat gathering behind them—not unexpected, this time.

Hannibal uncoiled his arm from Will's shoulder and reached down to take Will's cock in his hand. Silky beads of wetness smeared his fingertips. Will groaned, simultaneously arching against him and twisting halfway around. "Hannibal—"

Hannibal dragged his hand up the stiff flesh. Will's body clenched around him at the touch. His skin burned like a fever against his forehead. He could feel pressure building in his groin, but he didn't want it to end. Not yet. It was too feral, too consuming—too good. Stay with me, he pleaded silently. Stay. "Hannibal." Will's voice near his ear, insistent this time. Hannibal's hand stilled, and then his hips. He opened his eyes. His cock slid out stiffly as Will wriggled around to face him. The loss of contact left him aching.

Will reached out to smooth the damp hair from Hannibal's forehead. His face was flushed, his lips moist and bitten. Features softened by lust and exertion—and something else. Something dangerously fragile. Something new. "I'm close already," Will said, his voice trembling. "And I need to kiss you."
Hannibal looked back at Will, instantly reading the unspoken request in his words. He tried to swallow, but found his throat was too dry. In the other man's eyes, a dark well of desire bloomed, like a bloodstain on pale cloth.

*Sicilian blue. Egyptian lapis. Eyes the color of the Mediterranean on the sun-drenched shores of Palermo—of the sparkling waters of the Nile. Seas and rivers combining and dividing us; rushing through me from the cool depths of your gaze. Cleanse me—drown me—carry me away with you. O Parcae, O Moirai, hear my prayer.*

Hannibal's thoughts were silenced by the warm press of Will's lips. They tasted sweet, like honey.

Will felt as though his entire body were vibrating. *I need to kiss you,* he'd told Hannibal. He needed more than that. He needed to *feel* Hannibal again, to fill the aching void left by their separation and the fragmented need he could hear in the other man's voice.

It wasn't like the time in the kitchen of the cliff house. Not like in Paris, either—or even at the cabin. Hannibal had been composed even then; bent on serving pleasure to Will's body while keeping his own heart at an arm's length. Each time, Will had felt something inside himself break at Hannibal's touch.

Tonight, though, it was as if all their wounds were being cauterized by the burn of their bodies. He could sense the tightest-held parts of Hannibal loosening. Slipping. Hannibal was pulling *himself* apart—or maybe allowing Will to dismantle him. *You are not the man who left me bleeding. You are no longer the man who fell with me into the Atlantic. You are not the man I sent away—and yet you hold inside you all of the men you've always been. We're fusing; forging anew. You and I are becoming.*

He pressed his lips to Hannibal's own. Spicy-smooth Bordeau; the savory traces of cooked flesh, and underneath, a vague sweetness he couldn't place. Hannibal's taste was rich and addictive and darkly complex—exactly like the man himself. Will wanted *more* of it.

It was, he thought, very possibly something he'd wanted all along.

Will rolled onto his knees, his cock stinging from Hannibal's brief touch. His ass felt not-unpleasantly raw. He paid little attention to either sensation, concentrating instead on the blinding waves of need that Hannibal's mouth and tongue and hands had stirred in him. Hannibal shifted onto his back. His thighs widened as Will eased himself between them.

Will fished blindly until his hand closed over the bottle of lubricant caught in the folds of the bedspread. He managed to squeeze a decent amount into his palm, one-handed. He slicked himself, breaking from Hannibal's mouth long enough to glimpse the dark-eyed desire on the other man's face and the swollen shine of his parted lips. His hand trembled as it moved between Hannibal's thighs.

Hannibal's spine curved at the touch, pulling a hiss from his throat.

"Are you going to make me *yours* now, Will?" he murmured. "Or did you want to surprise me?"

Will smirked at the familiar words. One question whispered in a dream, another in betrayal. He knew it was Hannibal's way of keeping his teeth in, metaphorically speaking. The sting of their history would always be close; they had never pretended any differently. Somehow, remembering no longer pained him. The thought came again: *Funny how radiant our scars can make us appear.*

*Do you feel radiant, Will?*
Inside Will's mind, light burst and scattered, and reassembled—first as a rolling wave, and then swirling into a thousand dancing flames.

Yes.

He dragged Hannibal up by the hips, his thumbs digging into the flesh over the bones.

Did you believe you could change me the way I've changed you? Are you going to make me yours, or did you want to surprise me?

"I already did," he said simply.

Will spread his knees, forcing Hannibal's thighs open wider. He guided the tip of his cock against the slippery knot of muscle and pressed in, heavy and slow, dragging out the luxurious tightness of Hannibal's flesh.

Hannibal's thighs shook, draped over the tops of Will's own. "Uhn."

"See what I do to you, what you do to me. You want to burn? This is fire."

He didn't realize he'd spoken the words aloud until Hannibal tipped his head back to look at him, his pupils unfocused through slitted eyelids. His face was all sharp angles and cheekbones. Will wanted to smooth them with his hands. To cut himself on them.

"I knew you would be the one to destroy me." Hannibal's voice was raw, his words naked as a blade. "I didn't imagine you would do it in so many ways."

Inside Will's chest, something sore and dirty and indescribably beautiful ripped through him. His body couldn't contain it; neither could his heart. It rushed out of him, cascading over both of them like a wave.

"Creation begins with destruction," he growled. "This is both."

He shoved an arm underneath Hannibal's leg and clenched the other man's bicep hard enough to leave bruises. With a shaky breath, he buried himself all the way inside Hannibal's body. When his hipbones hit the swell of Hannibal's ass, they both groaned.

Will pulled out slow, ignoring the quaking in his own thighs. Cotton slipped against his knees as he leaned over to pull a searing kiss from Hannibal's mouth, and then thrust back in, harder. A noise of exclamation shattered his ears. More. Give me more. Give me all of you.

Will's throat was dry, his pulse hammering in the side of his neck. In this position, Hannibal could do little else but take what Will gave him. There was something appealing about it—about the way that Hannibal seemed to crave exactly that.

He tweaked the angle of his hips as he thrust back inside. "You're mine," he rasped. "Mine."

A dizzying tremor surged through Hannibal's body and up into Will's own. He slung Hannibal's other leg over his good shoulder, ramming in hard.


"Mine. You belong to me. You did—you do. You always will." He thrust in deep, and Hannibal's
cry shook something hard and primal in him as his cock hit the exact spot he was seeking. Hannibal's hands fist ed in the duvet, the knuckles tightening to white.

"Only you." A grating whisper slipped from Hannibal's lips. There was a broken, almost savage sound in it. "The only one who could—who could ever do this to me. Make me come."

Will's last barrier broke as he barreled down on the backs of Hannibal's thighs, crushing his mouth against Hannibal's swollen lips and driving in with merciless precision. Sounds Will had never heard Hannibal make—nor ever thought he'd hear—battered his ears like a hard rain; and Will's heart split open and soared as raw emotion raged between them. He could feel Hannibal's own heart roaring against his breast—an untamed inferno that consumed and protected them. The only one who could've saved me. Who did save me. I wanted to fall, to disappear. But you didn't let go... You'll never let go of me.

He twisted as he drove in, and Hannibal's mouth dropped open in a wordless cry, his spine arcing with a jerk. His head fell back, baring his throat. Will imagined sinking his teeth into the wide, white expanse of it, unleashing a torrent of red.

"God—Hannibal—" Will's breath caught as he plunged in once more—and then wave after wave of excruciating pleasure ripped through his body. Blood... water... fire... us.

Hannibal's teeth dragged down his neck, slick and insistent. His tongue flicked over Will's thudding pulse with a snarl of satisfaction.

When he opened his eyes, Hannibal's heated, honeyed stare met his own. His face was shining; transfixed in awe. It was the same look as he'd had on the cliff. This is all I ever wanted... For both of us.

Will pressed his forehead to Hannibal's own, exhaling as the tension in their limbs ebbed. His thigh muscles were trembling. Hands came up to circle his back, warm. Will barely felt Hannibal's fingertips graze his skin or the soft kiss he pressed to his temple; couldn't clearly discern the words murmured against his jaw. His mind was churning with possibility and dread; with a swell of emotion he vaguely understood, but didn't know how to name.

"How do you feel?" Hannibal's fingertips threaded through his sweaty curls.

He closed his eyes and, suddenly, the words came. "Whole," he said. "Home."

"Is that how you wish to feel?"

Will opened his eyes and looked at Hannibal.

Where does the difference between the past and the future come from? The difference between dreams and reality?

Mine? Before us, and after us. Our past becomes a thousand savage futures that create and destroy reality—over and over again.

"Yes," he answered.

Hannibal rolled Will against him, cradling him in a loose embrace. The heady scent of their sex surrounded them as he enveloped Will in a kiss that pierced through his flesh, his bones; into the naked part of his love-scorched heart that Hannibal alone had rekindled.

Nothing can drown us now, Will thought, as drowsiness tugged at his eyelids and limbs. We've set
our sea ablaze.

He was partially aware of Hannibal's lips at his ear, murmuring low. The words made little sense. The calming cadence of his voice pulled and lulled, like waves. Will allowed his eyes to slip closed.

*We drift in euneirophrenia, my philetaos. The mind rejoices after a pleasant dream. Phlegethon's fiery arms surround us; protect us. But the Gates of Janus are opening; we have to forgive each other again. Il momento di trovare la morte daccapo...*

Waves, black as ink, slipped underneath him as he skimmed above the surface of the sea. Flames lit the sky in bursts of crimson and gold. They seemed to shoot out from everywhere: his fingertips, the clouds, the peaks in the waves below. Heat and wind bore him aloft—as did the bright pulse of the body beside him, as ethereal and boundless as his own. He wanted to turn and look, but knew, somehow, that he couldn't. *Not yet.*

*Not yet. Follow the sound of my voice, Will. Hades surrounds us still.*

Will's eyes jerked open at a soft pressure on his temple. Hannibal pulled back, his lips curved in a freshly imparted kiss. His hand was a firm, reassuring weight on Will's abdomen.

He blinked. "What happened?"

The corners of Hannibal's eyes crinkled. "You slipped into slumber." He paused. "Twilight is not far off. I thought it best to let you doze for a little while."

"Oh." Will rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. He yawned. "Why'd you wake me up?"

Hannibal's expression faltered for a fraction of a second. Then his smile returned. "A rinse would do both of us some good, don't you think? Then, perhaps, sleep."

Will pushed himself up. "Dogs'll need to go out again, too."

"Yes," Hannibal agreed. "But first—shower."

Hannibal half-scooped, half-prodded him out of bed and down the hall toward the bathroom. The dogs looked up from their beds in the living room, blinking sleepily as they passed. Winston lifted his head. His curious brown eyes glanced from Will to Hannibal, and then back to Will.

"Hey Winston," Will said quietly. "Tell everyone to hold tight, okay?" Winston snuffed and lowered his head, keeping his eyes fixed on them. Will realized, with dry amusement, that the dogs were getting an eyeful. They likely hadn't seen him and Hannibal in such close proximity—at least, not without clothing.

A spark of heat twitched through him at the thought. *What kind of sight do we make together?* he wondered, as Hannibal switched on the hall light and closed the bathroom door halfway, avoiding the need for the harsh fluorescents. *Do we fold like human origami? Are we wild and loose, like rutting animals? Or are we a fusion of light and flesh and color? Two bodies moving in tandem—breath upon breath, skin against skin, meat into music...*

Will leaned against the sink, wincing as his ass hit the cold porcelain. The light from the cracked-open door fell in a golden stripe along his feet. It didn't really matter what they looked like from the outside, he supposed. What mattered was what they felt from the *inside*. Unlike Hannibal, he didn't spare a thought for what the eye of God saw.

Hannibal twisted the taps in the shower, extending a hand to measure the water temperature. When it
had grown warm enough, Hannibal ushered the two of them inside and slid the glass door shut. The water ran in hot rivulets down Will's back and shoulders and onto Hannibal's chest, cleansing the sweat and salt from their skin.

Will tipped his head back to rinse his hair. Hannibal's hands came up to settle on his waist, fingers whispering across the taut, slippery flesh of his stomach. The touch sent another spike of heat churning through Will's body.

"Mmm," he sighed, stretching his neck. "Water feels good. But I'm going to miss your smell on me."

Hannibal tilted his head, regarding him with dark eyes in the half-light. "If you ask me to share your bed tonight, then you won't have to wait long." He paused, then added, low, "We can share everything, Will."

Will frowned. "Why would you think I wouldn't ask?"

Hannibal traced his hand over the curve of Will's hip, his eyes shifting away, and Will suddenly understood. He expects me to tell him to leave again. To turn him away.

He pulled Hannibal to him gently. Will's fingers brushed against the scarred brand on his lower back, stirring a spark of anger within his own breast—a spark of protectiveness.

He carried me home, Will realized suddenly. After Muskrat Farm. Through the fields—through the snow, with burning flesh and aching bones. And then I pushed him away. Months had muddied to years after Hannibal's surrender, but the pull of their connection had never disappeared. What wouldn't you do to keep me safe—to keep me yours? It's my turn now. You're mine.

The other man's body was at once hard and soft against Will's own, molding to his jigsaw of flesh and bone with more ease than anyone else's ever had. Will felt the head of Hannibal's rekindled erection brush against the inside of his thigh. He shivered, despite the warmth of the water.

"Stay with me."

Hannibal looked up. His shadowed eyes seemed to drink in Will's face and voice, gauging his sincerity. Hope and fear wrestled within his gaze—and for once, Will saw, Hannibal wasn't trying to hide it.

Droplets streamed down the broad mast of Hannibal's shoulders, glinting off his still-flushed skin. His eyes dropped to Will's lips. Will felt his face growing warm. A tremor ran through him as he recalled Hannibal's legs clutched around his shoulders; his hips lifting as Will drove into him again and again, pushing him to climax without a single stroke from his hand.

Will's erection stirred, brushing against Hannibal's own. Hannibal's hand tightened around his side.

"I had hoped you would ask," he said, his voice grating underneath the rush of the water. Hannibal slid his palm over the curve of Will's ass, squeezing gently, before sliding his fingers into the space between.

Will's pulse sped up as Hannibal rubbed small, tight circles over his entrance. "Tonight of all nights, it's important that we stay close." Words more breath than sound. Another shiver shook Will's body and he shifted, widening his thighs and allowing Hannibal to curve two fingers inside. It barely stung.


Will's erection jumped. Hannibal's eyes flashed with predatory innuendo as he crooked a third finger inside. Will swallowed. It felt as though the temperature inside the shower had suddenly increased by several degrees.

"We could revisit your suggestion from earlier this evening." The corner of Hannibal's lip twitched. He leaned in, running his tongue along the shell of Will's ear. "Or would you prefer the sponge?"

Will gave a weak chuckle. He was fully hard again, every nerve inside him sparkling at Hannibal's touch; his body and mind tensing at the slightest suggestion. He knew it was the same way for Hannibal. *I'm inside you now, and you're inside me. See what we do to each other. This is fire.*

"I'm—I'm not sure if my legs will hold me," Will said truthfully. His thigh muscles were still smarting from earlier. On top of that, what Hannibal was doing with his fingers was making his knees extremely weak.

"Then *I* will."

Before Will could reply, Hannibal was lifting him against the wet tile, his forearms tightening around his thighs in a vertical reversal of their earlier position. For a split-second, Will worried about the precariousness of his own weight—and then he remembered Hannibal's words from the hallway. *I've carried you like this before, over a far greater distance.*

Fierce stings of lust and longing rose in him as Hannibal's fingers dug into the flesh of his ass, shifting him upward. The other man's mouth was a jagged scar in the half-darkness; his eyes smoldering like two coals. Will reached around, grasping Hannibal's cock in his hand.

"You're insatiable," he said, as he pressed his mouth to Hannibal's. Will tightened his legs around the other man's sides and guided him inside, licking hungrily at the dark curve of his lips.

"When it comes to you," Hannibal murmured. Will moaned as Hannibal lowered him onto his body. Wet tile slid against his shoulder blades—and then the sensation disappeared, replaced by the hot pulse of Hannibal thrusting inside him and the mingled aromas of steam and skin and heat.

When they finally came, Will's hand scrabbling at the wall and Hannibal's teeth fixed firmly around one of his nipples, it was like one tidal wave overtaking another. The water had just begun to turn lukewarm.

"Damn," Will panted. He braced his elbows against the tile as Hannibal eased out, and then lowered him to stand.

"Not worth it?" Hannibal asked wryly.

"I didn't mean the water temperature."

Hannibal smirked, and gave his ass a swat before reaching for the soap. "Give me two minutes under the spray, and the remaining warmth is yours. I will take the dogs out."

Will bit his lip, debating whether or not to darken the mood. He watched Hannibal duck under the water. Creamy waves of silver-gray flattened against his skull.

"Shouldn't we, um, go together?" he asked. *Because we don't know what's—or who's—out there,* he thought silently.
Hannibal shook the droplets from his hair. He wiped the water from his eyes. His mouth thinned as he regarded Will, his face still flushed a dark pink.

"I would prefer that you stayed here. I need to ensure that we're alone." Hannibal's tone suggested the plan was non-negotiable. He turned and began working the soap into a quick lather.

Will reached up, grazing his thumb across the ridge of scar tissue at Hannibal's temple. Hannibal turned back. His eyes met Will's, solemn and questioning.

"Don't leash Simon or Delilah," he said. "They're the strongest. And keep Winston out front. He's the first one to pick up on anything. If we're not alone, he'll know."

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When Hannibal returned to the house half an hour later, Will was standing at the open picture window in the front room, staring out into the backyard. A bath towel was slung low on his hips. His fingers were curled tightly around a tumbler.

He turned as Hannibal closed the front door. The larger dogs bounded into the house, not waiting for their smaller brothers and sisters to be unleashed.

Will's shoulders loosened at the sight. Hannibal could tell by the crease in his brow that he'd been anxious the entire time they'd been gone. *Probably what sent him to the scotch,* he thought. The drinking was something Hannibal would address with Will at some point, but not this morning. More essential matters required their attention.

"Anything out of the ordinary?" Will asked, as Hannibal knelt down to unclip the other dogs from their leashes. Will's tone was strained, Hannibal noted, despite their safe return.

Hannibal himself had experienced a slight twinge of anticipation upon leaving the house, though not for his own safety. This time, if he was taken, he had already decided to slaughter his way out or die trying. But if the Calabrians had followed him to Louisiana, he knew they would be looking for both of them. He'd vowed to himself not to let Will fall into the bloodstained hands of their hunters—or into the backbiting embrace of the FBI, if he could help it. He could abide the thought of his own death, if it meant Will was safe and free—but not Will's. Not anymore. *Strange how years and circumstance can change us.*

He patted Zoe on the side and straightened up, wondering at what point his heart had decided that it would seize or throw away anything and *everything* for Will. *Everything except my love for you, my φιλίτατος. Even my life.*

"Nothing to spark immediate concern," Hannibal replied, hanging the leashes on the hook by the door. He went over to join Will at the window. "The dogs were undisturbed. The night is still. The city's children are nestled snug their beds, dreaming of new smartphones and iPads."

"No sugarplums," Will commented dryly. He took a swig of his scotch. Licked his lips and turned to the window. "It feels like the night's holding its breath. *Waiting* for something."

Hannibal followed Will's gaze. The curtains were drawn halfway across the screen, making a pretty frame for the moonlight spilling onto the crabgrass-splotted lot behind the house. In a few hours, the moon would surrender her sky to the dawn. The faint scent of Spanish moss drifted in through
the mesh, mingling with the cool night air.

Hannibal was silent for several moments. He thought about the cliff house back in Maryland, about
the other future they'd embarked upon there and how it had ended—far across the sea, in front of a
window roughly the same size as this one.

"They will come for us," he said. "It may not be tonight. But it will be soon."

Will closed his eyes. "I know."

"We could leave," Hannibal said quietly. "Tonight. Go somewhere that neither Jack's nor Allegra
Pazzi's bloodhounds will find us. I would—" He stopped. Swallowed. Steadied himself. "I would do
anything to keep you safe, and by my side." The words came out rougher than expected.

Will sighed. "Nowhere is safe for us. Nowhere is safe from us." His eyes slid open. "What I told you
in Virginia hasn't changed. I don't want a life on the run."

"Will." Hannibal moved closer, pulling Will back against his chest. He slipped his arm around the
other man's stomach and took the tumbler from his hand. He set it on the bookshelf by the window.
Will leaned against him, tightening his palm over Hannibal's knuckles. He exhaled low. The sound
was like a song on the night air. Hannibal grazed his fingers over the twisted scar on Will's abdomen,
wondering how much more they had left to change in each other.

"Do you still wish to cross the River Styx?" he murmured against the shell of his ear. Damp, silken
curls tickled Hannibal's lips. Underneath the scents of soap and water, he could smell the heat they'd
created. It pulsed through Will's veins, like the call of a distant drum. "Or would you rather see what
dreams may come? Shall I summon the ferryman to us, Will, or Morpheus?"

Will turned halfway, his eyes coming to rest on Hannibal's face. Inside them, Hannibal saw a light
like fire—like the sun. Radiant.

"Every life where we can do this—be this—is a dream," Will said softly. A bittersweet ache flared in
Hannibal's chest at the words—echoes from their shared dream, weeks before they had come
together at Will's father's cabin. "I'll leave that decision up to you this time." Will's tone was firm.
Unafraid.

Hannibal gazed back at Will. Not for the first time, he saw him as he had appeared in their shared
memory palace: wreathed in light, victorious. My philtatos, he thought, you are a phoenix, sprung
from the ashes of a blazing sea. But our bloody tide is turning. Wolves are on their way, and this
time the pack far outweighs us. Still, Will was refusing to run. Will wanted him to choose.

Hannibal slipped his arm from Will's waist and moved to the wall behind the TV where the old
Deutsche clock hung. Its pendulum swung back and forth in a ceaseless arc. He closed his eyes and
reached up. He imagined suspending the lever with the brush of a finger—then envisioned himself
smashing it, ripping the pendulum from its mount and tearing the tiny cuckoo from its perch. Say the
word, and I will suspend or destroy it as you wish. I will stop the motion of the earth, the slipping of
time. I will create an event horizon for us, Will.

He tilted the clock away from the wall and reached behind to the hollow space in the back. He
removed the two vials he'd hidden there days earlier, when he'd first arrived in New Orleans.

Dawn had not yet broken that morning. Will had still been asleep, the door to his bedroom halfway
closed. The dogs had been surprisingly calm at Hannibal's quiet intrusion. Winston had bestowed
welcoming licks as the others sniffed at his shoes.
After storing the vials and replacing the clock, Hannibal had stood in the doorway and watched Will sleep, until the light began to creep across the floorboards. His face had been so fragile. So soft. It was all Hannibal could do not to cross the room and brush his cheek.

_To die, to sleep—to sleep, perchance to dream_, Hannibal mused, holding the vials up to the moonlight. One was full of clear liquid, innocent in its transparency. The other was darker in color and slightly clouded, like a miniature rainstorm trapped in a bottle.

Will watched silently, his expression inscrutable. The Shakespearean verse slid back into the library of Hannibal's memory palace with a ruffle of velvety pages. Should he make a place for his _philtatos_ in Hadrian's Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome? A mausoleum seemed a cold place for living ashes. If they were to go into the sea again, would it catch fire, or would it engulf them? Or perhaps it would pitch with boiling blood, in the manner of Dante's Phlegethon.

"Your elixir of immortality?" Will asked, a touch of humor in the sound. "Or the antithesis of it?"

The question pulled Hannibal from his thoughts. He met Will's eyes, his mouth curving in a half-smile. "Philosophers and alchemists believed that each served the purposes of the other." The vials clinked in his palm. "You would give me your life to hold or silence as I wished—just as I gave you mine."

"Yes." Will's answer was immediate. "It's hardly the most important thing I've entrusted to you. Or you to me."

Hannibal looked to the window. Outside, there was nothing but milky darkness and stars. But inside the shimmering well of their shared consciousness, a reflection was brightening. _Merging_. Their minds, more so than ever before, had moved together with alarming ease. Their bodies had, too, after surrendering to mutual pleasure. Hannibal found himself harshly craving the continuation of both.

_Of course Will would say yes_, he thought to himself. _Choice is merely the confluence of fortune and chance_. They were burning with the same intensity now. It had only been a question of _time_.

Hannibal set the clear bottle on the coffee table, and unscrewed the cap from the second. The liquid inside sloshed and blurred—a hazy orchestration of possibility.

"Do you know the _Dionysiaca_, Will?" he asked, taking down the glass of scotch from the bookshelf. It was one-quarter full—enough for both of them.

"No. It sounds Greek."

"It is. The _Dionysiaca_ is an epic poem by the Greek poet Nonnus of Hellenic Egypt, told in forty-eight books."

"I suppose you've read all of them." Will watched, arms crossed loose over his chest, as Hannibal tipped the contents of the vial into the tumbler.

"Yes. Several times. During the course of the narrative, Dionysus' lover, a beautiful satyr by the name of Ampelos, is gored by a wild bull. He had been riding it while shouting mockeries at the moon. 'Give me your best, Mene, horned driver of cattle!' Ampelos cried. 'Now I am both beast and man—I have horns and I ride a bull!'"

Hannibal paused. Will's eyes were sharp as arrows. "Distraught by his lover's death," he continued, "Dionysus transformed Ampelos' body into a grapevine. He created the first wine from his blood."

He swished the mixture inside the glass, noting the rapid clouding of the liquor. He held out the tumbler to Will. "But this is not wine, and the moon's waning light no longer tempts you, my
Will took the glass, his fingertips brushing against Hannibal's own as he did so. The touch seared like a flame.

Will tilted the glass, causing the amber liquid inside to shimmer as he stared into it. "So, according to the ancient Greeks, wine is both the product of sorrow and the cure for it. How ironic."

He lifted the glass to his lips and took a long sip, then swallowed. His nostrils flared at the after-burn as he handed the glass back to Hannibal.

Hannibal held it up, eyeing the level. Will had left exactly half—no more, no less. Good boy, he thought to himself.

He tipped the glass to his own mouth and took the rest in a single swallow. He closed his eyes, exhaling as the scotch slid down his throat. Laphroaig again, he noted. Some things don't change... Some things do.

Hannibal set the empty tumbler on the coffee table next to the untouched vial, and then loosed the curtains over the picture window. They fell across the screen with a gauzy flutter. He took Will's hand in his own, rubbing his thumb along the knuckles, memorizing the way the living flesh softened and stretched and then slid back into place.

"The sky will soon fill with light," he said. "Sleep's gentle darkness is waiting for us."

Will nodded. "Let's go to bed. Whatever the morning brings can wait."

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Inside the bedroom, Will stripped off his towel as Hannibal shrugged out of his pullover and trousers. The dogs, sleepy from their pre-dawn outing, had remained behind in the living room.

The sateen enveloped them with soft, cool welcome as they slid between the sheets. The indigo shade had reminded Hannibal of the sea at night—of Will's dark-eyed gaze atop the cliff, trembling with victory and awe as he'd struggled to his feet. But Will had been fearful then, too; Hannibal had felt it in the crush of his embrace. Did you already know what you would do, my phíltatos? Had you already decided at the window in Paris? I would have come with you, even if you had told me.

Hannibal switched off the bedside lamp, casting the room into darkness. Not even the full moon's fading glow penetrated the heavy curtains over the windows. Will had likely used them to block out the sun on his bad days; perhaps even yesterday. Days of solitude and discontent are behind us now, Hannibal thought, as Will settled in next to him. The sun welcomes you in all your radiance, my beloved.

A deep weariness tugged at Hannibal's limbs for the first time since his escape from the BSHCI. He brushed his fingers through Will's still-damp hair, stopping to run his thumb along the scar on his cheek. The surgeon who'd stitched it had done an admirable job; in a few years' time, the line would be barely visible.

Underneath the slow thud of their heartbeats, Hannibal could feel his nerves tingling with imminent chemical potency; a far-off signal from the other side of sleep. His blood, and Will's, would soon be
singing with it.

"What did Dionysus do after he changed Ampelos' blood into wine?" Will asked. His voice was a glowing spark in the darkness. *Like the first note of a symphony after the hush of the crowd.* The thought stirred a bittersweet ache in Hannibal's chest.

"I believe he began drinking heavily."

Will snorted. Hannibal felt his lips curve against his shoulder. "Okay. I'm going to choose to *not* take that personally."

"Even gods mourn the loss of love," Hannibal said. "Nonnus described it poignantly." He allowed his eyelids to slip closed. The words assembled behind them, rising from the labyrinthine corners of his memory palace. "Dionysus squeezed the juice from the grapes, reddening his white hands in his grief. *'Can I ever mix the apple fruit in the bowl?'* he proclaimed. *'Can I drop fig juice in the cup of nectar? Fig and apple have their grace as far as the teeth; but no other plant can rival your grapes—not the rose, not the tinted daffodil, not anemone, not lily, not iris is equal to the fruit of your vine. '" Hannibal paused. "The god was adrift without his companion. Reddening his hands became his cure for loss—just as it has been for both of us."

The press of Will's smile faded, but his hand remained solid on Hannibal's chest. "Creation from destruction," he said quietly. His breath tickled across Hannibal's skin. "And *destruction* from destruction... It's what you said in Lithuania, after you asked me to come to Paris. We were there. I remember."

"I was confident in your memory." Hannibal swallowed, emotion welling thick in his throat. "But I would have gone *with* you, Will. Both times. Even if you hadn't killed me."

"I know." Will stretched up, tilting Hannibal's head towards him with a fever-warm palm. His ribcage tightened against Hannibal's side. "I'm certain of it now. And I know that whatever was in the vial was for both of us."

Will's lips were a hot whisper against Hannibal's own as their mouths met. Despite the lightness of the kiss, it carried with it a sense of longing. A security in the knowledge that loss and love would always be restored—and *always* by the other.

Hannibal closed his eyes, cradling the back of Will's skull in his palm. He sucked at his mouth like a wound. Inside his mind's eye, a blaze of blue beckoned, dark and vivid. He thought of the Atlantic. Of Will's arms, and the way they'd encircled him. The way they held him now. Of the three years he'd spent before that moment, far away from Will and from the sea, patiently working his equations backwards and forwards in his mind. The silence of his prison cell had proven illuminating, after all. The errors that had eluded him in Wolf Trap had cleared, as the comforts of his life grew smaller. Hannibal knew Will had likely burned the notebook. It didn't matter. He no longer required its contents. *From burning sea to burning sun, cleanse me with your flame, my love. Our event horizon is near. Time will wait for us.*

When Will pulled away, the heat of his lips was replaced by the firm comfort of his body.

"I don't think I've ever felt this worn out before," he murmured, settling against Hannibal's shoulder with a sigh. "Not physically, anyway."

"And psychologically?" Hannibal asked wryly.

"Decidedly questionable."
Hannibal chuckled, pulling Will close. The other man's warmth against him—solid, fragile, real—was at once familiar and strange; the resonance of too many memories and dreams. Now I can be sure of my sleep, he thought. My blue has been returned to me.

"It's—mm. A culminating feeling," Will continued, his voice slurred with drowsiness. "But good."

Hannibal trailed his hand down Will's forearm. "Then let's settle our brains for a long winter's nap. We can wear each other out again tomorrow. And the night after that. And, perhaps, the night after that."

Will did not reply. Hannibal listened to the other man's breathing deepen as he slid into unconsciousness. And the life after that, he thought fiercely, as sleep and the chemical cocktail churning through his bloodstream tugged at his eyelids. Time will wait for us, my philtatos—I promise.

He pressed a soft kiss to Will's temple, and closed his eyes.

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Click.

Will's eyes shot open. Blackness greeted him. Either it's still dark, or it's night again. The thought raced through his mind as he blinked, ears straining to catch the sound he'd just heard.

Maybe you imagined it.

Maybe you didn't.

Hannibal's chest rose and fell beneath his cheek—slow, rhythmic. The realization that both he and Hannibal were, in fact, still breathing seemed a cursory detail. He knew he'd heard something. A sound just slight enough—just foreboding enough—to wake him.

What did you hear, Will?

Something's wrong.

A creak sounded from the hallway. Footsteps on hardwood. Quiet, but not covert. Just one set—someone alone. Someone who knows we're here. Someone who knows we can hear them.

Will lifted his head. Every inch of his skin prickled with sudden cold; every nerve in his body had fired to attention. A sickening sense of déjà vu swelled within him.

Beside him, Hannibal shifted. He slid his palm over the stiff arch of Will's shoulder blade, cupping the bone.

"What is it?" His voice was drowsy, muffled by the pillow.

"Somebody's here." Will's words sounded far-away to his own ears. His pulse sang in his throat, high and thready. No, he pleaded silently. Not again—not like this.

Hannibal moved his other hand to Will's chest, splaying his fingertips across his breastbone. Will could see only a dim outline of Hannibal's form in the dark. A sprig of panic awoke in him. Please
don’t say you’re not surprised.

Hannibal pressed against the rapid fluttering inside Will's chest. The touch was warm. Grounding.

"Will," he said. "Relax. It's all right."

"Do you know what's going on?" Will whispered harshly, trying and failing to keep the frenzy from his voice. He pushed himself up on his elbow. "Is this some kind of plan?"

"Will," Hannibal said again, stronger. "Listen to me. I don't know who is outside, if anyone. But you and I are here together. And nothing in heaven or hell, or the twilight between, will tear us away from each other again. I promise."

The calm cadence of his voice seemed to grab hold of the darkness and wrap it around the two of them, like a shield. Will sagged against Hannibal's hand. His mind felt at once frantic and sluggish, as though he'd just awakened from a too-long nap.

"I want you to think, now," Hannibal directed. "Did you hear the dogs?"

Will frowned. He hadn't heard a sound before the noise that had jerked him awake. "No. They didn't bark. But they should have." He paused. "Unless they knew who it was."

Outside the bedroom, the house had gone quiet. Will felt a curl of hesitation in the flex of Hannibal's fingertips against his skin.

"All right," he replied. There was an odd softness in the sound. "Then let's dress quickly, and go see who—or what—has disturbed our rest."

Will's brow furrowed, but he did as commanded, shoving down the blanket and scooting off the bed. Hannibal switched on the lamp as he stood. The low light cast shadows over the wrinkled outlines of their bodies on the sheets.

Will grabbed the pair of navy jogging pants from the chair and pulled them on, cinching them tight around his hips. A shiver skittered down his spine. Something about Hannibal's wording had unnerved him. Something to do with Paris—but what? He recalled the spray-painted bulldog on the brick building opposite their apartment. Like his pack, it had given no warning when Jack, Alana, and the French agents had crept inside just after daybreak. He and Hannibal had still been asleep—but Chiyoh had been waiting in the tower above, watching through the scope of her rifle. Ready to shoot the minute things turned ugly.

There was no one watching over them now.

Will turned to find Hannibal's hand extended toward him. For a split-second, Will saw him as he'd appeared on the cliff: his face and clothing saturated in blood, a slick trail of it still oozing from the hole in his stomach. It really does look black in the moonlight.

He blinked. Hannibal was waiting with a patient expression, his rust-colored pullover and lounge pants spotless. No blood on his hands, his mouth. Whole. Unshattered.

"Will you join me?"

Will swallowed. He reached out to lace Hannibal's fingers in his own, resisting the urge to mention that they didn't have a weapon handy, or even a plan. Not this time.

Hannibal seemed to read his thoughts. "If we require a defense, we'll make one." The phantom
weight of Chiyoh's pistol was replaced by the solid clutch of Hannibal's hand. "Our minds are
deadlier than bullets or knives, and twice as quick together."

Will nodded. Together, then.

The hallway was quiet as they crept on bare soles toward the front room. The distant jangling of tags
caught Will's ear. A lamp was on, he saw. The walls seemed to shimmer with low, golden light as he
and Hannibal rounded the corner to the foyer.

Across the front room, the curtains over the picture window had been flung wide open. The screen
that had covered the opening was inexplicably absent. A strange light filtered through the bare frame,
silhouetting the figure standing in front of it.

Will stopped in mid-step. Hannibal tightened his grip on his hand. The heavyset shoulders and broad,
tailored lines of the besuited figure were instantly recognizable.

"Hello, Jack." Hannibal's tone was neither surprised nor expectant.

Jack Crawford unclasped his hands and turned to face them. He eyed Hannibal, and then Will, with
a strange mixture of wariness and pity. He was wearing the same gray suit as in Will's long-faded
fluttered inside his ribcage, like moth wings.

"Did you get my note?" Hannibal asked, tilting his head. "Or did you simply drop by to wish us a
merry Christmas?"

"I hope you don't mind me letting myself in." Jack's deep baritone rolled straight toward Will. "I've
known you were here for some time." His eyes flickered briefly to Hannibal. "Both of you."

The sound pinned Will in place, like an insect on pegboard. Underneath it, he could hear other words
—fragments of sentences uttered in other times. Other lives.

*I can try to help you out of this... But you've got to lower that thing first.
You killed him. Don't you remember?
Nothing happens and nobody moves until you put down the gun.
You did the right thing, Will.*

"No." The syllable was a cracked whisper on Will's lips.

Jack nodded, seeming to take Will's answer as validation. A soft whine pulled Will's attention down.
Winston's ears perked as he yawned and wagged his tail. The rest of the dogs were clustered casually
around the floor. Even Buster was curled up, scratching absentely at one ear. Not one of them seemed
at all ruffled by Jack's presence. *There's something wrong about all of this. Very wrong.*

Will found his voice. "Why are you here, Jack." Around them, the walls seemed to breathe. "You're
alone. And you're not pointing a gun at us. Not exactly FBI protocol. Seems like you've put yourself
in a precarious position."

Jack smirked. "And you're not pointing a gun at me, Will. Not this time."

"I—" Will stopped. A chill trickled over him as Jack stepped into the halo of light cast by the lamp.
Between the unbuttoned lapels of his dress shirt, Will glimpsed a jagged pucker of scarred flesh at
the center of Jack's throat. In his mind, he could hear the sharp shattering of glass and the sound it
had made as it rained down over the floorboards. He could see, too, the bloom of purple-red blood
spurting between Jack's fingers as he clutched at his torn throat. *Like juice from a crushed fruit.*
A shudder seized him. "You—you can't be here," Will stuttered. "Not like—" he gestured weakly at Jack's throat, "—like this."

Hannibal stepped partway in front of Will, sliding a hand to his elbow. "Don't come any closer, Jack," he warned. "Not until Will understands."

Will jerked his arm from Hannibal's grasp. He stepped around him, fixing him in a dark stare. "Not until I understand what?"

"I'm here because you need me to be," Jack said, raising his voice and making them both look over. He glanced sideways at Hannibal, and then back at Will. "You called me here," he said, his voice softening.

Will's eyes narrowed as he glared back at Jack. "I didn't call you. Your agent came to see me—since you couldn't be bothered to come and ask yourself if I knew what Hannibal was up to." He turned to Hannibal. "I thought I knew. But now I'm not so sure."

Hannibal's eyes were bright with anticipation and something strangely close to worry, as he reached out. "Will—"

Will moved away. "No. You expect me to believe this isn't some kind of sick game? A masquerade of some fictional alternate timeline for the sake of—for the sake of fucking what?" He felt heat gathering behind his eyes. His hands curled to fists at his sides. "This isn't therapy, Hannibal. And believing something doesn't make it necessarily true."

"Please, Will," Hannibal said quietly. "If you love me."

The words stung, sharper than any blade Hannibal had put to his body. Will squared his jaw. Everything inside him wanted to scream. His throat was buzzing with it. Don't lie to me—not now, not ever again. Not like this. Not when I need you. Not when I love you.

"Then what?" he growled.

"Listen. Listen to me. Listen to Jack. As you observed, we are here without our armor. It is a precarious position for all of us." Hannibal looked to Jack. "And truth and belief must be earned—by both the receiver and the bearer."

Will exhaled. He allowed his hands to relax, but maintained the distance between himself and Hannibal. "One of you needs to start making sense, really quickly."

Jack tucked his hands into his pockets. "Belief comes with imagination, Will. We imagine the possibility that we all live on after death." He paused. "That belief is what's holding us together, in this moment, right now."

As if on cue, the Black Forest clock on the wall chimed five times. The pendulums lowered, one by one, as the tiny wooden cuckoo darted in and out of its door. Will counted four notes. One missing, he thought. One note stuck. But the last one doesn't count. The chambers are empty; the cuckoo's flown the coop. Zero bullets dodged. Wind back the clock—spin the cylinder again.

"If anything's holding the three of us together, it's the absurdity of our survival," Will spat. "We beat the odds, whether we wanted to or not. Believing or not believing in that doesn't make it any more or less true."
A breeze from the picture window surged through the room, raising gooseflesh along Will's bare arms and chest. The inrush of air carried with it the faint smell of salt. *Wait—that's not right.* Will glanced sideways at Hannibal.

"The same can be said for the vagaries of chance," Hannibal said softly, moving to Will's side. He gave no indication that he'd noticed the odd scent. His hand came to rest on Will's back—an abruptly welcome warmth. "Perhaps, too, the vulgarities of fortune. Which have you brought to offer us this morning, Jack?"

Jack flexed his hands inside his pockets. "I haven't come to give or take away anything you don't already have. I can't touch your freedom—or your fate."

Will stared hard at the man who had once been his friend. Choice, not fate, had placed them on the opposite sides of friendship—which made Jack's claim all the more perplexing. *You were supposed to put Hannibal in prison. That's what you recruited me to do—twice. You would never walk away without a fight. Where's your fight, Jack?*

"Our lives, then," Will said, low. "You would take *those* from us." He was vaguely aware of the words having been spoken to him before—in a different order, in a different time. He shivered. Hannibal's hand moved to tighten around his hip. His fingertips grazed the edge of his abdominal scar. This time, he knew, the touch was meant to comfort.

"That's another thing I can't do."

"Come on, Jack," Will pushed. "You wouldn't throw away the chance to squash two flies with one swatter."

"Will." Jack's eyes were dark and unblinking. "You never made it out of the Atlantic."

Will's throat tightened. Anger twisted inside his gut, spreading through his limbs and into his hands. Beside him, Hannibal was silent. *Too* silent. Will wanted to wrap his fingers around Jack's neck. Strangle the inane words from his tongue, and crush the round bulge of scar tissue between his thumbs. *Liar.*

"This is an awfully long joke, Jack," he scoffed. "Even for your imagination."

*Hannibal isn't saying anything,* came the frenzied murmur inside his head. *Hannibal isn't doing anything.*

Jack shook his head. "No, Will. It's not. You didn't come back from the window, either. Once you stepped off that ledge, that was it. You died. *Both* of you were dead. *I* was dead." He touched the pad of his thumb to his throat. "We didn't imagine that."

"You weren't there," Will snapped. "That was just a—a fabrication of you." He was aware of the childish curl in his own voice. The hint of desperation. *Say something!* he screamed silently to Hannibal.

Jack's eyebrow quirked as his gaze slid to Hannibal. "Are you surprised?"

Hannibal cleared his throat. "Not exactly. Though I had hoped for a more straightforward course."

"You'll have to recalibrate."

"Will and I are no strangers to circumnavigation."
Jack's lips parted, revealing the gap between his front teeth. Hannibal raised his chin. "Nor are we strangers to using our imaginations."

Will stepped back. He looked between the two men, hoping for a flash of ill-begotten humor to make itself known. A smile; a word of reassurance. *Nothing.*

"Okay," he said, squaring his jaw. "Listen. My house is *not* the anteroom of hell. And I'm not playing along with whatever this is. So get out. Both of you. Now."

Hannibal's face fell. In his eyes, Will caught a glimmer of disappointment. The sight made him want to scream.

"Will," Hannibal said gently. "It's *not* impossible. Nor is it optimal, I'm afraid. There will always be cracks in our teacup, no matter how many times we mend it. But we can slip between those cracks. Rearrange them. We are no longer held to its shape, or its shattering."

Will folded his arms. "I don't understand."

"The laws of science do not distinguish between the past and the future. Yet, there is a vast difference between the past and future, and ordinary life—what we consider conscious reality." Hannibal licked his lips. His stare was penetrating. *Imploring.* And, Will saw, deadly serious.

"Dreams and memories do not manifest in conscious reality," Hannibal continued. "Where, then, do they exist?"

Will bit his lip, contemplating the question. *In me. In you. In the spaces between one moment and the next. Time measured in light, in the distance between two bodies pulled by gravity. Forever conjoined, and forever circling.*

"Do you remember what you said before we went to dinner?" Hannibal urged.

Will shook his head. He did, but he didn't *want* to. His brain was on fire. He could feel it licking the insides of his skull, igniting the folded tissues of his cerebrum—flame to ashes, ashes to flame.

"You said, *entropy is what distinguishes the past from the future.* You were correct. Entropy is the force that gives a direction to time. But it can also *reverse* it. Or, in some cases—" Hannibal shot a determined look at Jack "—reshape it completely."

Another swell of wind swept through the room. Will breathed in. *Salt and brine and ion-dense air. The bluff is eroding. The smoke is clearing. I... think I'm starting to see.*

"Like a river that runs backward," Will said, slowly, "but still reaches the sea." He lifted his eyes. "A wheel of conclusion. One that never stops turning."

Hannibal nodded. His eyes shone with soft approval. "Yes."

"Would you like to see?" Jack raised his arm and stepped to the side, revealing the picture window in full view.

A sapphire shimmer caught Will's eye. He crossed to the window, barely conscious of his feet moving over the carpet. He felt Hannibal's presence beside him as he stopped at the low sill and stared out. The mud and crabgrass were gone; the houses across the alley were no longer blocking his view. Instead, a vast black sky unfurled before them, dusted with chains of stars. Where deep space met the blue line of the horizon, the ground was moving. *Roiling.*
"The view from the window's changed," Will said. The statement seemed at once ludicrous and perfectly acceptable. He looked over at Jack. "Is that right? Was it supposed to change?"

Jack's face softened, the lines along his brow fading. "It can," he answered, a bittersweetness in the sound. "But only if you're in the same place together."

Hannibal's voice was a sudden murmur in Will's ear. "I didn't stop working on the problem I started in my notebook, Will. Three years without the distractions of ordinary life gave me the time and space to think. To create a solution from the dissolution of our connection. Even then, I knew I could never entirely predict what would happen. Though, I imagined our odds would be higher if we—"

He stopped. Will could hear the other man's thoughts circling inside his mind, as if they were his own. He could feel the ache in his breast, the tremor of the heart that Hannibal had always hidden so well. We are conjoined, you and I; in memory and in dream. In past and future. In life and death.

"If we forgave each other again," Will finished, reaching out for Hannibal's hand and grasping it in his own. "If we found each other again. Neither of us deserved forgiveness. But it's the one thing we gave to each other that no one else could."

Hannibal's eyes searched his face. They were impossibly dark, glinting with naked hope. "Forgiveness and love are the same for us," he said.

Will squeezed his hand. "Yes."

"I borrowed your imagination once, and I broke it." The sound of Jack's voice tugged at their attention. "I didn't understand how you were able to piece it back together again." He looked from Will to Hannibal, his expression heavy with foregone resignation. "Now I do."

On the tail of the words, Winston lifted his head and growled. Six pairs of ears instantly perked. A low, scuffling sound came from outside the house, whispering from both sides of the walls. The noise was followed by the muted squeal of a gate and the scrape of soles on concrete. Simon and Buster jumped to their feet, tails stiffening.

Will's eyes widened as he looked at Hannibal. Police or FBI? he asked silently.

Or the Calabrians, Hannibal's narrowed eyes seemed to suggest.

It doesn't matter, Will thought to himself. A cold feeling twisted in his gut as he glanced back at Jack. They're coming for us.

"It appears the heathens are on our doorstep once again." Hannibal's annoyance was palpable. "A rude awakening on Christmas morning."

The footfalls quieted suddenly. Two heavy knocks sounded at the door. Winston's growl deepened to a snarl.

"Wait," Will said. "How can they be here—whoever they are—if we're, uh, not. So to speak." He glared at Jack. "Is it the Bureau? Did you send them?"

Jack shook his head. "I didn't change the view from your window, Will. You and Hannibal did that all by yourselves. Anything that can happen, or will happen, is up to you."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but his voice ground to a halt. Inside his mind, he felt the cogs and wheels of his thought slowing, stilling—then suspending. Time had seemed frozen in the Cappella Palatina with Abigail. Will had known, on some subconscious level, that she hadn't been there in
body. It hadn't made her any less real. After Abigail had gone, he'd touched his hand to the steps of the chancel where she'd sat beside him. The stone had been warm.

*Ask me to suspend it,* Hannibal's whispered words fluttered through the darkness of his mind. *To stop the motion of the earth, the slipping of time. One word, and I will do it.*

Two more knocks—hard enough to shake the door—silenced Will's memory. He ignored the sound, sliding his hand under the hem of Hannibal's pullover and drawing him close. The drowsy scent of sleep was still thick on his skin. Will wanted to curl up inside of it and stay there. *Warm. Alive. Mine.*

"Everything that *can* happen, happens," he said, echoing his own words to Abigail. "It has to end well, and it has to end badly. It has to end every way it can."

Hannibal's eyes warmed with affection. "How would you like it to end this time?"

Will glanced out the window. The breeze swept off the dark waves below and up through the window frame, caressing his chest. The pre-dawn chill was almost refreshing, he thought. *Not like in Paris.*

He breathed in the deep scents of saltwater and Hannibal's sleep-warm skin. This time, he no longer feared the prospect of falling. *The space between one moment and the next—the distances between two bodies, two minds, pulled by gravity—they are what bind us in time. What bind us to each other. What suspend us, as space and time and all distances begin to close.*

Will looked to the man at his side. The man he'd *chosen.* "Together," he answered. "That's how I want us to end."

Hannibal exhaled, and pulled Will against him. He cradled him in his arms, reaching up to smooth his fingers through his hair and down the back of his neck. "It will be different," he said.

Will's eyelids fluttered closed, as Hannibal's breath caressed his ear. "I know."

He felt a sudden, hard bump against his calf, and then another against the back of his knee. Will's eyes snapped open. He looked down to see Winston's paws planted firmly on the side of his thigh. Farther down, Zoe was scratching at his jogging pants. Delilah and Simon were clustered around Hannibal's feet, whining and throwing sharp glances behind them at the front door. Bowser, Wilhelmina, and Buster were bestowing anxious licks on Jack's hands and face.

"The dogs won't be able to follow you," Jack said as he straightened up, giving Bowser a pat. His voice was thick with sympathy. "I'm sorry, Will."

Will swallowed. The lump stayed in his throat. Hannibal moved aside silently and Will crouched down, giving a low whistle that broke at the end. He didn't need to call them. Buster, Bowser, and Wilhelmina ran over to join the other four at his feet. He gathered his pack in his arms, his heart aching as they wriggled over one another, all trying to get closer at once. The rough pull of their tongues found his arms and face as he rubbed and patted each of them.

Winston gave a half-hearted wag of his tail. His brown eyes, Will saw, were dull with sadness. He scratched the mutt's ears with both hands. "I'll be back," he whispered fiercely. "I'll find you. I promise. We'll see each other again soon."

Winston gave him a long look. Then, as if in acceptance, he licked his jaw once, and whined.

The loud scrape of something being jammed between the door and its frame drew the attention of both the dogs and the humans, shattering the moment's brief peace. Excited by the noise, the dogs
bounded into the entryway, snapping and barking at the door. A volley of muffled curses arose from the other side. *Not English,* Will's mind registered. *Italian. And... Greek.*

Hannibal's eyes were dark as they met Will's. "'Ndràngheta."

A hard thump rattled the doorframe. "Lecter!" cried a gruff male voice. The accent dragged on the ending *R.* "We smell you. *Piccoli porcellini, venite a giocare!*"

The wood began to splinter, white shards of it spiking out as the angled steel end of a crowbar twisted into the crack of the door. Delilah and Simon jumped at the intruding object, scratching and snarling.

Jack reached down and unstrapped his side arm from his ankle holster. "Go," he said darkly, leveling the gun at the door.

Will's mouth dropped open. In whatever incarnation he'd appeared to them, Jack was setting them free.

Jack shot an angry glance over his shoulder when Will didn't move. "I said go!"

Then Hannibal's hand was grabbing Will's own, and tugging him up onto the sill of the picture window. High, cool air whipped around them. The ocean frothed and tumbled below, ever-deadly in its beauty. *As it was, is, and always will be,* Will thought fleetingly. *This is our world without end.*

"I can't promise where we will go," Hannibal said. His eyes were bright, like two living stars. "Or what it will be like when we arrive."

Will's mouth twitched in a wry smile. "It's always a shot in the dark." He curved his arm around Hannibal's side, pulling their bodies close. "Together, maybe we'll get lucky."

Behind them, the sound of timbers groaning and splitting mixed with the raucous cries of the dogs.

"Ready?" Hannibal breathed. His lips grazed Will's own, nearly stinging in their softness.

Will closed his eyes. He nodded. "Let's go."

Jack's gun emptied behind them with a furious staccato, as the two men stepped off the ledge and into the abyss. The sea rushed up to enfold them in its savage, joyful arms, like a lover.

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*No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By 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.* —Hannibal Lecter
Epilogue: The River Lethe

Chapter Notes

The wrap-up chapter to this "choose your own adventure" story—one that hints at future(s) still to come. Thanks so much for reading!

_Eve of Dreams_ can be read as a standalone; however, summaries of the prequel fics, _Of Putrefaction, Saccharine_ and _Interlude: Diary of an Incubus_, can be found on this post. Musical accompaniment for each chapter of the three-part series _A Thousand Savage Futures_ can be enjoyed on YouTube [here](#). Also, the header arts contain clues to the riddles of the story, so look closely!

_You saw not the waters of Styx, the fire of Tisiphone, the eye of Megaera! You are still alive, my boy, even if you died. The waters of Lethe did not cover you._ —Dionysus to his lover, Ampelos, from Nonnus' _Dionysiaca_

The sound of pointed heels was an uneven _clīck-clīck-clīck-clīck_ in the half-darkness of the hallway. The accompanying thud of broad soles, slightly out of step, softened their echo.

Voices rose and fell over the footfalls. They were the only other noise aside from the slow, steady beeping of machines—a residual mantra that permeated the mostly empty basement cellblock.

One other occupant, clustered away in a corner room, was still awake: a dissociative patient with a penchant for nursery rhymes. He sang quietly, so as not to disturb the two archangels resting in their glass coffin down the hall.

_Oh oh oh_, he thought, as the telltale clatter piqued his ears. _Mrs. Hooves is a-comin'! Gonna poke them with her broom. She'll hide you in her bosom and lift you into heaven's darkness. Fly, angels, fly!_

The patient scurried into the darkness of his cell, clamping one hand over his crotch and rapidly stroking his tongue with the fingers of the other.
The footfalls stopped outside of a wide, glass-fronted cell. The owners' reflections were mirrored back at them underneath the low fluorescents: one pale, with a slash of red about the mouth; the other dark and wise-eyed. Both faces stared through the transparent wall into the sparsely furnished space. A drafting table had been pushed against the wall to make room for the two electric beds in the center. Fluid lines stretched from twin poles erected alongside the beds to the two bodies that rested upon them. Neither stirred.

"The license is legally binding. And they were very specific in their advance directives." A flash of ice blue, as the pale face turned to regard the skeptical expression of the other. "Notoriously specific, in Doctor Lecter's case. Vadim Stonys made it quite clear that they weren't to be separated."

Jack Crawford shook his head. "How or why they made the time to do all of this is beyond me."

Alana Bloom turned back to the glass. "They were holed up in that house for a few days before Francis Dolarhyde dropped by to visit. They had time to do a lot of things."

Her raised eyebrow coaxed a stiff chuckle from Jack's mouth. The echo of the noise died before he spoke again. "We were wrong about Will all along, weren't we?"

"Not wrong. Just naïve. About what he was becoming." Alana paused. Her eyes lingered on the pale body on the right. Just below the bandages, the blue veins along Will's temple contrasted with the angry slash of healing tissue across his cheek. Will's skin had tightened with weight loss from the all-fluids diet, and Alana found herself wishing, for the first time in a long time, that she could give him something better than what he'd chosen for himself.

"We were naïve about the stranglehold of Hannibal's influence," she clarified.

"Well," Jack said, folding his hands behind his back, "if Will truly wishes to follow Hannibal Lecter into hell, who are we to stop him?"

They fell silent. Jack's eyes roamed over the sparse contents of the room. It looked much the same as it had when Hannibal had been the sole occupant, except for the hospital beds. Someone had placed a plastic vase of red flowers—poppies, his mind supplied—on Hannibal's drafting table. Bella had planted them every spring, until the year she'd grown too sick to tend the garden. Who would've bothered to send flowers? he mused. The thought was interrupted by Alana's voice, unexpectedly soft.

"No one knows where they are right now. Hell might still be a way off for Hannibal and Will."

Jack cleared his throat. "And if they wake up?"

"With the brain trauma they sustained from the fall, it's about a fifty-fifty chance. Maybe less. That's Doctor Schneider's opinion." Alana's eyes darted between the two bodies on the beds, as if straining to discern some sign of conscious thought.

Jack turned to her. "Alana, play devil's advocate with me for a minute. If they do—or if one of them does and one of them doesn't—then what? We don't know how they'll react to being confined together. They could be twice the danger to each other as they are to themselves. Consider the scenarios."

Alana crossed her arms. "I'll make the decision if, and when, it comes to that. Barney and his team are monitoring them twenty-four-seven. If anything changes, I'll know immediately. You'll know immediately. Until then, there's not much point in speculating."

She paused, remembering the foxish look in Vadim Stonys' eyes as he'd rattled off Will and
Hannibal's advance directives in her office. The documents had been virtual mirror images of each other. Their witness signatures preceded Hannibal's escape by a week—as did the notarization on Will's divorce decree, which Molly had confirmed she'd actually signed.

Alana hadn't believed for a minute that Stonys wasn't lying about the rest of it. But his paperwork was solid, and his alibi for the days Hannibal and Will had been missing had held up. She'd been left with little to scrutinize and even less motivation to do so, after Hannibal had been returned to her with Will in tow, both bloodied and broken.

"There are legalities involved," Alana continued. "And the ramifications of separating them could be greater than the consequences of keeping them together." She threw a glance at Jack. He looked weary, she saw—eyes heavier than she remembered. The crease in his brow hadn't faded since he'd arrived at the hospital. "You know that as well as I do, Jack."

Jack went quiet. Alana followed his gaze to the bed on the left, where Hannibal rested. His paper-thin eyelids were closed; his bandaged head was tilted slightly toward Will. She could remember the glimpses of early-morning peace she'd caught on Hannibal's sleeping face, years ago when she'd shared his bed. Unconscious, his expression was frighteningly innocent.

Sometimes Alana still woke to find Margot's brow furrowed in sleep, the corner of her mouth twisted in worry. On those mornings, she would press kisses to the fault lines left by her wife's history, until they melted into soft moans and rousing heat.

Jack sighed and tucked his hands into his pockets. "I keep ping-ponging between regret over putting Will in the position to make a choice, and guilt over playing into his hand. There's a net of worry in the middle, waiting to snare me."

"We've worried about Will for most of the last five years. Maybe signing away his life to Hannibal is Will's way of telling us not to worry." Alana's lip twitched, though her eyes held no trace of amusement.

"Maybe you're right." Jack stared back into the glass. He tugged up his sleeve to check his watch. "It's getting late. Let's give them their night."

Alana nodded, and gestured at one of the security cameras. As she and Jack walked back toward the basement exit, the overhead fluorescent lights blinked out behind them, one by one.

"I was surprised to see you walk into my office tonight," Alana said, the tap of her heels punctuating her words. "You live in Bethesda now, don't you? What brought you out here?"

Jack's jaw tightened. "Monsters never sleep. There's a guy in the Midwest skinning women. Police have recovered five bodies so far. The Bureau is working hard to catch him. They've put SSA Foster in charge—whom I believe you've already met."

"The BAU's asked for my consult," Jack added, with a touch of pride. He decided to refrain from sharing any more details. The Bureau was stumped. The evidence was there, but not even he could see through it to the man hiding behind the wall of flayed flesh.

"Might lead to something good. For you, anyway." Alana's smile was congratulatory, but the
wariness in her sharp blue eyes spoke of pity. "I hope you find him before anyone else goes missing."

"We will."

Alana swiped her card. The door buzzed and then clicked closed behind them, leaving the cellblock ensconced in darkness.

"When you do, you have an open invitation to send him here. My house is your house. It can be his, too—for life."

Jack nodded. He was careful not to give voice to the thought that had been running through his head all day. *If Will, or even Hannibal, were awake and aware right now, I'd ask to borrow their imaginations. The nightmares the two men envisioned together would be worth more than the detective skills of a half-dozen special agents, Jack knew.*

Notwithstanding that wish, he'd recommended one agent to Antonia Foster's team. Clarice Starling had excelled in every field exam and psychological test the Academy and the Bureau had put her through. Something about her tenacity reminded him much of Miriam Lass—*too much, maybe. But Starling had already graduated, and had been working in the field for nearly a year. No more trainees,* Jack had promised himself. So far, he'd kept his promise.

"Besides," Jack added, lightening his tone, "I have a date in the city. At Fiola."

Alana raised an eyebrow, as they headed toward the stairs. "Must be a promising date, then. Margot and I went there the night we got engaged. We decided the next week to close down the slaughterhouse. But I'd recommend the Elysian Fields lamb with eggplant and sweetbreads, if you want to try something a little different."

"Sounds offal," Jack quipped, a smile dancing at the corners of his mouth. "I'll keep that in mind."

Alana smirked. "We were feeling victorious. It was our last non-vegetarian meal."

The echoes of their voices faded as the stairwell door swung closed behind them. In the cell block, silence settled over all but the two occupied rooms, rolling like a fog down the corridor and licking into the empty spaces. It curled up alongside Miggs on his cot. He remained perfectly still, hands clenched around the edges of his mattress, listening to it sing.

*Mrs. Hooves likes the quiet,* he thought. *Doc Strangelove, too, and Nurse Judas. Not the G-Man, though. He's good. He wants to wake the angels.*

"Set them on fire, sandman, and their flame shall consumeth the chaff!" he rasped into the darkness.

On the tail of his words, a break sounded in the tandem blips from the room down the hall. The machine noises sped up, ricocheting off the walls with an ominous intensity.

Miggs crossed himself twice and clung to his cot, trembling at the onset of an earthquake he could feel but not see.

Inside the glass room, a flutter of movement came from the bed on the left. A twitch of fingertips—the jerk of a knee. Then a sharp intake of breath, as air expanded the occupant's lungs in a full and painful rush.

Hannibal opened his eyes.
One sensation, and one only. A sound—a rapidly escalating beeping. The roar of the sea had been silenced. But what had happened to the cool night air, tinged with the smell of salt and the warmth of Will's lips? His sight had gone dark, and he could feel his body falling.

Falling. Hannibal's hands jerked instinctively. Will. They groped for something solid. The movement stretched the cloth straps around his ankles. Will's arms, pulling close. The two of them had fallen, over and over, it seemed. Midnight to morning. Falling forever. Falling together.

Beep Beep BEEP BEEP. The panicked staccato of sound wracked his ears. He considered tearing off the pulse oximeter, but knew the disturbance would register either way. He couldn't calm his clamoring heartbeat. They would come for him, and soon.

The familiar tug of the nasogastric tube arrested Hannibal's movement as he tried to push himself up. His head was spinning. His abdomen hurt, and everything was blurry—but he remembered.

The window. The sea. Our last embrace. "It's always a shot in the dark. Together, maybe we'll get lucky."

"Will?" he whispered, fear lodging in his throat.

Please, not alone. Not this time.

Next to him, a rustling of sheets seized his ears like a song. Hannibal's breath caught. He forced himself to exhale. A second vitals monitor chirped frantically, like the cuckoo in their old Deutsche clock.

Hannibal turned his head, ignoring the pain that stabbed the inside of his skull at the movement. He could make out the faint silhouette of a body on the neighboring bed.

"Will." The sound, muddled by the plastic feeding tube, bordered on a sob.

A husked sigh floated across the space between them. "I'm here." The sound was rusty. Pained.

Hannibal stretched out his arm, groping in the dark until he found the guardrails of the opposite bed, and then Will's hand. He threaded his fingers through Will's own, ignoring the sting and pull of the IV needles.

"We made it," Will said, hoarse. "I—I think." He paused to suck in a breath. "Everything hurts."

Hannibal clenched Will's hand. The other man's words were slurred with disorientation and too-long sleep—but the sound of Will's voice, living and lucid, was remarkable beyond even his own hopes. Fortune and chance had not deserted them, after all; although it appeared the Fates had decided to have a little fun with their relocation. Across the room, Hannibal could see himself and Will reflected in the transparent cell wall. He knew it was not a mirage.

Fate has a habit of not letting us choose our own endings, he'd once told Frederick Chilton, from behind the glass. It appeared the same could be said for their beginnings.

No matter, Hannibal thought to himself. We know how to play with fate and circumstance now.

"I was afraid you'd vanished," Hannibal murmured. "Disappeared from my side."

"Were we dreaming?" Will's voice was filled with pain, and wonder, too; but the anger and disillusionment Hannibal had expected was nowhere to be heard.
Time will wait for us still, my phíltatos, he vowed, as the faint buzz of the cell block door vibrated down the hall. And nothing in heaven or hell, or the twilight between, will tear us away from each other—I promise.

"Perhaps," Hannibal replied, swallowing around the tube in his throat. "If so, it was a good dream. Bittersweet, and bright with blood and fire. I would have been happy to continue it."

He paused for breath, thinking of the lives they'd already lived, the deaths they'd embraced, and the many that remained behind and ahead of them. In the background, the smack of footfalls echoed off the walls, quick and imminent.

"Dawn has brought us a new future," he continued. "A new conquest. It may be our greatest yet."

"And if we're dead?" Will said, sharp. Hannibal could hear his thoughts wavering in the blackness of their cell, stretching beyond the infinity of memory and reality. They electrified him.

"There are many roads to be walked in death—as many as in dreams." Hannibal felt Will's eyes on him in the dark. "We can travel all of them together. 'Till human voices wake us,' Will."

A long second of silence hung between them. Just as the cell door buzzed open, a returning squeeze of Will's hand filled Hannibal with light.

"I've never felt more alive."

Everything that can happen, happens. It has to end well, and it has to end badly. It has to end every way it can. —Will Graham

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