In All That Vast Number

by knotcricket

Summary

Hannibal Lecter is searching for that one special omega to ride out the zombie apocalypse with. OK, maybe two special omegas...

*Serious about the tags - if Zombie Cannibal Sex Slave Human Pet Harems isn't your thing, this is not the porn you're looking for. Please move on if that's the case. For the four of you that are left, welcome. I feel like we have a lot of unpacking to do.
Selection

Chapter Notes

Will is a kid at the beginning for plot reasons only - not to sexualise him as a kid *at all*. The only reason for the "Underage" tag is because Randall starts out as 15. Please let me know if anything is sending mixed signals or squicking you out there and I'll revise it.

I've tried to tag up front everything I can think of that might make people want to bail on the whole story. There's a couple tags I haven't included because they would be spoilers, would be potentially confusing and relate to a relatively minor part of the story. Where I haven't tagged something, I've tried to include a trigger warning at the beginning of the relevant chapters. Please read these.

Hannibal Lecter was in no hurry to commit himself as he paced down the long corridor of the Baltimore State Omega Institute past row after row of fluorescent-lit shatterproof plastic cells. In truth all he could think about was shallowing his breathing to avoid the assault of cloying perfumes wafting towards him through the ventilation holes.

He was sure the trainers at the Institute had meant well – carefully bathing, primping and scenting each of their graduates before returning them to their cells and coaching them into a pose meant to catch the touring Alpha’s eye. But the net effect was of an assembly line of gaudy mannequins - a veritable McDonalds of future consorts.

Dr. Chilton had started out giving elaborate resumes for each of the omegas - stopping at each cell to expound at length about this one’s rare hair colour or that one’s exceedingly graceful gait. Hannibal simply walked on trying to think of a pretext for covering his nose that would not be considered rude.

By the end of the third row, Dr. Chilton had lost heart and asked him directly what kind of omega he was looking for.

And how to answer that? Hannibal wasn’t even entirely sure that he wanted an omega after all these years. It certainly had the potential to be very inconvenient given his lifestyle.

His Uncle Robertas had been happy to remain a bachelor until the day he died and yet it was in some ways the loss of that same uncle, his last remaining blood relative, that had started Hannibal casually scrolling through omega adoption sites and then touring neighbouring Institutes on his days off.

In short, he didn’t know what he wanted but he was getting an increasingly clear picture of what he didn’t want.

To duck the question, he pointed to a half-closed door at the end of the corridor and asked, “And what is through there?”

Dr. Chilton in frustration grabbed at the elbow of Hannibal’s suit jacket and tried to turn him back the way they had come.
“That’s nothing. Those are the cells for the omegas who are still in training,” he explained. He followed the trajectory of the Alpha’s eyes down and dropped his hand back to his side as if it had turned to lead.

“I’m sure we can find a finished one that will suit your needs.”

“Can I see the ones that are still in training?” Hannibal asked without asking.

“I’m afraid that’s quite impossible,” Dr. Chilton sputtered as Hannibal slipped past him and into the next block of cells.

This corridor was much more dimly lit and crowded – the cells less than a third of the size of the ones in the show block. Most of them were empty and Dr. Chilton rushed to explain that that was because their residents were attending classes or meals or were in the exercise yard.

He tried again to stand in front of Hannibal and direct him back towards the finished omegas but the taller doctor simply sidestepped him and strolled down the corridor.

As he walked he registered that the scent of perfume in the other room had been replaced by the faint odour of blood and panic. This was more to his taste already.

The omegas in the training block wore fitted boxer-briefs and a padded leather vest with a handle on the back. The cells were completely bare and featureless except for a metal bedpan on a shelf at the back of each one.

As Hannibal walked past, several of the omegas moved forward and knelt near the gates of the cell presenting the backs of their necks to him. Unlike the omegas in the show block, many of these ones had thick welts and round bruises visible on their arms and thighs.

Hannibal stopped to examine one of them more closely and they were suddenly joined by a young guard who looked at Dr. Chilton desperately for direction.

“This is Dr. Lecter,” he explained. “He’s asked for a tour of the facilities. I was just explaining to him that these omegas are only partially trained and that the best-behaved ones will be off enjoying their privileges at this time of day. What’s left here are really the most unsuit…”

But Hannibal was moving on again to a cell at the very end of the row where all he could see were the soles of four bare feet pressed up against the plastic.

As he came closer he could see that there were two omegas in a cell barely larger than them clinging to each other so desperately it was hard to see where one of them started and the other one stopped.

“You have two here,” he observed blandly.

“Yes,” said the young guard whose nametag read Matthew Brown. “They are siblings who came in together.”

“Only a few days ago, wasn’t it?” Dr. Chilton jumped in. “They’ve had no training at all. They’re only just adjusting to the facility – normally they would be trained to at least present themselves…”

Dr. Chilton rapped on the plastic gate with his cane to get the omegas’ attention but instead of getting to their knees at the front they slid like a single creature to the back of the cell and tried to disappear into each other.

The movement was enough, however, to see that one of them was larger than the other – maybe
fourteen or fifteen with short sandy hair. The smaller one was only nine or ten with a mop of black curls.

“I didn’t think you trained pre-teens,” Hannibal stated with a hint of distaste.

“We don’t,” Dr. Chilton jumped in hurriedly. “That is under normal circumstances. We take thirteen-year-old omegas when the parents don’t want to or are unable to train them themselves. As our clients come from a more… sophisticated… background - the omegas that train here have an opportunity to be introduced to a much better class of potential Alpha. We train them until they are eighteen and well-prepared to go to their forever homes. For example, the many accomplished and attractive omegas you saw in the other room…”

Dr. Chilton gestured back towards the door they had come through subtly insinuating himself between Hannibal and the cell with the two omegas in it. But Hannibal would not be deterred now that his curiosity was piqued.

“So why are you training this omega? He can’t be thirteen.”

“No,” Matthew interjected as if startled back into the conversation. “He’s only nine.”

Hannibal waited several beats for him to elaborate before prompting him with, “So why are you training him?”

“They were recently orphaned. Their omega died giving birth to the younger one and their Alpha was killed in a car accident last week. Social services tried to separate them at the hospital but apparently that didn’t go well…” Matthew began to snigger in a manner that Hannibal found thoroughly repulsive.

“We’re not really planning to train him at the moment,” Dr Chilton clarified still desperate to salvage the situation. “We can train the older one and keep the younger with him as a companion until he is old enough to start.”

“Can I have a closer look?”

“As I said, they’re completely untrained. It’s probably best not to agitate them unless you’re intending to buy one of them.”

Hannibal considered the situation for a moment and then said, “Yes, I would like to see them.”

Dr Chilton stepped away from the door so quickly he nearly tripped over his own cane and motioned Matthew to open the gate.

Matthew unlocked the gate and stepped towards the two little omegas cowering in the corner. There was barely enough room for him to turn around with the three of them in the cell. He knelt down and tried to reach around to grab the handles at the backs of their vests to pull them apart.

The omegas snarled at him in unison and kicked uselessly at his shins which were covered in pads. The older one leant forward suddenly and tried to bite into his forearm getting nothing but a mouthful of shirt for his trouble.

Matthew dropped them both suddenly, whipped out the stun baton from his belt and shoved it into the arm of the older omega. The older omega flopped back like a fish and the younger one jumped away as far as he was able from the crackling sound of the baton.
Hannibal took the opportunity to grab the handle of the smaller one’s vest and pull him out of the cell, holding him up to eye level like a kitten by the scruff of its neck. The little omega immediately curled into a ball and started distress whining.

Recovering quickly on hearing his brother’s crying, the older omega tried to sneak out of the cell between Matthew’s legs, but the guard managed to grab ahold of his handle and lift him up as well.

Both omegas were crying hysterically and trying to reach for each other but Hannibal and the guard held them apart.

“Let’s go to the medical bay,” Dr. Chilton suggested over the racket they were making. “There’s more room and perhaps Dr. Bloom can give them a sedative.”
The omegas had not calmed down when they reached the medical bay and their caterwauling was loud enough that Dr. Bloom met them at the door with her arms crossed.

Hannibal and the guard carried the two omegas to an examination table where Dr Chilton tied restraints to their vests so that they could face each other on their hands and knees but could not move off the table and hurt themselves. The two omegas pressed their foreheads together and with the renewed contact their distress crying toned down to sporadic pathetic whimpering. Both omegas were shaking like leaves and had their eyes tightly closed.

“I just examined these omegas yesterday,” Dr Bloom told Dr Chilton coolly.

“Yes, well now Dr Lecter wants to have a look at them,” Dr Chilton replied glaring at her to be quiet.

“This is very disruptive to their schedules,” Dr Bloom informed them both. “Will in particular needs as much stability as possible right now.”

“Which one is Will?” Hannibal interrupted hoping to cut short the impending argument.

Dr Bloom pointed to the younger dark-haired omega and Hannibal moved over and began to examine him checking his teeth and spine, running his hands along his flanks and legs to feel the musculature and reaching for a stethoscope on the counter to listen to his heart. He shifted the omega’s vest just enough to slip his hand and the stethoscope under it and could see a dark linear bruise had formed across his chest and around his shoulder where the seat belt had restrained him.

The omega’s heart was thumping about like a ship’s rigging in a hurricane.

“It’s OK, Will,” Hannibal told him, pulling the stethoscope back and squeezing a bare foot with his other hand. “There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Apparently satisfied he moved on to the other omega who had started to pant from the stress and wobble at the elbows.

“What’s his name?” he asked Dr Chilton who consulted with his clipboard and then replied, “Randall”. Hannibal saw the older omega wince but he made no effort to offer a preferred alternative.

“There’s nothing to worry about Randall,” Hannibal murmured in his ear. “We’ll be done in a minute and nobody is going to hurt you.”

Hannibal stroked his hair gently to reassure him while avoiding a lump on one side of his forehead, likely from the accident as well. As he began the physical the omega was generally passive except when Hannibal tried to pry his eyes open to test his pupil response. The omega rolled backwards and away tangling himself in his restraints and almost toppling off the table.

Matthew and Dr Chilton unwound him and pulled him back into position holding him there firmly while Hannibal continued with the examination.
When he had finished the external examination, he gently pulled down the older omega’s shorts to just above his knees and, turning to Dr Bloom, asked for a pair of exam gloves.

“What kind of examination is this?” she demanded, the question tearing her attention away from her paperwork. Her narrowed eyes bore into Dr Chilton.

“It’s a graduation exam,” Dr Chilton explained while fishing a pair of nitrile gloves out of a drawer and handing them to Hannibal. “Dr Lecter is interested in purchasing these omegas.”

“But they haven’t had any training yet,” she snapped. “And anyway you can’t legally sell them until they’re eighteen.”

“Actually if they’re orphans they can be sold at any time,” Matthew offered helpfully. They turned to stare at him and he shrugged while explaining, “Law school. Night classes.”

“He’s right,” Dr Chilton jumped in triumphantly. “They are legally wards of the Institute and can be sold before the age of eighteen because I can provide the guardian’s signature.”

“Fine but how can you sell them without any training?”

Hannibal cut in ahead of Dr Chilton’s response “Actually, I have decided I would prefer to train them myself.”

“Have you ever trained an omega before?” she demanded. “Do you have any idea how much work is involved? Especially for a pair of omegas that have experienced significant trauma?”

“No, I have not trained an omega before,” Hannibal replied. “But I trust you and Dr Chilton will be able to assist me if I have any questions. I assume that ongoing consultation can be included in the purchase price.”

“Yes of course,” Dr Chilton said practically bouncing on his heels and waving his cane for emphasis.

“This is grossly unethical, even for you Frederic,” Dr Bloom practically spat at him. “You may be their legal guardian and I may not be able to stop this but if either of you harm one hair on their heads I’ll have you both up before the medical ethics board and that’s just getting started…”

“Dr Bloom,” Hannibal began in a tone not much different to the one he had used to reassure the omegas. “I have no intention of harming either of these omegas. I can assure you they will be as well cared for in my home as they would be here… if not better.” He eyed the rapidly forming stun baton bruise on the older omega’s arm significantly.

“I do hope that I will be able to call on you if I need any assistance, however.”

Dr Bloom huffed at him and turned on her heels, storming into her private office which adjoined the medical bay. “Just leave me out of it,” she called back over her shoulder.

Hannibal turned back to the older omega who seemed torn between trying to shrink into the table and reminding the doctors that he was kneeling there with his ass in the cold air waiting for them to hurry up and finish.

He let out another soft whimper as Hannibal came over to stroke his hair again. An involuntary shiver ran down the omega’s spine and then he made a noise that was almost a moan as Hannibal ran a gloved hand through the downy hair at the base of his belly and over and around his little pink omega pseudocock.
It was heavy in his hand, despite the small size, and began to plump up as he ran the back of his hand under it to inspect the omega’s smooth hairless sack.

They were strange creatures, he mused, but attractive none-the-less. They had what looked like testes but produced no seed and a pseudocock which seemed entirely ornamental. He would need to refresh his studies on omega anatomy when he got them home… he meant if he decided to purchase them.

From memory, he didn’t think that omegas were supposed to grow so much hair on their lower bellies. That was more of a secondary sex characteristic of Alphas but perhaps it was simply a genetic quirk with this omega.

“Has he had a heat yet?” he asked, moving around to stand behind the omega and spread his pert cheeks as wide as he comfortably could.

“No,” Dr Chilton replied after consulting his notes again. “The hospital said there were traces of suppressants in his system but no sign that he had been in estrus. They surmised that his sire was giving them to him as a preventative. You can see he is unclaimed.”

Dr Chilton pointed to the omega’s pale pink hole, so tightly clenched Hannibal couldn’t help chuckling, patting the omega on the shoulder and telling him to relax again. He was indeed unclaimed. After the first time he was penetrated, the skin at the entrance to the hole would darken, letting everyone know that an Alpha was keeping him.

Hannibal dipped a gloved forefinger into a tub of Vaseline and rubbed it in gentle circles around the tight pucker. The omega let out a long cry that started off startled and indignant and ended up closer to a keen of pleasure. When Hannibal increased the pressure slightly, he thrust his hips forward, an involuntary response, and the folds of his ass closed around the tip of Hannibal’s finger.

Hannibal laughed again pulling his hand back. “You’re being a very good boy,” he told the omega. “Not much more to go.”

Dr Chilton handed him a speculum and Hannibal considered it carefully. “It would be a shame to stretch him out before he is claimed,” he said finally. “But perhaps another method will suffice… Do you have an ultrasound machine?”

Dr Chilton nodded and moved quickly to roll it over from the side of the room, turning on the monitor.

Meanwhile Matthew lifted Will off the table and brought him over to another corner to restrain him out of the way. Both omegas began to panic again at being separated. Hannibal knelt down to Will’s level in the corner while Matthew and Dr Chilton flipped Randall over on the table and restrained him on his back.

He pushed the younger omega’s curls back from his eyes, which remained squinched shut, and half-whispered “Everything will be fine, little omega. I just need to take a quick look at your brother and then we can all go home.”

Turning he saw that Dr Chilton was unstrapping the vest over Randall’s stomach while Matthew injected what he assumed was a sedative into one of his haunches. He thought to protest that he preferred not to drug the omega unless it was absolutely necessary but then he recognised the wisdom of keeping the pup as calm as possible when the restraint vest could not be fully engaged.

Hannibal warmed up the end of the ultrasound wand with his hands and then spread it with a tube of
silicone gel that was kept heated by the machine. He set it gently into the crook of the omega’s belly just over his hip and let it glide in slow circles from one end of his belly to the other.

With the vest pulled back he could see that the omega was slightly emaciated. Reaching for his chart from Dr Chilton he could see that the pup had been about twenty pounds underweight when he was admitted. There were no older records to explain if this was a recent development or if he was naturally a bit skinny.

It doesn’t matter, Hannibal thought to himself. We’ll have you back up to a good breeding weight soon.

“Do you have the rest of his medical history?” he asked Dr Chilton instead.

“No,” he replied. “The hospital said their Alpha seemed to be transient – living out of the van they crashed in. And there were no records to trace where they came from except for Louisiana license plates. The van appeared to be stolen.”

Looking down, Hannibal saw that Randall’s eyes had opened and that he appeared to be trying to follow their conversation intently through the haze of his sedative. Hannibal noted in finer detail what a handsome pup he was - bright blue eyes, a button nose that was just a little too big for the rest of his face and a deep dimple in his right cheek.

Abruptly, Hannibal turned his attention back to the screen. His trained eye picked out the shapes of the omega’s reproductive organs which were all fully mature and within acceptable parameters. His first heat was close Hannibal surmised from the gentle undulation along his tubes.

He pulled the wand back, wiping the gel off the end and removing his gloves. The omega seemed almost reluctant to see it go, but perhaps he was just missing the warmth.

Matthew moved to resecure the older omega’s vest, lifting him off the table and depositing him in the corner next to his brother. The sedative was in full effect now and as he was set down Randall slid bonelessly against the wall until his head was in Will’s lap. Will bent over to the side to rest his head on his brother’s hip turning his face to the wall to block out the rest of the room.

Hannibal felt a strange sensation his chest – something like pride – which was an absurd thing to feel about two omegas he had never seen an hour before.

Dr Chilton cleared his throat and said “So…” expectantly.

“I am interested in buying both of them,” Hannibal said, careful to keep his swelling eagerness and certainty out of his voice.

“That’s excellent,” Dr Chilton replied grinning from ear to ear at having off-loaded two omegas without incurring any boarding expenses. “I always say it’s better if you plan to have two omegas to choose siblings. At least that way you know ahead of time if they get along.”

“Perhaps we could discuss the terms in your office…”

“Of course, just this way Dr Lecter.”

Chapter End Notes
Dr Bloom does not approve of you getting off on this.
Hannibal killed the engine of his Bentley after pulling into his garage and rolled his eyes already beginning to regret his impulsive decision.

“That’s enough,” he told the two hooded omegas lying across the back seat. They had not stopped whimpering once on the entire forty-minute drive home and Hannibal felt the beginnings of a blinding headache starting to build behind his eyes. He knew he should have put them in the trunk but Dr Bloom insisted that that would distress them even further.

He waited until the garage door finished closing securely and then lifted them out of the car together, the smaller one sprawled on top of the larger one. They both quieted but tensed up in his arms.

He would have to have a little patience while they adjusted he told himself as he carried them upstairs to the guest bathroom. If he had planned things out a little better, he would have had some clothes, bedding and maybe some games ready for them but the truth was he had convinced himself all along that he was only window shopping. They would have to make do with what he kept for his usual guests until he could find time to go to the shops.

In the bathroom, he set the two omegas in a corner and began drawing them a warm bath. He made sure to lock the guest bedroom door leading into the bathroom and then closed the bathroom door as well to make it harder for them to bolt.

Once the tub was full enough, he turned the water off, pulled the heavy black hoods off their heads and began to unstrap the clear plastic muzzles that Dr Chilton had insisted he would need. The terrified and disoriented expressions on the omegas’ faces made the muzzles seem even more ridiculous than when they were first suggested but Dr Bloom had convinced him that for some omegas restraints could increase their sense of security.

He put the muzzles on the sink counter and set to work unstrapping them from their harness vests. Both omegas were silent now and stared directly at him with eyes as big as saucers and the rest of their faces red and flushed from the hoods. He couldn’t help smiling at them again and tousling Will’s hair.

With the vests off, they had only their boxer-briefs left. Hannibal decided to give them a little test and stepped back sitting on the lidded toilet but still facing them.

“Take your briefs off and get in the tub,” he told them aiming for a stern but non-threatening tone.

They hesitated for some time; the older one seemed to be trying to form an excuse in his head. Hannibal was about to intervene when Will slowly pulled himself up using the towel rack and then stood there shuffling his feet.

Hannibal decided to give them one more chance. “Take them off Will,” he repeated, coaching rather than demanding.

Will reached up to fiddle with the edge of a towel. Then he pulled it off the rack and handed it to Randall.

Just as Hannibal was about to lose his patience Randall held the towel up, Will pulled the briefs off
behind it and then leaped into the tub. Hannibal grinned with satisfaction and then looked at the older omega expectantly.

Randall shuffled the briefs off while still sitting and then stumbled up to the edge of the tub. The sedative had not completely worn off yet and he was struggling to lift one leg over the edge of the tub while balancing on the other.

Hannibal lifted him up under the armpits dropping him down into the warm water where he immediately lolled his head against the side of the tub.

“Are you able to bathe yourselves?” he asked.

Will stared intently at Hannibal’s chin and then whispered “Yes” packing his tone with all the indignity of a child who was convinced he was being treated like a baby.

“Yes, Alpha,” Randall rasped looking down into the water and blinking rapidly.

“Good,” Hannibal said leaning down to pick up their briefs. “These need a wash and in the meantime I’m afraid I don’t have any clothes in your sizes. I’ll leave some of my clothes out on the bed for when you’ve finished. You can wear them for today.”

“Are you hungry?”

Randall gulped and shook his head no and Will followed his lead.

“Maybe a nap then when you’re done. I have a few errands to run and will be back in a few hours to make dinner. In the meantime, I expect you to wash yourselves including your hair, put the towels in the hamper when you’re done and then rest until I get back. Do you understand?”

The pups nodded cautiously.

“I need an answer pups.”

“Yes, Alpha” they whispered in unison.

“Good boys,” he told them and left them to it.

He brought the briefs into his own bathroom, considered throwing them in the hamper but dropped them in the trash basket instead, and then contemplated the long rows of bagged suits on hangers in his walk-in closet.

The older omega barely came up to the middle of Hannibal’s chest and the smaller one was half again his brother’s size. Not even Hannibal’s boxer shorts were likely to fit them comfortably.

He settled on two of his older silk smoking jackets which would at least keep the omegas warm without tangling them up too much. He paired them with some thick wool socks. They would look ridiculous but it was only for a few hours until he could get them something more suitable.

He brought the clothes into the guest bedroom and laid them out neatly over the bedspread. He could hear some subdued splashing in the bathroom but resisted the temptation to check on the omegas.

Instead he tested the lock on the shutters over the window and then stepped back into the hall, locking the door to the guest bedroom. Dr Bloom had told him that the omegas would settle in best if he limited the amount of the house that they had to adjust to all at once and established a safe room for them to retreat to.
After further consideration he went to the kitchen, made up a bowl of fresh strawberries and cream with ladyfingers and a bowl of shelled pistachios and brought them up to set on their nightstand in case they got hungry later.

Satisfied that his omegas were secured for the immediate future, Hannibal sat down with the omega training guide that Dr Chilton had sold him and turned to the equipment list at the beginning of the first chapter.

It was somewhat daunting, so Hannibal decided to focus on the basics – clothes, a few things to entertain themselves with if Hannibal was called into work suddenly, the bare necessities if Randall went into heat.

He made a quick list on a piece of monogrammed stationary and grabbed his car keys. Before he left, he turned on his phone and checked the app connected to the cameras in every room of the house.

His omegas were still in the bath. Will was washing Randall’s hair for him. He noticed that they both had an odd set to their jaws and turning up the sound he could hear them making a soft liquid trilling sound to each other. He had only ever read that omegas made that sound to settle their young cubs – not that they made it to each other or anyone else. He would have to check the manual for an explanation. He added it to his growing list of research questions.

In the meantime, however, he went to the shops. Fortunately, the copies of the medical records that came with their adoption papers included their measurements printed out in Dr Bloom’s tidy hand. At the companion boutique to the one where Hannibal bought most of his suits, he picked out a few pairs of plain black fitted omega pants, some warm wool sweaters, cotton t-shirts, windbreakers, socks, underpants, house slippers and slip on shoes. He kept to neutral earth tones reasoning that when he had a clearer sense of the omegas’ personalities he could dress them in something that expressed them better.

He went to the omega shop next and was again amazed at the entire universe of articles he had never imagined he might need. He settled on two handheld tablets that came pre-loaded with games advertised to improve his omegas’ knowledge of world cuisine and ability to make dinner conversation.

There were a number of other games as well that made no pretense at educational value but were designed to keep omegas distracted for as long as possible. Hannibal hoped it wouldn’t come to that – that he would have time to develop a suitable curriculum to keep his omegas stimulated – but he was never sure from week to week how much of his time would be needed consulting on cases for the FBI or meeting with patients so he decided that the games were a useful insurance policy for the time being.

For Randall, he picked out a cock-cage, a retaining plug, some lube and a jar of pre-natal vitamins just in case. It was almost unheard of for omegas to quicken after their first heat but Hannibal suspected that if any Alpha was potent enough to be in that 0.2% it would be him.

He had padded restraints at home already but was unsure about the size so he picked up a few extra pairs just in case. Some of his old pairs were a bit frayed – one half chewed through – and there was no harm in having more than he needed.

He’d already bought leashes and collars along with the training manual from the Omega Institute. He selected a few other omega training guides from the shop as well to make sure he was familiar with the gamut of techniques.

When he got home he brought the bags up to his closet except for the bag of omega clothes and their
tablets which he dropped off outside their door for later. Pressing his ear to the wood he could hear
nothing inside.

In his own bedroom, he opened up the surveillance app again to review their activities.

They had finished their bath and remembered to leave the towels in the hampers. Two points each in
the reward column. They sniffed at the clothes Hannibal had put out but didn’t try any of them on.
Randall pulled the blanket around himself and curled up under the bed largely out of sight. Will
nibbled on one of the ladyfingers cautiously while listening at the bedroom door for any noises in the
hall.

When he had satisfied himself that Hannibal was really gone he went methodically around the room
prying at the baseboards with his bare fingers, testing the locks on the shutters, their hinges, the give
of the floorboards, digging into the empty cabinets under the bathroom sink and through all of the
drawers and the medicine cabinet. Eventually he gave up trying to find a weapon or means of escape
and crawled under the bed with his brother.

Hannibal fast forwarded through the final hour and a half where the two omegas remained hidden
under the bed with no sound or movement.

“Well we certainly have our work cut out for us, don’t we,” he said to himself fishing one of the
training manuals out of a bag next to his bed.

Chapter End Notes

How many smoking jackets does Hannibal have? I imagine at least five - for the
different shapes of cigars...
After an hour or so of skimming his omega training manuals particularly the chapters on settling new omegas and getting them through their first heat (just in case), Hannibal went down to the kitchen to make dinner.

He made a simple roast loin in Cumberland sauce for himself and shashlik for the omegas. He wanted to get them used to hand feeding but wasn’t sure they would eat directly from his fingers on the first try.

When the food was done and the table was set he went back up to the guest bedroom, unlocked the door and went inside. The omegas were still huddled under the bed with only a tail of blanket sticking out from under it.

A very faint gasp of air as he walked towards the bed told him at least one of them was awake.

“Come out pups, it’s time for dinner.”

He waited a few moments to see if they would comply. When it was clear that they wouldn’t, he yanked swiftly on the edge of the blanket and then grabbed the two ankles that this exposed.

Instead of pulling the rest of them out, however, he pinned their feet to the ground and said, “I expect to be obeyed, omegas. I will give you one more opportunity to be good boys and come out. If I have to drag you out, you will be punished.”

He let go of their ankles and started to count down from five. Somewhere between two and one, the omegas emerged blinking and squinting from the light and with their hair sticking in all directions. Randall kept the blanket wrapped around both of them.

“Better,” Hannibal told them. “Did you have a good rest?”

Randall glared at him resentfully, no doubt blaming him for the sedative but Will nodded and said “Yes, Alpha” very softly while staring at the ground.

Hannibal retrieved the bag he had left by the door. He pulled out a pair of omega pants in each of their sizes and a pair of house slippers for each of them setting everything on the bed.

Then he pulled out the two tablets to show to them. Randall looked interested immediately but Will kept looking at the floor.

“I want you to get dressed now,” he told them. “And then we’ll go down and have dinner. If you’re well behaved, afterwards you can play games until bedtime. Do you understand?”

The omegas nodded... then remembered to say “Yes Alpha” when they saw he was about to correct them. Hannibal took it as a promising sign. At least they learned reasonably quickly and their personalities did not seem to be naturally oppositional.

Hannibal went into the bathroom to retrieve their vests and a hairbrush. When he came back, he saw they had both put on their pants and slippers. They were eyeing the door to the hall which he had left cracked open but snapped their attention back to Hannibal as soon as he came in.
“Good pups,” he told them as he strapped them into their vests and brushed their hair back into some semblance of order.

He led them into the bathroom and had them wash their hands with antibacterial soap. They had just taken a bath and Hannibal’s cleaning service kept the floors spotlessly clean at his insistence but it was the principle that mattered.

When they were done, he lifted each of them by the handles at the back of their vests and carried them out into the hall. He had considered testing their obedience again by ordering them to follow him but he suspected that the long walk downstairs and to the dining room past many of the other rooms of the house would be too distracting for them and there was always the risk of the food getting cold.

As he carried them, the pups craned around trying to peek into all the rooms they passed and even look up to see what was on the ceiling.

In the dining room, he set them on the floor on either side of his chair and then went to the wine cellar to retrieve a bottle of 1995 Médoc. When he returned, he saw that Will had crawled around to the other side so he was kneeling shoulder to shoulder with his brother.

He’d forgotten to specifically order them to stay put and he supposed it didn’t matter to him that much which side of the chair they sat on, but Hannibal felt a twinge of annoyance that the pup had decided for himself where to settle.

He sat down and began to caress Randall’s hair and the side of his face praising him for being a good boy and staying put. Will looked confused, then hurt, and finally slunk back to the other side of the chair looking at Hannibal’s other hand expectantly.

Hannibal found it charming to watch the omegas’ instinctual docility and eagerness to please asserting itself. He gave Will a fond pat on the head and then moved his hands back over the table to pour the sauce on the loin medallions.

He took a few bites, sipped his wine contentedly and then reached down to put a skewer of shashlik level with Randall’s mouth. The omega sniffed at it cautiously for a few moments and then snapped at one of the cubes of meat on the centre of the skewer nearly pulling the whole thing out of Hannibal’s grip.

“Slow down,” he told the omega with a measure of indulgence in his voice. “There’s no rush.”

He set Randall’s skewer back on the plate while he was chewing on the first cube and then lowered the second skewer for Will.

After a moment, Will reached up to try to pull the first cube off the end of the skewer.

“No hands,” Hannibal told him sternly and the omega’s arms dropped immediately.

After a moment, he sniffed at the cube again and then pulled at one corner of it with his teeth. It slid off on the third try and Will tipped the rest of it into his mouth by angling his head back.

Looking over he could see Randall watching them intently, his eyes following the skewer longingly as Hannibal placed it back on the table.

Hannibal took a few more bites of his own meal to test their patience and then lowered the skewer for Randall again. He went on alternating between feeding them and himself noting with some amusement that Randall attacked only the cubes of meat, seemingly in random order, while Will
dutifully took whatever item was next off the end.

When Randall finished all the meat, he seemed to have lost interest.

“You need to eat the vegetables too, Randall,” Hannibal told him. “I will not tolerate waste or picky eaters.”

He could swear he saw the omega roll his eyes at him as he nibbled off a slice of roasted onion and sat chewing it openmouthed like it was ashes. Hannibal thought about correcting him but then decided it was a lesson for another day. The purpose of today’s exercise was just to begin instilling positive associations with hand feeding.

Eventually the omegas finished everything on the skewers, Will somewhat faster than his brother. Hannibal ordered them to stay and then went back to their room to retrieve the strawberries and cream which he had left out earlier and they had not touched.

He put the cream away for another use since it had been sitting out for too long, and quickly melted some white chocolate to drizzle over the strawberries.

When they were done, he brought a plate back to the table and was pleased to see that the omegas had not moved, although they had shifted positions so they were lying down on either side of the chair instead of kneeling. They both pulled themselves back up onto their knees when they saw him.

He sat down and offered a strawberry to Will first. After a little hesitation and placing his teeth as far away from Hannibal’s fingers as he could without letting the food drop, Will accepted.

Randall was less fastidious again and took the food right away even letting the edge of his lips touch one of Hannibal’s fingers.

After feeding another strawberry to Will, he took a bite out of half of one of them himself and offered the other half to Randall.

He watched as desire for the fruit overcoming the fact that it was half-eaten played out across the omega’s face. He ate the strawberry eventually but with obviously less enthusiasm than the first one.

Hannibal smiled and decided that would be enough for the first night. He pushed the chair back and picked them up again to bring them upstairs.

Randall moaned from the pressure of the vest on his full belly and twisted back and forth trying to get Hannibal to put him down again.

“If I put you down will you be a good pup and follow me?”

Randall nodded.

Hannibal put them both back on their feet and started for the stairs checking back every few minutes that they were still padding along obediently behind him.

Will took little stagger steps as they passed some rooms with his head swivelling around to try to see what was in them but every time Hannibal was about to take his arm or pick him up again he would hurry to catch up to them.

Back in the guest bedroom, Hannibal took their vests off, had them wash their hands again and brush their teeth and then gave them the tablet games to keep them occupied. He double checked that they had enough toilet paper and that the bowl of pistachios was still there in case they got hungry again.
during the night. That reminded him to go back downstairs to get them two shatterproof mugs that they could drink from if they got thirsty.

Satisfied that they had everything they needed to settle in, he gave them each a pat on the head (both were too absorbed in their games almost to notice) and told them good night, locking the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Google is responsible for the wine pairings so blame them if they’re OOC for Hannibal. I’m afraid I’m just a smut peddler, not a sommelier.
Hannibal woke suddenly to the unexpected sound of water running through pipes in the wall behind his bed. He turned the light on his nightstand to its dimmest setting and checked the watch sitting next to it. It was just past three in the morning.

It took him a few foggy moments to remember that he had actually brought two omegas home the previous day and that they were currently supposed to be sleeping in his guest bedroom.

He reached for his phone, turning on the surveillance app with one hand while he rubbed the last of the sleep out of his eyes with the other.

The first screen showed him the guest bathroom where the bigger omega – Randall was his name – was sitting in the tub, folded bonelessly against one side, running water through the detachable showerhead over himself.

On the second screen, in the bedroom, the little omega was anxiously pacing around the door to the hallway, testing the handle and working up the courage to bang on it.

Hannibal’s heart lunged for a moment. The training manual had explained that pheromones in the saliva of an Alpha could trigger a heat reaction in unclaimed omegas but he hadn’t seriously thought the amount he’d left on the strawberry would be enough to be effective.

Forcing himself not to rush, he stood up and made the bed pulling the long bolster off the ottoman and placing it at an angle that would facilitate mounting. He set the supplies he had bought out on the nightstand and, when he was satisfied with the arrangements, walked down the hall.

When he opened the door to the guest bedroom, Will all but tackled his front leg, frantic to lead him into the bathroom. He could hear a low and continuous moaning sound coming through the open door.

Burying his grin, lest Will take it the wrong way, he allowed the little omega to guide him to the edge of the tub.

The water coming from the showerhead was ice cold and made white circles on Randall’s flesh wherever it was directed but otherwise his skin was cherry red. Hannibal turned the water off and then reached over to test the omega’s forehead. He could feel the heat radiating off his skin from several inches away.

The pup’s eyes were unfocused and listless and beads of sweat broke out across his face now that the water was no longer washing it away.

Will gave a little distress cry and actually made eye contact with Hannibal, his expression pleading with him to do whatever it took to fix his brother.

“He will be alright, Will,” Hannibal told him lifting him to go back to the other room. Surprisingly, the omega allowed it without protest. “I know how to make him better. But he’s going to have to come with me for a little while.”

“How long?” Will asked gulping.

“Just for a few hours and then you can come and see that he is fine.”
Will looked sceptical but allowed himself to be placed back in the guest bed and the blanket pulled over him. Hannibal noticed that Randall had soaked through the sheets and the blanket on his side and considered changing the bed to make Will more comfortable but decided it was more important to tend to the older omega for the moment.

“You’re a doctor,” Will said more to himself than to Hannibal.

“That’s right,” Hannibal told him. “This is completely normal. He just needs to spend a little time with an Alpha and then he’ll be the same as always. You be a good pup and go back to sleep and I’ll bet by the time you wake up, your brother will be ready for a visit.”

“OK,” Will whispered dropping his eyes but not completely closing them.

Hannibal went back to the bathroom where Randall had slid to the bottom of the tub chasing the last of the cool water with the side of his face.

“Do you want some help Randall?”

The pup nodded miserably and said “Yes, Alpha.”

Hannibal grabbed his largest towel and gathered the omega up in it, lifting him out of the tub and setting him on the toilet seat. He rubbed as much water out of the omega’s hair as he could and then swabbed off the rest of him. Hannibal noticed that the omega was making gentle circles with his hips while he sat trying to capture more of the friction of the rough towel against the entrance to his hole.

“Just be patient,” Hannibal told him. “I have something for you that will be much more effective.”

When the omega was dry enough, Hannibal wrapped him in a fresh towel and lifted him up under one arm. Randall brought an arm up to hold on to Hannibal’s neck and dropped his head into the crook of the Alpha’s shoulder. He could see the pup’s nostrils working, chasing after his scent and could feel the slightest bit of tension go out of the omega’s frame.

Hannibal realised for an absurd moment that he would be completely happy to stand there all night breathing in the sparkling scent of the omega’s hair – something like orange blossoms or jasmine - and feeling the pup’s chest rising and falling in rhythm with his own.

Renewed frustrated moaning from the omega jogged him out of his reverie.

He carried the omega into his bedroom and set him on the ottoman while he locked Will’s door and closed his own. When he got back he saw that Randall had dropped his back onto the cushion and spread his legs with his knees in the air. His hand was starting to knead at his little pseudocock with increasing urgency.

“No pup,” Hannibal told him with measured sternness. Randall didn’t seem to hear him or didn’t understand so Hannibal pulled the offending hand away and then pushed it under the omega’s curving back.

“You don’t touch yourself there without my permission. Do you understand?”

Randall gave a long groan in reply and then tried to roll over onto his knees. Hannibal released him and let him turn while he went to the nightstand to get the cock cage and lube.

When he got back to the ottoman, the omega was presenting for him, a fresh trickle of slick starting to slide down the inside of his thigh.
“We’ll get to that in a moment,” Hannibal told him pulling him around so that he was on his back again.

Hannibal lubed up the cock ring and slid it easily around his pup’s organs. The contact made the omega a little too excited to put the rest of the cage on easily so he gently twisted his balls until his pseudocock went down enough for the cage to slip on.

“How does that feel?” Hannibal asked testing the give to make sure the fit was right.

Randall chewed at his lower lip and frowned as he twisted his hips to try out the weight and level of restriction.

“You need to learn not to come until my knot is inside you,” Hannibal explained patiently. “When you have a little more experience, I can try mounting you without it.”

He leaned forward between the omega’s legs until the pup was trapped beneath him and then he seized his lips in a deep hungry kiss. Randall arched under the Alpha as if something was being drawn out of him.

He seemed unsure what to do at first but after a few moments followed Hannibal’s lead making soft nibbling motions at the Alpha’s lips. Hannibal deepened the kiss several times to insure a good transfer of mating hormones.

Suddenly Randall’s eyes flew open as he realised his fever was breaking a little. Hannibal smiled at him and ran a hand through the sweaty spikes of his hair - which wasn’t quite long enough to get a good grip on.

“We’ll grow your hair a bit longer,” Hannibal told him as Randall leaned up greedily seeking more contact.

Hannibal let the omega take a few more little kisses and sniffs around his neck before pulling back to stand upright again.

“Turn over on your hands and knees,” he told the omega and Randall almost rolled off the side of the ottoman in his eagerness to comply.

Hannibal slid out of his pyjama top and bottoms and folded them neatly on a chair forcing himself to slow down and let the anticipation circulate through his system. He had only had one omega before and never an unclaimed one or one in heat. He knew that both of them would likely remember this for the rest of their lives and he wanted to savour every second.

He walked back to the ottoman and stood behind the omega spreading his cheeks to inspect his hole. The bud of it twitched under Hannibal’s thumb as he tested how much slide the omega’s slick gave him.

The manual advised him to take the omega roughly the first few times to help establish and reinforce their respective functions. Hannibal wanted to make sure the pup had enough slick to take him hard and fast and for a good length of time without needing to stop and add more lube.

There was enough to let Hannibal slide a finger in to the first knuckle but then another wave of heat made the omega clench so hard around him Hannibal almost saw stars.

Pulling his finger back when the omega relaxed again, Hannibal used the little bit of slick that trailed after it to help stroke his long, thick cock up to the peak of its engorgement.
He scooped up some of the precum that was seeping from his tip and began to rub it in placid circles just inside the omega’s hole where it would stimulate his glands to increase slick production.

After a very short time, he was rewarded with a gush of slick that almost coated the back of his hand. He used it to finish readying his cock and then leaned forward to place a row of bruising kisses between the omega’s shoulder blades.

Stepping back to look at Randall again, Hannibal almost laughed to see how far gone he was already. The omega’s eyes were rolled back and he was rubbing his cheek against the velvet of the ottoman cushion while twisting his rump around to entice the Alpha.

Hannibal grabbed him firmly under the arms and dragged him across the bedspread, which rode up a little under his knees, until he was draped over the bolster.

He tested the omega’s hole again and found that two fingers slipped in easily and a third with a little coaxing.

He climbed onto the bed and over the omega, caging him with his arms and indulging himself with another deep sniff behind the omega’s ears.

He used his knees to push the omega’s thighs a little further apart. Randall made a rumbling noise that was almost like a growl as Hannibal lined the end of his cock up and started to slide it in.

He had meant to take the omega with one hard thrust but as soon as he breached the ring of his omega’s hole he was flooded with a sense of bliss so overwhelming it stopped him cold for a moment.

When he came back to himself he realised the omega was breathing in deep long huffs and with each exhale was sliding himself a little bit further and further back onto his cock.

“That’s a good boy,” he told him patting the outside of his hip and then gave another strong push which only gained him another half inch or so into Randall’s tight furrow.

It took another few minutes until Hannibal had buried himself completely in the flushed and panting omega. He felt like he had run up a mountain already and they were barely getting started.

He pulled back out until only his head was captured and then tried a firm slide all the way in. Randall let out a little wail of pleasure under him and started trying to turn to kiss him but Hannibal held his hands down to the bed nibbling at one of the pup’s earlobes instead. He was rewarded with a deep shiver that set off a pulsing in his cock.

Hunting the sensation, Hannibal began to thrust - stiff deliberate jabs giving way to increasingly frenzied, driving and demanding rutting.

The wet clapping sound of his heavy clenching scrotum against the inside of the omega’s thighs chased every other thought out of Hannibal’s mind and he could feel his knot beginning to swell – much more quickly than he could ever remember it expanding before.

The omega felt it too and started to panic at the stretch. He wiggled a little as if trying to crawl out from under the Alpha and Hannibal’s instincts overwhelmed him. He thrust his knot in until it locked and then bit down on the omega’s shoulder to pin him in place.

A few short, restricted thrusts later and he was coming – rush after thick rush of hot claim deposited deep in his new mate.
When he was done he rested for a brief moment with his forehead between Randall’s sweaty shoulder blades. He struggled to reorder his thoughts which seemed to be flying like electricity around his extremities. He worried for a few seconds that he would not be able to capture them again and felt a flash of resentment – as if the omega had manipulated him into giving up something precious. The feeling was overwhelmed a second later, however, by the delightful dragging sensation on his cock as the little slave struggled to catch his breath.

When his movements steadied, Hannibal rolled them both over onto their sides his knot still buried firmly inside his omega.

Randall looked a little wild-eyed but not distressed by the experience. Hannibal gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and told him what a good pup he had been while he worked the cock cage and ring off with one hand.

The omega came as soon as the ring was removed giving a sudden yelp of surprise as his passage started clamping down hard around the unyielding length of Hannibal’s cock. The exquisite pressure on his knot brought Hannibal to a second, even longer, but less productive climax. If he didn’t pace himself the little pup was going to drain him dry.

Randall hummed contentedly and rubbed his forehead along the muscles of Hannibal’s arm. Hannibal licked at the little beads of blood on the omega’s shoulder where his teeth had just broken the skin.

“Now you know who you belong to,” Hannibal told him.
The buzzing, vibrating dance of his phone on the nightstand brought Hannibal reluctantly back to consciousness. The omega was still curled up in bed with him, but his cock had slipped out to rest in the gap between his thighs.

As he rolled over to answer the phone, Randall started to stir as well. Hannibal brought an arm up to partially enclose the omega’s head, stroked his hair and said, “Shhh, go back to sleep.”

“Dr. Lecter,” a deep baritone voice barked as soon as he accepted the call. “I need you.”

“It’s five thirty in the morning, Jack,” Hannibal replied.

“If the lunatics don’t sleep in, neither do you. Meet me at the Highway 40 entrance to the Patapsco Valley State Park in forty minutes and bring rubber boots.”

“I’m afraid I’m not available at the moment. I have some urgent family business to attend to for the next few days.”

“Nonsense, Dr. Lecter. I have four dead betas and an intelligent psychopath running around getting a taste for it now. What can you possibly think is more important than catching the son of bitch?”

“My agreement to consult for the FBI is on a contractual basis and subject to my availability with respect to my other commitments,” Dr. Lecter explained. “And I won’t be spoken to like one of the betas in your unit that you seem to enjoy making jump. As I said, I have a pressing family matter to attend to. If Dr. Heimlich is not available, I might be able to come in on Wednesday or Thursday to assist you.”

The line went silent as Jack hung up on him.

Before his annoyance at the other Alpha’s rudeness could build a full head of steam, Hannibal felt his omega stretching out and rolling around to face him.

“Good morning Randall. Are you feeling better now?”

The pup gave off a long mmmmhhhmming noise, his eyes still closed as he draped himself across the Alpha’s chest.

“Are you hungry? Do you want me to make you something to eat?”

Randall shook his head no and then suddenly looked up and around.

“Where’s Will?”

“He’s fine,” Hannibal reassured him. “He sleeping in the other room. Do you want to go and visit with him for a little while until your heat crests again?”

Randall looked a little confused but then nodded his head yes.

“OK. Come with me for a minute and then we’ll go and see Will.”

Hannibal led the omega into his en suite and rolled the dimmer lights on to full. Randall stopped and winced at how much brighter it was than in the bedroom.
Hannibal sat on the edge of the bathtub where he had good access to the sink and the drawers under it. He motioned for the pup to come and stand beside him.

“Lie down over my legs,” Hannibal instructed him taking one of the omega’s hands and starting to guide him into position.

Randall hesitated and then offered an uncertain protest. “I didn’t do anything bad.”

“It’s not a spanking,” Hannibal reassured him. “Although it will be in a minute if you keep misbehaving. I just want to check that everything is still OK. If you’re a good boy for me, you can go and spend the rest of the morning with your brother.”

Randall reluctantly lowered himself over the Alpha’s legs shifting a little to find the most comfortable position.

Hannibal took some anti-bacterial cream from the drawer and spread it generously around the bite mark on his new mate’s shoulder. Then he raised one of his legs slightly to tilt the omega’s rump up into better light.

Randall tensed and gave little protesting squawks as Hannibal spread his cheeks and examined with considerable satisfaction the deep purple colour that the pucker of his little omega’s hole had shifted to. It would settle back to a permanent crimson red once his heat was over but in the meantime Hannibal could enjoy the evidence of a job well done.

There were no signs of blood or tearing. Hannibal gave a few gentle wipes with a damp washcloth to make sure there was no residue around the hole that would cause chafing later.

He used a combination of lube and more antibacterial cream to coat the retaining plug and then gently pressed it against the omega’s entrance rubbing his lower back with his other hand to help reassure the pup.

Randall tried to turn around to see what was happening and as he shifted his weight, Hannibal slid the plug all the way in. It was much smaller than his cock but large enough that it would stay in on its own without a deliberate effort to remove it.

Randall gave a yelp of surprise and twisted back and forth helplessly trying to get back to his feet. Hannibal curled over to hold down his thighs and upper back until the omega gave up.

“It pinches… oww, it really hurts” Randall sulked when he realised his struggling wasn’t getting him anywhere. Hannibal could tell from his tone that the pup was uncomfortable and embarrassed but not in any actual pain.

“Only because you keep shifting around,” Hannibal told him bluntly. “In an hour or so you won’t even feel it.”

“An hour? How long do I have to wear it for?”

“Until I decide to take it out,” Hannibal informed him.

With that, he took another wash cloth and finished wiping the last of the dried slick and come from the inside and back of the omega’s thighs. When he was satisfied that the pup was as clean as he was going to get without a full bath, Hannibal moved to stand and let the omega roll back onto his feet.

Randall shifted back and forth a little, his face scrunched into a frown and he reached back to feel for the end of the plug.
Hannibal knelt down again to his eye level and said evenly “If you take that plug out Randall, I will whip you so hard you won’t sit down for three weeks.”

He watched the omega struggle to process what he had said and then drop his hand back to his side.

“Good boy,” he told him petting his hair and kissing his forehead. “Let’s go see your brother now.”

Will never made it back to sleep after the Alpha came to take his brother away. As the morning light started to seep in through the slats of the shutters he sat in the corner nearest to the door staring at it bleary eyed and willing it to open.

It was too terrible to even think that he could lose both his father and his brother, the only family he had in the world, within the space of a few weeks. And then what? Spend the rest of his life as a living dress-up doll for some brutish knot-for-brain? No thank you.

He’d been sitting there for so long, he almost didn’t believe it when the door did open and the Alpha came in with his brother limping beside him.

He didn’t notice the limping at first, however, because of the flood of relief that overwhelmed him.

Randall looked grumpy but conscious and himself again. His skin wasn’t maroon anymore and as Will threw his arms around his neck to hug him he noticed that the fever had completely broken.

Unable to contain himself, he gave the Alpha a look of perfect gratitude before closing his eyes to focus on the hug.

Randall made a little “oofing” sound to signal that his patience with the hugging was done. Will let go of his neck and walked with him over to the bed where they lay down together on top of the blanket.

Randall grabbed the tablet from the nightstand and pretended to be immersed in it until the Alpha left them alone without saying anything for once.

Will crawled up between his brothers arms so that they could watch the same screen together. He made a little warbling sound to let his brother know again how glad he was that he wasn’t sick anymore. Randall gave him a little acknowledging trill back and then focused on joining up the dots in his game. Every since Will had been a cub, he and his brother had shared their own little language with each other that not even their father understood. The young omega didn’t even want to imagine what it would be like to have no one else to speak it to.

After a few moments Will asked him, “What happened?” He could feel such an overwhelming tangle of contradictory emotions from his brother he didn’t even know where to start.

“Nothing, I’m fine,” Randall told him and Will knew him well enough to be sure that was the most he was going to get.

The Alpha came back in about twenty minutes later with two round glass bowls filled with what looked like fancy scrambled eggs.

He set the bowls and two spoons on the nightstand and sat down on the bed next to them. When he took the tablet out of Randall’s hand the older omega rolled over onto his other side facing away from them.
“His heat is going to return a few times over the next day or so,” the Alpha explained to Will as if they had been best friends forever and the subject of their conversation was not lying right next to them listening to everything.

The Alpha showed Will how to find the menu on the tablet and send a text message. The only contact showed a picture of the Alpha over the word “Master”.

Will wanted to make a fake gagging gesture but since Randall was facing the wrong direction to appreciate it, he restrained himself.

“When he starts to seem confused again, I want you to send me a message and I will come and take care of him. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha” he whispered hating that there was something in the Alpha’s voice that always made him feel three years old again.

“Good pup,” the Alpha said tousling Will’s hair while he stood up again.

“Eat your protein scrambles before they get cold,” he told them from the door. “You too, Randall. Your heat will be less unpleasant if you stay hydrated and keep your energy up.”

When the door was closed, Will crawled around into Randall’s arms again handing him back the tablet.

“Eat your protein scramble, Randall,” Will told his brother seriously with a thick European accent.

Randall let out a snorting involuntary giggle and gave him the first genuine smile Will had seen since the accident… since well before the accident really.

They started to play one of the games together – a spectacularly stupid and insulting programme that involved matching pictures of food with large greyed out shapes in a refrigerator. When they dragged the right food over the grey shape, the game would make a bright chiming noise and then a mix of the Alpha’s voice and an overly excited computer voice would say “Well done, Randall. Those are ‘grapes’!” or “Good boy, Randall. You put the ‘chicken’ on the right shelf!” no matter which one of them was playing it.

After a few rounds, they were laughing uncontrollably at the ridiculous supportive feedback the game was giving them (“That’s OK, Randall, you tried your best!”). A few rounds after that their belly laughing had turned into real hunger.

They flipped over and devoured the protein scrambles. Will thought it was probably the best thing he had ever eaten in his life. With their father they had lived entirely on Froot Loops, diner food and takeout pizza. He was absolutely going to run away the first chance he got but when he did he suspected the one thing he was going to miss was having his own personal chef.

When they were done with breakfast, they tried a few other games but there was nothing on either of the tablets that wouldn’t have bored a dim five-year-old. While Randall started to snooze, Will tried to figure out some way to access the Internet. He could get into the settings, and he could see that networks were disabled but he needed a password to change the settings.

He tried to guess the Alpha’s password using the limited amount of information he knew about him. “Knot-head” didn’t work and neither did “bossy pants”, “fancy man”, “psycho” or “protein scramble”.

Getting frustrated and bored, he leaned back on the bed and then noticed a slight heat was starting to
radiate from Randall’s skin and that he was beginning to look flushed again.

He wasn’t sure what to do. He didn’t want the Alpha to take Randall away again but he didn’t know how to make him better himself.

When Randall started to moan and it was obvious he was deteriorating fast, Will picked up the tablet and texted “Please help” to “Master”.

The door opened what felt like seconds later and the Alpha crossed over to the bed to feel Randall’s forehead.

“Good job Will,” the Alpha told him. Will choked back a hysterical laugh - he sounded so much like he did in the tablet game.

“I need to take care of your brother for a while now,” the Alpha explained giving him an inscrutable look while lifting Randall up. “Be a good boy and play your game.”

He carried the older omega out of the room leaving the door wide open.

Will’s heart leapt but then he remembered last time the Alpha had come back moments later to lock it.

He waited patiently on the bed facing the door with his “aren’t I a well-behaved boy” expression plastered on his face for when the Alpha came back.

After a few minutes, he walked over to the doorway and peeked out into the hallway. There was no sign of the Alpha anywhere. Leaning out at the waist without daring to put his feet over the threshold he could see further down the hall but still no sign.

A few minutes later he worked up the courage to step out into the hallway. The Alpha hadn’t specifically ordered him to stay in the room – just to play the game. He kept the tablet clenched in one hand as his alibi in case the Alpha confronted him.

It was a long hallway with a number of doors on either side. Will remembered a story that Randall had told him once about a maze and a man with a cow head and that the way not to get lost was always to make right turns.

He put his right forefinger against the wainscoting and set off trailing the knuckle along the wall behind him.

The first few rooms were also guest bedrooms, not very different to the one he and Randall were in. All of them had locked shutters as well. Peering through the slats he saw that they looked down into the neighbours’ side garden, not out into the street.

There was a billiards room and an art studio and a baby plant nursery. Expensive looking paintings hung on every wall, even in the guest bathrooms and each room or suite was carefully colour-coordinated and themed. All the windows were locked or secured.

At the end of the hall was the only door that was closed. Pressing his ear to it, Will could hear the Alpha grunting from the effort to treat his brother’s fever. He could hear Randall groaning as well but at least it sounded like he was getting better too.

Will tested the door handle gently, found that it was locked and then moved back down the hallway and towards the stairs.
There was an entire room filled with musical instruments he had never heard of before – kinds of xylophones and stringed instruments like pianos without keys and what looked like a rotisserie with hundreds of glass disks spitted on it.

Will picked up a felt mallet and tapped it on his hand several times before accidentally dropping it on the floor. He froze, ready to dash back for the bedroom if the Alpha came in but after a few minutes he realised nothing was going to happen. He put the mallet back carefully and then went back into the hallway and down the stairs.

He saw the dining room where they had been last night and the biggest kitchen he had ever seen. They both had floor to ceiling windows looking out into a huge garden with a tall brick wall all around it, it’s own fountain and a shed at the end. He tried to see if any of the neighbouring houses had windows looking down that he could be seen from if he tried to create a signal but he couldn’t find any.

The pantry and wine cellar were each larger than some of the motel rooms that Will had lived in with his father and brother.

There was a formal sitting room, a downstairs lounge and a guest bathroom but it was obvious that the heart of the house was the Alpha’s study – two storeys with an honest-to-God sliding ladder, floor-to-ceiling books on almost every wall and half a dozen cosy looking chairs to curl up and read them in.

Will forgot immediately that the purpose of the exercise was to find a way out of the house. He ran his fingers along the soft leather bindings of the books squinting to see the titles, many of which were in fading gold script and in Gothic lettering.

Many of them weren’t in English - a lot of French and Italian – some in Russian script. There were shelves and shelves of books on psychology, anatomy, art history, philosophy...

At the centre of the library, the Alpha’s desk stood like a pediment and throne.

On the floor next to the desk was a hemp shopping bag filled with even more books the Alpha hadn’t had time to shelve yet.

Will picked one off the top and saw it was an omega training manual. Those were always kept in the grown-up section of all the libraries or bookstores he had ever visited. Overwhelmed with curiosity, Will took the book over to one of a pair of leather armchairs near the desk and started to read it.

The first section he turned to was about how to keep omegas entertained. The author explained that some omegas could be inquisitive little things, not intelligent exactly, but with an instinctual need for regular social contact and mental stimulation. Will rolled his eyes.

The book recommended that games and toys programmed to give regular positive reinforcement in their master’s voice was one way to keep omegas from getting into trouble when their Alpha was busy attending to other things.

Will sighed and flipped to a different section of the book. This one dealt with positive and negative reinforcement.

He was just getting into the second paragraph when he heard a rustling and creaking sound, looked up and saw the Alpha settling into the leather armchair across from him.

He froze, absolutely petrified, unable to form a single thought.
The Alpha was completely casual, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for them to be sitting down together for an after-dinner chat. He adjusted the bottom of his smoking jacket, brushed some imaginary lint off of it and said, “What are you reading Will?”

He sat patiently waiting for a response while Will struggled to remember how words worked.

“B-b- a book,” he stuttered.

“That sounds interesting,” the Alpha replied and resentment at his bemused and condescending tone helped Will recover himself.

“What is it about?”

“Omegas,” Will told him figuring it was pointless to lie when the Alpha could see the spine and cover for himself.

“What about them?”

“H-how to train them.”

“And what are you learning?”

Will glanced down at the open page desperately and grabbed at the first word he easily recognised.

“Treats,” he exclaimed triumphantly. “You have to give them. For, um, positive reinforcement.”

“Oh yes? What kind of treats?”

Will looked down at the page again and read directly this time, “You should keep a well-stocked supply of small finger foods that the omegas particularly like to reward positive behaviour.”

“And what do you and Randall particularly like?” He couldn’t tell if the Alpha was making fun of him, was baiting him into a punishment or was genuinely interested. Usually he could read peoples’ emotions like a book but something about the Alpha always seemed to be remote and closed off to him.

Will took a long moment to consider and then said, “I like tater tots and he likes chicken nuggets.”

He saw the knuckles of the Alpha’s hands go white for just a second clutching the arms of the chair before he relaxed and changed his grimace back into an indulgent smile.

“I think that’s enough reading for today,” the Alpha said. He stood up, took the book, put it back in the bag with the others and then put the bag on one of the highest shelves on the ground floor.

“Can I finish reading it?” Will asked, his eyes following the bag longingly.

“Maybe another time…” the Alpha said but it was obvious this meant no.

“When?” Will pressed him anyway.

“When you’re all grown up and have omegas you need to train.”
Edification

Randall’s heat finished the next day after a few more intense cycles, which Hannibal understood was not unusual for a first time. His next heat, which was due in three or four months, would last a few days longer and he would be much more likely to be fertile during it.

Hannibal made a note to buy some birth control pills for Randall before then. While the purpose of getting an omega was ultimately to have cubs he was in no rush, preferring to take some time to train his pups properly and get them up to peak health and fitness first before they were distracted by new responsibilities.

While the older omega rested between sessions, Hannibal worried about what to do with the pair of them when he needed to return to his work.

He was already having trouble keeping Will engaged in constructive activities when he needed to look after Randall. He shuddered to think what the pup would get into if he was left in the house alone for five or six hours at a stretch.

Reviewing the surveillance videos, he could see that both pups had been very interested and entertained by the tablet games the first hour or two but had then, for some reason, lost their enthusiasm for them.

He kept the door to the guest bedroom open all the time now so the omegas had the run of the house hoping that this would give them more exercise and stimulation. But every time his back was turned, Will was testing the locks on the doors and windows or stealing kitchen knives and hiding them away in various other rooms or sticking his nose into books that were too mature for him or trying to get onto the internet using rude passwords.

In desperation, he let the omegas watch television but even that didn’t seem to occupy them for very long. When he went to check on them they were kneeling backwards on the settee and looking out the window yearningly - watching the sparrows flick between some hazelnut trees in the garden.

Finally, he called Dr Bloom to ask for her advice swallowing his annoyance at the smug tone of the beta’s voice.

“Omegas are extremely social creatures,” Dr Bloom informed him as if this was not the first piece of advice in each of the fifteen omega training manuals he had already consulted. “If they’re misbehaving it’s probably because they’re bored - cooped up with only the three of you in the house.”

“I understand that,” Hannibal replied. “I’m just not sure what to do about it.”

“Why don’t you bring them to the Institute for some classes?” She suggested and it made such obvious sense Hannibal immediately felt foolish for not thinking of it himself.

“They don’t need to be boarded to attend class. It will give them something to do and an opportunity to interact with other omegas.”

“Do you think Dr Chilton will agree to it?”

“If you pay him enough, he’ll agree to anything.”

Hannibal was torn. He really preferred to train the omegas completely himself and enjoyed it when
he had the time for it. Perhaps he could find some elective classes for them that would keep them occupied at least some of the time but would not pre-empt or interfere with any of the training he had planned.

He called Dr Chilton next and arranged for a time to bring the omegas in for some placement testing. The director was reluctant to take Will at first, but Hannibal convinced him that the omega was bright enough to keep up at least in the non-academic subjects and eventually the sum of money that he offered overcame Dr Chilton’s reservations.

The next morning, Hannibal’s Bentley pulled once again into the visitor parking at the Baltimore State Omega Institute. The pups started whimpering nervously in the back seat as soon as they recognised the building but Hannibal reassured them that they were only there to take a few tests. He had no intention of returning them.

He unhooked their leashes from the catches over the door and led them in to the front office.

Dr Chilton met them as soon as they arrived with the same sleazy, ingratiating grin he had had on his face the last time Hannibal saw him.

He led them all into the small library, which was virtually empty, and then put the omegas in separate reading cells where the librarian could supervise them through the glass windows that formed the front wall of each cell.

The omegas didn’t want to be separated but Dr Chilton insisted that they had to be “for the integrity of the testing process” and they obeyed when Hannibal made it clear to them that there was no alternative. Dr Chilton locked the doors to each of the rooms and assured Hannibal that they would be quite safe while they completed their placement tests and he was given a tour of the rest of the facility.

Looking back as they left the library Hannibal saw that Will was happily ticking away at his answer sheet while Randall was slumped over the desk staring at the tip of his pencil.

They visited the arts wing first. Hannibal watched with great interest as they passed a series of bright and cheerfully decorated classrooms where large flocks of omegas were being taught to paint, sketch, write poetry, sing, dance, play music and even put on little plays. Although the class sizes were somewhat larger than Hannibal considered ideal, it looked like the omegas were happy, orderly and engaged with their lessons.

The next wing was for physical activity. The omegas could take supervised classes that would encourage them to run, swim, do yoga and play badminton. There was also a large grassed exercise yard with a circuit of activities and the opportunity for the omegas to get a little sun and fresh air in a safe, enclosed environment.

After crossing the yard they came to a wing for more advanced students. Dr Chilton explained that the purpose was to improve the ability of omegas to carry on an intelligent conversation because, as Dr Chilton expanded in a mystified tone, some Alphas seemed to like that kind of thing. “A lid for every pot,” he said with a snigger. Hannibal moved on to peer into one of the classrooms without responding.

There were much smaller classes here – only four or five students in some of them – and the omegas were learning about literature, history, politics, philosophy, psychology and even foreign languages.

The last two wings were for classes on beauty and comportment; and sexual performance. Hannibal told Dr Chilton he didn’t need to see either of those wings as he would be doing that training himself.
Dr Chilton seemed vaguely disappointed not to have an excuse to visit but led Hannibal to the staff break room instead to get some coffee while they waited for the omegas to finish their placement tests.

When they opened the door, Hannibal was surprised to see one of the teachers beating a student with a thick wooden paddle. The unfortunate omega was splayed over a low table with his briefs around his knees and his backside bright red from the apex of his buttocks to halfway down his thighs. There were even little flecks of blood where the paddle had broken the skin.

The teacher let the student up from the table as soon as he saw Dr Chilton. The omega scrambled to pull his briefs back up and his face turned redder than his haunches when he noticed there was an Alpha looking at him as well.

Once he was able to walk again, the teacher pushed him towards the door by the back of the neck saying, “That’s enough for today, Nathaniel. Go practice your arpeggios.”

The omega shuffled past them red-eyed and sniffling and Dr Chilton moved to introduce Hannibal to the instructor who set the paddle on the table so that he could shake Hannibal’s hand.

“Dr. Lecter, this is Mr. Budge. Mr. Budge, Dr. Lecter. Tobias is one of our most talented instructors. In addition to teaching music, he also understudies cello for the Baltimore Symphony and composes original works.”

“Ah, that’s very interesting,” Hannibal said sizing up the handsome but somewhat serious instructor. “I have season tickets to the symphony. I’m surprised we haven’t met before, as small as the arts community is in Baltimore.”

“Well I’m sure we’ll run in to each other in the future,” Tobias replied. “I moved here relatively recently and am always looking to widen the circle of my acquaintance.”

“Tobias throws the most astonishing dinner parties,” Dr Chilton told Hannibal. “If I close my eyes I can still smell his Pork Roulade with Smoked Foraged Mushrooms. The composition was exquisite.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Hannibal responded but was relieved from the requirement for further comment when a short phrase of harp music came over the intercom system signalling a new class period.

“Do excuse me,” Tobias told them, leaning forward to shake Hannibal’s hand again. “And I hope we will have an opportunity to finish this conversation another time.”

“Of course, Mr Budge” Hannibal said nodding.

When the door closed behind Tobias, he turned to Dr Chilton and paused for a moment as if puzzled and choosing his words carefully.

“I am surprised you allow Alphas to teach here,” he said finally. “Doesn’t that create problems with so many unclaimed omegas running around everywhere?”

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking, but Tobias is actually a beta. He’s comes across a little… assertive… I know. We actually asked him to submit a DNA test before he could start instructing here. I reviewed the results myself and they prove he’s not an Alpha. We would never allow that to happen – it would be unworkable, as you say. And he really is an excellent instructor. His pushes his students hard but at his last teaching position four of them went on to medal in national competitions.”
Hannibal paused for another long moment, then picked up the paddle on the table, turning it over and over in his hand, while Dr Chilton cleared his throat nervously.

Finally, Hannibal broke the silence. “It is unacceptable to me that anyone else discipline one of my omegas. If I enrol them here, then I expect that to be communicated to any instructor who might come into contact with them.”

“That could be tricky,” Dr Chilton said. “It makes it very difficult for the teachers to maintain order in the class if they are allowed to punish some students and not others…”

“My omegas will not misbehave and if they do, you have my permission to call me at any time to resolve the situation. I can assure you there will not be a need to do so more than once.”

“Well, I assume they’ll wear collars while they’re here,” Dr Chilton suggested, thinking aloud. Hannibal nodded in response. “I’ll just let all the staff know that they’re not allowed to punish omegas in collars and need to bring them to the office instead. I imagine if we ever enrol any other claimed omegas, their Alpha will feel the same way.”

Hannibal nodded again. “That would be fine.”

Dr Chilton’s phone buzzed at his side and he started slightly before checking it.

“Your omegas are done with their placement tests and Mrs Coleman has finished grading them. Shall we go see the results and pick out some classes for them?”

The omegas were sitting side by side on the bench in the front office and Hannibal could see at once that something was wrong with them. Randall wouldn’t look up from the floor and Will was looking around nervously and chewing his lip. He assumed they were anxious about their results.

At Hannibal’s direction, the omegas stood up and followed him into Dr Chilton’s office sitting on either side of him in the chairs facing the director’s desk.

“This is really quite astonishing,” Dr Chilton was saying as he read the first page of the results. “I have never seen scores so high for an omega Will’s age.”

Hannibal smiled broadly giving the younger omega a gentle shake by the back of his neck.

“I want him to take French. Both of them actually. And music appreciation. Swimming. And Will can take a few of the conversation classes.”

“Are you sure? All of the other students will be 16 or 17 at least.”

“Yes, the whole point is to challenge him. If he can’t keep up after a few classes, we can find some other ones that are better suited for him.”

Hannibal looked down and saw the younger omega was beaming but trying hard not to show it.

“That fine then,” Dr Chilton said, entering notes in his computer. “What hours do you want to bring them?”

Hannibal brought out his diary and read out the times he had scheduled for his regular patients.

“OK, I will try my best to find classes with suitable topics that fit around those times.”

“I am also on call to do consulting for the FBI. If I need to do some work for them on short notice, would it be possible to bring the omegas in for a few hours and let them take yoga or swimming
classes or some other classes that they could easily drop in on.”

“That should be possible. Many of our staff members are always looking to make some extra money and might be able to watch them on short notice during their break periods as well. That would cost a bit extra of course.”

“Of course.”

“Now, Randall…” Dr Chilton said flipping to the next page. From the corner of his eye, Hannibal could see the omega had his knees pulled up and was shrinking into his chair.

“Randall’s answer sheet was completely blank,” Dr Chilton told them holding it up for Hannibal’s inspection. “And he spent the hour drawing zoo animals on his test booklet. That makes it very difficult to choose appropriate classes for him.”

Hannibal turned to stare down the omega who had an expression like he hoped the earth would open up and swallow him at any second.

“Why didn’t you complete the test as you were asked to, Randall?”

Randall paused for so long Hannibal was about to reask the question with more emphasis when the omega started muttering into his knees, “Why do I need to take a test just to go to stupid music appreciation classes? I don’t even want to come here. Why can’t I just stay at home and Will can do whatever he wants?”

The look Hannibal gave the defiant omega when he peeked up to see his Alpha’s reaction stopped Randall dead in his tracks. He suddenly shrank into himself even more turning red to the tips of his ears.

“He can’t read it,” Will blurted out before Hannibal could act on his unspoken threat.

His brother growled “Shut up” at him and moved to run out of the room but Hannibal caught him around the waist and pulled him into his lap. The omega went slack almost immediately, completely mortified and hanging his head.

“It doesn’t really matter,” Dr Chilton said, eager to defuse the situation. “We can probably design a full schedule for him where he doesn’t need to read anything and find some alternative testing and grading system. It’s not like we’re preparing him for a career in a STEM industry, are we?”

“No,” Hannibal decided. “I want him to be able to read. Don’t you have any classes for that?”

“It’s not really what we do here. All of our students learned in primary school…” Randall gave a little groan and Hannibal shook the hand holding his stomach slightly, warning him to keep quiet.

“But as I said, we sometimes have staff members who want to make some extra money and they might be able to tutor him during their breaks.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’m happy to pay extra.”

“OK, so all I need to do is finalise a schedule for each of them and they should be able to start tomorrow at… 9:30 as long as we receive the deposit we discussed before the banks close tonight.”

Hannibal stood to shake the director’s hand again as Randall slid back onto his feet.

“Thank you very much Dr Chilton and we look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, don’t we
“Pups?”

“Yes, Alpha” they said in unison, Will genuine and eager and Randall looking like he would rather be boiled, stuffed and mounted.
Randall was seething before they even made it to the first class. He had been seething ever since the doctor strapped a collar around his neck and told him he was going to the Institute whether he liked it or not. Until that moment he had held on to a vague, improbable hope that the previous day had just been a bad dream and he wasn’t going to be forced to take stupid omega classes.

Their sire always said school was a waste of time – that all a real man needed to know was how to fix engines, fish, drive a car and handle his liquor. Unfortunately, it turned out he’d only been halfway decent at two of them.

Everything Will and Randall knew was from being dropped off at public libraries while their sire had a job on or just wanted them out of his hair. Will would bury his nose in a book somewhere and Randall would find a nice bored librarian to give him snacks or an art class or story-time to sit in on.

Their first class at the Omega Institute seemed to confirm their sire’s opinion of education generally. They were told to paint pictures of puppies based on photos of puppies. If you already have the photo, why do you need the picture, Randall thought as he added a bear hovering over his puppy menacingly.

But at least Will was in the class with him - and a lot of other omegas that gave them friendly smiles and offered to share colours with their new classmates. And the teacher gave them lots of encouraging pats on the head no matter how hopeless and untalented they were. She even gave them mugs of cocoa at the end while she went around putting gold stars in the corner of everyone’s work. She hesitated for a few moments before putting one on Randall’s but then went ahead and did it anyway.

The second class was where it all went to hell. Will had to go off to another part of the building to take classes for the smart omegas and Randall was stuck in a room by himself with a private tutor who was supposed to be helping him catch up to the dumbest omegas in the rest of the school including the ones two years younger than him.
The tutor just confused him by trying to compare the sounds from letters to musical notes, which Randall also didn’t know anything about. Finally the tutor got frustrated, wrote a row of letters on the top of a sheet of paper and told Randall to copy each of them fifty times while he read his newspaper.

The only good thing about the task was that Randall could finally hear himself think again. He felt like everything since the accident had gone by in a haze. He’d knocked his head really hard on the side of the van before he even knew what was happening and blacked out for most of it. They’d been sedated at the hospital, then again for their intake medical at the Institute, then again when the doctor came to buy them.

And then Randall had been sick for days. But he didn’t want to think about that. He just needed to copy the letter “b” another 35 times and then get through the rest of this stupid, miserable day.

At some point he was going to have to tell everyone that he wasn’t actually an omega. He’d tried to do it at the hospital but the doctor just told him they had some test that said he was an omega and that he was confused because of his concussion. And when he tried to tell the guard at the Institute he just got hit with the electric shock stick. And then he’d been worried if he did convince someone they would split him up from Will - so they had agreed not to say anything. But how long was he supposed to keep the act up?

His sire had constantly been telling him to “Alpha up” whenever he started crying about something. And if he wasn’t an Alpha, how could his sire possibly not have known about it? His dynamic was on his birth certificate and every other piece of paperwork relating to him.

The blood started to creep up the back of his neck and around his ears when he thought about what his sire would say if he knew what he’d done with the Alpha doctor.

He hadn’t really had a choice, he could see himself trying to explain, but the truth was there were parts he had liked a lot and even encouraged. The plugs were awful – thank God he didn’t have to wear them anymore. But he really loved feeling the Alpha’s heaviness all over and around and then inside him, holding him in place, how cool his skin felt in the beginning before it started to warm up, the way he took charge of what happened and when and how fast and hard…

Randall suddenly realised that his thing was sticking up, completely obvious in his school briefs, and there was even a wet patch starting to form in his seat.

He panicked completely. The tutor was still buried in his newspaper and didn’t seem to notice but the class period could end at any time and then he’d have to walk down the crowded halls with everyone staring at him.

“Um, I have to go to the bathroom,” he said as he rushed past the tutor towards the door. The tutor lowered one corner of the paper without really looking over it and shouted “Two minutes” after him.

Randall raced as fast as he could given his predicament, stumbling down the hall from the classroom door to the nearest student bathrooms and diving into a stall.

He didn’t know how to make it go down. He could maybe try drying the briefs under the hand drier but it wouldn’t make a difference if he couldn’t make his stupid thing stop standing up.

He tried to push it down but the contact only made things worse. He tried force of will, pulling the seat of his briefs back to restrict it more, pinching himself. Everything made it worse.

Finally he thought if he just rubbed it very fast maybe it would get tired. He didn’t get very far into
trying though before he felt the tutor’s heavy hand on his shoulder.

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Hannibal breathed a sigh of relief as he drove away from dropping his omegas off at the Institute. He enjoyed them even more than he had been expecting to, even when they were a little naughty or rambunctious. But he wasn’t used to being responsible around the clock for other living beings. He realised he hadn’t had a moment to himself in almost four days. That was quite an adjustment from living alone for decades, coming and going as he pleased.

His pups were someone else’s problem for a few hours in any case. Now he could focus on his work. It was almost an hour’s drive to Quantico in terrible traffic but Hannibal listened to a CD of the Goldberg Variations of Aria da Capo and the trip went quickly.

He was hoping to pick up the crime scene photos discreetly from Dr Katz and then study them for a few hours where he could have some quiet and privacy but as soon as he walked in the door she all but shouted “Good morning Dr Lecter” and that brought Agent Crawford bounding out of his office.

Hannibal gave Dr Katz a withering look in response to her smirk and then turned to the burly Alpha bearing down on him.

“Doctor Lecter,” he bellowed. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

At his tone, Dr Katz and her two assistants pretended to have work in the other lab and scurried off.

“Good morning, Jack” Hannibal replied. “It is always a pleasure to be here.”

“What ‘family business’ could you possibly have that was so important you were happy to let my crime scene go stone cold before waltzing in here three days later at 10:30 in the morning…”

“My business is my own, Jack. I am not obligated to share it, even with you. However, if you would like my assistance with the profile, I am here now.”

“Dr Katz,” Jack shouted at the top of his lungs without breaking eye contact. Hannibal refused to cover his ears, squint or otherwise react to the other Alpha’s conspicuous dominance display.

The beta doctor stopped pretending she wasn’t listening at the door and came in.

“Please read Dr Lecter in on the Duelling Banjos Case. He’s decided he would like to remain employed here.” With that Agent Crawford stormed back into his office and slammed the door.

Dr Katz came over to his side quickly, leaned in and in an unwelcome parody of intimate friendship said, “What, were you helping a saucy little omega through her heat?... Oh my God you were! Look at your face!”

“Let’s just discuss the case,” was all Hannibal would reply. “Before we give Agent Crawford another reason to lose his composure.”

He walked over to look at a series of photos spread out on an examination table.

“Why are you calling it the Duelling Banjos case?”

“That’s just one of Zeller’s stupid in-jokes. We keep finding betas in remote parts of national parks with no clothes and the first three fingers on their right hands cut off.”

Hannibal surveyed the crime scene photos dispassionately.
“What do you know about the victims?”

“They all work at the same laboratory.”

“Do you think someone is trying to gain access? To make use of their identities?”

“Maybe, but why would they? It’s a nutritional science lab. The first victim was researching how to improve the taste of shelf stable tartar sauce. The second one breeds bumblebees. The last two victims were receptionists. Jack thinks that maybe a jealous co-worker at the lab…”

Hannibal’s phone cut her off - the ringtone he had programmed for the Institute.

“I do apologise, Dr Katz. Please excuse me. If you email the case file to me, I can review it this evening.”

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Hannibal pulled into the visitor parking of the Omega Institute for the second time that day determined to keep his temper no matter what. His omega had not managed two hours...

Dr Chilton would not tell him over the phone what had happened – only that it involved Randall, that it could not wait until the end of the day pick-up and that it was serious enough that they needed to discuss it in person.

That left a lot of fuel for speculation on Hannibal’s long drive back. In addition to making him look like an incompetent handler in front of Dr Chilton and Dr Bloom, the omega’s misbehaviour would also give Jack Crawford another excuse to harangue him for not taking his consulting work seriously enough.

Hannibal took a deep breath as he stepped out of car. All of the omega manuals agreed that it was crucial to be firm but not to express anger or resentment when disciplining them. Knowing that they had displeased their Alphas but could earn forgiveness sent omegas into a positive feedback loop of shame and behaviour modification. But thinking that their Alphas were very angry with or even hated them would cause omegas to drop.

Hannibal had been carefully curating his emotional responses and expressions since he was a young child, but he could barely remember a time, certainly not for decades, when he was as angry and frustrated as he was now.

When he entered Dr Chilton’s office he was surprised to see that Tobias Budge was waiting there as well. They both stood up to shake hands and greet him.

“Well,” Hannibal prompted briskly without sitting down.

“I’m so sorry, Dr Lecter,” the music teacher began. “This is quite awkward.”

“Whatever you have to tell me, I am ready to listen.”

Tobias shifted uncomfortably again and said, “I was tutoring Randall and he was doing quite well… but then he asked to go to the bathroom. I didn’t think anything of it, but when he didn’t return for several minutes I went to find him and he was…”

“Yes,” Hannibal supplied feeling a dropping sensation in his gut.

“Well, he was touching himself inappropriately.”
“I know he’s just at the beginning of his training,” Dr Chilton jumped in. “But this kind of behaviour we have to take very seriously.”

Hannibal realised he was grinding his teeth so hard his jaw was starting to cramp.

“Yes, of course Dr Chilton. He certainly knows better.”

“I think perhaps it’s too early to label him a deviant,” Dr Chilton continued. “But if he was still in the Institute’s care, this is the kind of thing that we would make a significant intervention to correct.”

“No, that’s quite right,” Hannibal responded icily. “Where is he now?”

“He’s in the medical bay,” Tobias provided, rising to show Hannibal the way. “He became quite distressed when we informed him that you were coming and Dr Bloom felt it would be best for him to wait somewhere more private.”

Hannibal marched ahead of him, remembering perfectly well for himself how to get there.

When he walked into the medical bay he could see that the lights had been dimmed. Randall was lying with his nose a corner and his lead tied to a hook in the wall above him. Dr Bloom was kneeling over him and rubbing circles on his back.

“Good morning Dr Bloom,” he said brusquely, crossing over to them. “Thank you for your assistance but I can handle the situation from here.”

His pup gave a little whimper on hearing his voice and then scrambled to his feet with his head hung down.

Hannibal unlatched the lead from the hook, shortened the length in his fist and started back for the car at a quick pace, the omega stumbling to keep up with him. Dr Bloom seemed to be about to say something but Dr Chilton signalled her to stay out of it.

At the car, Hannibal latched the omega up to the hook over the passenger door. The pup crumpled immediately across the back seat covering his head with his arms and trying to bury his face in the crease between the seat and back rest.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, Hannibal took several deep breaths before turning on the engine. The peaceful harpsichord music immediately began to irritate him and he switched it off as quickly as he could.

As he drove, he struggled again to moderate his racing thoughts with a cooler-headed assessment of the situation. It was clear that his omegas had no respect for him. Or at least that he had been far too indulgent with their almost constant prodding at his authority.

It was no longer charming or able to be excused by their inexperience. They needed to understand, for their own safety as much as anything else, that obedience was not optional.

At the house, as Hannibal pulled his omega out of the car, the pup started crying and trying to make eye contact with him. Steeled in his resolve now, Hannibal led him swiftly into the study, bent him over the desk and told him to stay put.

The Alpha went upstairs to his walk-in wardrobe and made himself take another four or five deeps breaths to ensure that he was completely in control of himself.

He walked up to the belt rack and spent some time considering his options. The width needed to be
sufficient to make a real impression. He was unsure if patterns or weaves in the leather would be more or less effective but decided that they would be more difficult to properly clean if he had to and ruled them out. He wasn’t planning to use the buckle end but wanted to make sure it wouldn’t scratch or pinch his hand. He also didn’t want to use one of the belts he wore frequently. It would be dedicated to this purpose from now on and he didn’t want his pups to have any other associations with it.

He made his selection, picked up the arm restraints from the nightstand and brought them back down to the study thinking carefully about what he wanted to say.

His pup was still splayed over the desk crying in deep racking sobs when he came in. When Hannibal moved to take off his vest, tie his arms up with the restraints to a hook under the desk and pull his briefs down to his knees, Randall complied passively however his Alpha moved him but kept his eyes squeezed shut.

Hannibal pulled his chair around to the side of the desk where he would be in the omega’s eyeline and sat in it. He leaned forward to cup a hand behind one of the omega’s ears and ran his thumb tenderly through the wet trails on Randall’s cheek. Then he told him to open his eyes.

The pup obeyed at once, the sheen of tears lending an almost startling brilliance to their usual blue colour.

“I want you to listen to me very carefully Randall. Can you do that?”

The pup nodded immediately and with enthusiasm but it wasn’t good enough.

“I need an answer please.”

“Yes, Alpha,” the pup responded almost before the statement was out. His voice was hoarse from his earlier sobbing but he was trying his best.

“Nobody, under any circumstances, ever touches you there except for me. Especially not you. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the pup said closing his eyes and nodding.

“Open your eyes,” Hannibal told him firmly and the omega pulled them open again with a gulp.

“When I tell you to do something, you obey me.”

“Y-yes, Alpha,” the pup shot in, unsure if he was being prompted.

“We had this conversation the first night you came here. I am extremely disappointed to be having it again.”

The omega gave a big hiccupping sob but then opened his eyes again just before Hannibal was going to remind him.

“I’m sorry,” he started to offer but the look in Hannibal’s eyes cut him short.

“You’re going to be punished now to make sure we don’t need to have it a third time.”

Hannibal stood up and picked up the belt. When the pup saw it, he gave another loud whimper and squinched his eyes closed turning his head to rest on his other arm. This time Hannibal allowed it.

Hannibal spread his left hand gently but securely across the small of the omega’s back to hold him in
position. He curled the belt in his dominant hand, brought the arm back about halfway and landed the first few smacks square in the middle of the omega’s backside. He felt Randall tense after each stroke but his crying seemed to have gotten a little quieter as he accepted his fate.

When the skin began to flush, Hannibal started putting his whole arm into it spreading the strokes across the lower parts of his cheeks and into his sit spots. Now Randall was tensing ahead of the blows, uncertain about when they would fall. He started to give little cries in rhythm with the heavy thwacks of the belt instead of the continual snivelling he had been doing earlier.

The strokes began to fall more regularly, faster and harder now. Hannibal felt his hair fall across his forehead and took his hand off the omega’s back to wipe the sweat off his brow. He stood back a little and then with his whole strength brought the belt down on the back of the omega’s thighs.

Randall started clenching and struggling after each blow, trying to twist and curl himself up despite the arm restraints and desk being in the way. This slowed down the pace considerably as Hannibal waited for the omega to settle himself after each stroke before delivering the next one.

Finally, the pup seemed to have run out of energy and went quiet. Hannibal put his hand back in position to steady him and delivered the final few hard, slow smacks for emphasis.

He put the belt down, took a second to catch his breath, and started to rub Randall’s shoulders with one hand while he undid the wrist restraints with the other. The pup’s face was buried in his upper arms.

“Do you have anything you want to say to me?”

“Sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” the omega chanted, too embarrassed to look up.

Hannibal ran his hand through the omega’s hair and told him what a good boy he had been and that he was forgiven now. He checked the marks on the omega’s backside – only a few small cuts but the beginnings of what would be some significant bruising. He rubbed a little anti-bacterial cream into the cuts, shushing the omega when he hissed at the contact. Then he lifted his pup to carry him upstairs.

Randall folded slack into his arms. Hannibal was worried for a second that the pup had passed out but then he shifted to position his nose under the Alpha’s neck and was taking deep, eager breaths of his master’s scent.

“Good pup,” Hannibal told him again as he carried him into his bedroom. “That’s my good boy.”

The Alpha set him gently on the bed and then pulled the duvet over and around him, letting the omega rest his head on Hannibal’s thigh as he stroked his hair gently.

The pup was worn out, quiet and still. When Hannibal’s phone started ringing, however, he started letting off soft whimpers again.

It was Dr Chilton on the other end wanting to know when he was planning to pick up Will who had finished his classes for the day but had no one to collect him.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Hannibal told the director, cursing himself for getting distracted and forgetting the pick-up time. It would be another forty minutes before he got there and Will would likely be acting out in response to feeling abandoned. The last thing he wanted to do was spend the rest of the evening bringing Will into line too.

He set a pillow under Randall’s head, gave him a quick kiss on the forehead trying to ignore the
pleading look in his pup’s eyes, and left swiftly to take care of his other omega.

Chapter End Notes

If you've skipped this chapter because of the trigger warnings, all you need to know is:

1. Randall thinks he's an Alpha
2. Dr Katz is a shit stirrer (not sure that's a *development* though)
3. Hannibal and Dr Katz are working on a case involving lab workers who keep turning up dead in national parks with missing fingers.
4. Randall gets punished. Hannibal gets interrupted from bringing him down from it because he has to pick up Will.

Abandoned tags: Dr. Chilton does not help
“I apologise again,” Hannibal told the director as they walked down the corridor of the arts wing, the faint sounds of Chopin’s Polonaise in A Major greeting them from one of the classrooms. “It’s unforgivably rude of me to lose track of time like this. I can assure you it will not happen again.”

“That’s perfectly understandable,” Dr Chilton replied. “New schedules always take some getting used to and, as we discussed, we are generally able to accommodate your omegas outside of the usual hours for an additional fee. Unfortunately, on this occasion and on such short notice the only class we could find for Will to drop in on was Freeform Movement to Music…”

Entering the studio where the music was coming from, Hannibal could see a large, gangly flock of omegas in colourful tutus spiralling and stomping around in random directions with their arms extended.

Through the flurry of motion, Hannibal finally spotted his little omega standing in the corner, arms folded over his vest, tutu kicked away from his feet and steam practically coming out of his ears.

Hannibal crossed the studio and then knelt down to eye level for his omega.

“I’m very sorry, Will,” he said trying to tilt the omega’s chin up to make eye contact with him. Will twisted his face away to avoid it and then stared daggers into the ground again.

Hannibal wanted to continue his explanation and apology but the music and the fluttering of the other omegas was too distracting. He clipped his lead into Will’s collar and brought him out to the car instead.

The pup climbed angrily into the centre of the back seat and then sat with his arms crossed, not saying anything.

Hannibal shut the door behind him, sat in the driver’s seat and watched his fuming omega through the rear-view mirror.

“I’m afraid I had some very urgent business to take care of today. In the future, something like this should only happen very rarely and I promise I will do everything in my power to ensure you are collected on time.”

They sat in silence for a few seconds and then Hannibal decided that he had had enough.

“Will,” he said deliberately. “What do you say when someone apologises to you?”

Will just shrugged and continued to glare at the empty cupholders.

“You say, ‘Thank you, I accept your apology,’” Hannibal prompted him.

“Thank you, I accept your apology,” the omega parroted insincerely and almost too softly to hear.

Hannibal clenched his jaw but then decided that was good enough for a day like today and started the engine.

As they began to pull out of the parking lot, Will looked up and around suddenly asking, “Where’s
“Randall?”

“He had a little trouble and he needed to come early,” Hannibal explained.

“What did he do?”

“It’s not important,” Hannibal told him. “He’s been punished now so it doesn’t matter. When we get home you can spend some time with him before you do your homework. I think he would appreciate that.”

He watched in the mirror as the younger omega worked through his response.

“OK,” he said finally and then shifted across the seat so he could look out the window for the rest of the journey home.

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When they got back, Will raced into the house as soon as the Alpha unclipped the lead. When he didn’t see his brother in any of the rooms downstairs he raced up to the bedrooms.

Hannibal let him go and started fixing their dinner. He had a pounding headache from all the driving and decided that a simple meal of sliced Mangalitsa salami, fried Haloumi and micro-greens on crostini and homemade elderflower sorbet would have to suffice.

While the cheese was sautéing, he checked his phone and saw that Jack had left four messages.

He had just about worked up the patience to listen to the first one when he felt Will tugging on his sleeve.

The pup looked up at him anxiously and said, “he has his heat again. You have to fix him.”

Hannibal turned off the burners and then followed Will up to the master bedroom. It didn’t make sense for Randall to have a two-day gap between surges in his heat and no other symptoms, so Hannibal guessed he was just moping and wanting some more attention.

The pup had rolled over sideways on the bed so his face was hidden between the edge of the mattress and the leather headboard. He was wrapped entirely in the duvet, hugging a pillow to his chest and all that Hannibal could really see was his very slow breath movements under the blanket.

The Alpha sat on the side of the bed and then reached around to feel his omega’s forehead. It was clammy instead of feverish probably because he was wrapped up so heavily. Hannibal tried to pull the duvet away, but the omega clung on to it for dear life.

He sent Will to get a glass of water and tried to roll Randall over to get a better look at him. He didn’t entirely manage but he did see that the omega was glassy eyed and flushed.

Hannibal sat back against the headboard and pulled the omega into his lap hoping that scenting his Alpha’s pheromones would start to bring him out of it. Randall poked his head out of the blanket to rest it under Hannibal’s neck and he willingly took sips from the water glass when Will returned with it but he still didn’t respond to any questions or seem to be completely aware of his surroundings.

When nothing else seemed to be working, Hannibal decided he needed some food but when he went to lift the omega off the bed he started distress crying so loudly Hannibal put him back immediately.

“You need to eat something,” Hannibal told him. “And you’re not allowed to have food in my bed.
I’m going to bring you downstairs and you can eat in my lap. How about that?”

The pup just rolled over against the headboard again and didn’t respond.

Frustrated, Hannibal told Will to stay with his brother and text him if he got worse. Then he went down to his study to consult the omega manuals.

He was able to diagnose it as subdrop from his medical training but couldn’t specifically remember all of the techniques recommended for dealing with it. In his practice, he worked almost exclusively with betas. He consulted half a dozen manuals and made a list of what to try.

When he went back upstairs he had his arms full. He saw that Will had managed to insert himself between Randall and the headboard and was making that trilling sound again with his forehead pressed against his brother’s bare chest. Will was getting increasingly upset when he didn’t get a response.

He asked the younger omega if there was any progress. The little omega glared daggers at him when he interrupted but then he shook his head no sadly.

“Why don’t you go and do some homework? I have some treatments I can try with him,” Hannibal said.

The younger omega protested a little but then left reluctantly, closing the door behind him.

Hannibal took his clothes off except for his boxer-briefs and climbed into the bed again. Skin-to-skin contact with his Alpha was supposed to be the standard treatment. He pulled the cocooned omega back into his lap and gradually managed to peel the duvet and pillow away from him by replacing it with contact with his arms, chest and legs and letting the pup scent him freely.

He encouraged the omega to take little sips from the hot cider he’d brought and then followed it with a few squares of chocolate.

With the blanket gone, the pup cooled down quickly and seemed slightly more alert but still unwilling to look up at him. Hannibal praised him frequently and then talked about random subjects so that the pup could hear his voice. He told him about Will and the music class and thought he could almost see a little smile.

The Alpha placed very gentle pressure with his hands and then mouth over the omega’s claiming mark mindful that it was still healing. Then he moved them so that they were lying on their sides with Hannibal’s upper arm and leg draped over the omega. He tilted them over a little more, placing gradually more of his weight onto the omega but making sure not to put any pressure on his tender backside. The purpose was simply to let the omega feel that he was there and looking after him.

Having exhausted his list of subdrop treatments, Hannibal was about to go downstairs to see if he could find any other ideas when the pup started giving a series of little hiccupping sobs which turned into a brief flurry of crying and apologies. When Hannibal renewed his reassurances and reminded him that he was forgiven, the omega turned to snuggle lightly into Hannibal’s shoulder.

After a few minutes, the Alpha asked him “Are you hungry, Randall?”

“Yes, Alpha, starving” the pup responded quietly and Hannibal felt a surge of relief wash over him to hear his voice.

“Let’s go downstairs and have some dinner then,” the Alpha said standing and moving to pick his omega up.
But Randall continued to cling to the sheets and fuss when Hannibal tried to pick him up.

Hannibal decided to test a gentle command, “Stand up Randall.”

After a second the pup stood up on top of the bed wobbling a little after lying down for so long.

Hannibal stepped over to the door and ordered him to, “Come over here.”

The omega seemed to be genuinely trying but as soon as he got to the edge of the bed he couldn’t seem to bring himself to step off it. Watching him hesitate half a dozen times and seeing that he was starting to get genuinely distressed again, Hannibal quickly told him “OK, lie down.”

When the omega happily complied, Hannibal pulled the duvet over his waist, gave him a little peck on the forehead and said, “This one time and one time only…” before heading down to the kitchen.

He ran into Will two steps, pacing and glowering, outside the bedroom door and told him he could go in and keep his brother company. Will lit up again and ran in to see him.

The crostini would leave crumbs everywhere, so Hannibal packed away all the ingredients and tried to think of a dish that posed the absolute minimum risk to his 3,000 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets. He couldn’t believe the omegas had him wrapped around their fingers like this in less than a week.

He came back up a little less than an hour later with his largest serving tray and two dishes in the middle of it.

He had Will sit back against the headboard and Randall lie on his side next to him to keep the pressure off his bruised rear. Then Hannibal spread towels around their necks and along both of their sides, behind them and over every other possible surface where crumbs could land.

Hannibal placed the tray over Will’s legs and then sat cross legged on the other side lifting the lids from the two dishes. The omegas cried out at the same time:

“Tater tots!”

“Chicken nuggets!”

“No,” Hannibal told them sternly. “This is an amuse-bouche of pommes darphin and deconstructed pollo alla parmigiana.”

Hannibal let both pups sleep in his bed that night as well. Randall still wouldn’t leave it no matter what and Will started to fret when Hannibal suggested he go back to his own room all night by himself.

In the morning, Will sprang up as soon as the alarm went off to get ready for school but Randall still melted down if Hannibal tried to get him out of bed. In addition, Randall was flinching like he was in pain even when there was no obvious contact with the deep purple bruises on his backside.

“What’s wrong?” Hannibal finally asked him.

“I have to pee.”

“The bathroom is right over there…”


Randall looked to the en suite door, looked to Hannibal again and then gave another deep wince.

“Don’t you dare,” Hannibal told him. “I can carry you if you want, but you are going to the en suite, not in the bed.”

He moved to pick the omega up but when Hannibal tried to lift him the pup started grimacing, twisting around and then letting off distress cries in the characteristic omega tone that made it almost impossible for Alphas not to stop whatever they were doing and try to make it better.

“Fine,” the Alpha said putting him back down and distractedly picking up the first suitable thing he encountered on the mantle. He handed the pup a 18th century Imari porcelain vase, one of his least favorite of a large collection left to him by his uncle. Hannibal told him to make sure he didn’t spill anything and went down to consult his manuals again.

As he was desperately checking through the indexes at the back of each book, Will came in already dressed for school to beg for his breakfast.

Hannibal told him, “I’m very sorry Will, but your brother still isn’t well enough to go and I shouldn’t be away from him for so long in case he needs something. Give me five more minutes and I’ll come and make some breakfast for you. After that we can find some books for you to read instead.”

Will looked a little disappointed but didn’t protest instead taking off his vest and then scampering up to visit his brother.

There was nothing in any of the manuals that was even vaguely relevant. The only references he could find to omegas not wanting to get out of bed were bred pups becoming agoraphobic in the week or so before they whelped.

At the end of his wits, Hannibal picked up the phone to consult the most esteemed omega therapist in his circle of acquaintance.

“Hello, Dr Du Maurier. I’m very sorry to disturb you first thing in the morning but I need an emergency consultation.”

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Bedelia was elegant even at seven o’clock in the morning. She was there so quickly Hannibal wondered if she slept in her Italian silk blouses.

“Hannibal,” she said simply as she came through the door.

“Dr. Du Maurier. Thank you so much for coming at such short notice,” they set quick kisses on alternate cheeks and then Hannibal offered her some fresh squeezed orange juice he had just made for the omegas.

“Not this morning,” she replied, “but perhaps some caffè macchiato if it’s not too much trouble and then I think it’s best if I see my new patient.”

They made light conversation about shared professional acquaintances over their coffees and then Hannibal gave her the background to the issue. The Alpha assembled a tray for Randall’s breakfast and then they went up together to bring it to him.

After sending Will downstairs to entertain himself, Hannibal fed the older omega while Bedelia introduced herself and asked him some simple questions about himself. Randall answered a little shyly but without significant reluctance.
“He doesn’t seem to be dropping,” she told Hannibal putting the back of one hand across the omega’s forehead. The pup sniffed curiously at the perfume from her wrists and Hannibal began to have second thoughts about inviting another Alpha into his bedroom to examine his omega.

“He was last night but then he recovered after about two or three hours. The only problem now is that he won’t leave the bed.”

“Have you ever had this problem before Randall?”

He shook his head no.

“What does it feel like when you try to get out of bed?”

“Like I’m going to fall down. Or it’ll hurt.”

“He can’t even get out of the bed to relieve himself,” Hannibal added pointing to the vase Randall had left on the nightstand and which he was now avoiding looking at.

Seeing how ashamed he was, Bedelia smiled at him kindly and the pup seemed to relax a little. She took the vase off the nightstand and set it on the floor where it would be out of his line of sight. Then she opened her clutch and took out a pen to start recording notes but accidentally dropped it.

Before Hannibal could move to pick it up for her, she pulled a second pen out, held it up for him to see and then continued her questioning while scribbling into her embossed notepad. Despite his worry, Hannibal took a brief moment to admire her taste in stationery.

“How old are you Randall?”

“Fifteen.”

“Have you had your heat yet?”

Randall looked confused and said, “I… don’t think…”

“Yes,” Hannibal cut in. “He had his first one earlier this week.”

“Perhaps I can ask Randall a few questions in private. There’s some things I need to ask that he might be a little embarrassed to answer in front of his Alpha.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Hannibal replied. “He’ll be less anxious if I’m here.” He could see that the omega was already beginning to turn red and look around uncertainly. He was starting to regret ever calling the therapist for help.

“Very well. If you’ll please let him answer though I think the session will be more productive.”

Hannibal took a step back, unable to completely suppress his resentment at the other Alpha thinking she knew better than he did how to handle the omega.

Bedelia turned back to Randall and continued with her usual urbane tone. “Did your Alpha fuck you during your last heat?”

The omega gulped and looked like he wanted to sink into the earth again.

“Go on, Randall” his Alpha tried to encourage him to get this over with as quickly as possible. “You can be honest. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about”
“I… I don’t know.”

“You don’t remember if he did or you don’t understand the question?”

“I don’t understand,” Randall was looking to his Alpha like he was afraid he would be in trouble so Hannibal rubbed his lower back to reassure him.

“Did your Alpha put his cock in your hole and then come in you?” Bedelia asked as if she wanted to know the time.

“I think that’s quite enough Dr Du Maurier…” Hannibal started to cross around the bed to escort her out but the therapist ignored him and looked directly at Randall instead.

“Do you know what those words mean, sweetheart?”

Hannibal looked down and was surprised to see that his omega was shaking his head no. He had assumed that a pup as old as he was would be familiar with at least the basic facts of life and realised that there was a lot more training they needed to do.

“Yes,” Hannibal cut in before she could ask another ridiculous question. “I mounted him during his last heat.”

Dr Du Maurier gave a secretive little smile and then leaned down to pick up her other pen. Now that they were on the same side of the bed, Hannibal noted with disgust that it had fallen into the vase.

Bedelia wiped off one end with a wet wipe while looking at the other. Then she held it up so that Hannibal could see the blue plus sign.

“Then congratulations,” she announced drolly. “You’re going to be a father.”

Chapter End Notes

I guess Bedelia walks around with unwrapped pregnancy tests in her bag. Whatever.

Abandoned tags: Stationery kink; Hannibal gets told

My Google search history:
"Pretentious Japanese vases"
"Pretentious blouses"
"Most pretentious coffee drink"
Hannibal stood stunned for the better part of a minute while Bedelia enjoyed his rare discomfiture.

“Perhaps we can continue this discussion in your office,” she suggested.

Hannibal suddenly remembered that she was there and replied, “Yes, of course. We’ll be just downstairs. Stay here Randall.”

The pup rolled his eyes at him and then curled up under the blanket seeming not to have followed the therapist’s meaning and just relieved that the questions were finally over.

Down in the study, they found Will furiously poring over the omega training manuals Hannibal had left out on his desk.

“Out,” Hannibal told him a little more harshly than he intended. The younger omega jumped out of his seat and looked at the floor anxiously. The Alpha softened his voice a second later and told him to go play with his brother and make sure he was drinking enough water.

When the pup was gone, Hannibal made sure to lock the door to keep out prying ears and then sat in one of the leather armchairs across from Bedelia.

“I don’t know what to say,” he admitted.

“I hope this is good news at least.”

“Yes, just unexpected. It was my impression that most omegas are not fertile during their first heat.”

“It’s very unusual, but not unheard of,” she replied.

“And the manuals said something about gestational agoraphobia but I was under the impression that omegas only experienced it just before giving birth.”

“In the vast majority of cases yes, but in certain circumstances omegas can experience it at any time during the pregnancy.”

“And what circumstances are those?”

“It’s a form of anxiety disorder that sometimes manifests in young omegas when they are pregnant with their first cub. When an omega doesn’t understand what is happening to it, it’s instinct will be to find a safe place and try to conserve its energy until it understands the situation better. Because Randall hasn’t had the benefit of the omega training that most pups his age would have experienced or of a positive omega role model, his body doesn’t understand the hormonal changes that it is going through either as a result of claiming or quickening with his first cub.”

Hannibal tried not to lose his train of thought each time the word “cub” was mentioned but was finding it increasingly difficult.

“Claiming fundamentally rewires an omega’s neural pathways so that he can only experience sexual and romantic fulfillment from his Alpha and obviously a first pregnancy results in a host of additional hormonal and physical changes. Both happening so close together is likely overwhelming Randall’s
ability to process them appropriately.”

“This is quite fascinating, Dr Du Maurier. It’s obvious that what I was taught in medical school is now somewhat dated.”

“There’s an excellent recent study out of Johns Hopkins that looks at the impacts of social isolation on feral omegas which cites several comparable examples. It supports what we have known for years, but did not have scientific evidence for before – that it is crucially important that omegas be properly supported through key changes of life stage.”

“From an anthropological perspective, omegas evolved to live in large, mixed-age communities of a number of omegas claimed by a single socially and sexually dominant Alpha. The older omegas instinctively guide the younger ones. But in our modern society, traditional family structures have broken down. Hence the need for Omega Institutes, albeit with beta instructors instead. A poor substitute, I’m sure you’ll agree. I’d be happy to send you a copy of the working paper if you would be interested.”

“Yes, I would be very interested. But how long is the reaction going to last and how can I help Randall out of it?”

“It’s difficult to say. The encouraging news is that he thinks of your bed as a safe place. It’s obvious that bonding has been successful and that he instinctively trusts you. The next step would be to try to remove as many sources of anxiety from his life as possible. And part of doing that is ensuring that you are explaining to him what is happening to him in a way that he can understand. Starting with basic anatomy,” she finished and he could swear he saw a shadow of a wink in her eye.

“So it has nothing to do with my punishing him?”

“Potentially the timing is coincidental, but anxiety around punishments can also be a contributing factor. Again, if an omega doesn’t understand why he is being punished or feels the punishment is unfair for some reason, that his Alpha isn’t listening to or doesn’t care about his side of the story, or he doesn’t understand what he needs to do next time to avoid another punishment that can all lead to anxiety which will trigger or worsen the condition.”

“When he feels safer and more confident, he will no longer need to stay in bed or in the house. How long that takes will be up to you as his trainer.”

“Well,” Hannibal said. “You’ve given me some unexpected news and a great deal to think about. Thank you very much for your time Dr Du Maurier. I hope I can call on you again if I have any more questions.”

“Of course, Dr Lecter. I often find that it’s the Alphas who are more in need of my assistance than their omegas.”

After seeing Bedelia out, Hannibal went in a kind of daze to the wine cellar, ground his heel into the specific section of the floor that released the trap door and went downstairs into the basement.

The cool air from the freezers helped him to arrange his thoughts.

If he had to select the dominant emotion it was pride that his little omega had managed to quicken so easily. It was a good sign for the future, he thought. The timing was not ideal. He had not had the opportunity to bring his omega up to peak condition first. But some careful attention to his dietary intake should quickly compensate.
Hannibal picked out some liver for the folates and iron content. Checking his supplies, he could see that he was running somewhat low – particularly if he was feeding three, or rather four, now instead of just one.

He could see that he would be extremely busy, not just with the training and consulting work but with preparations for the cub. Perhaps it was time to refer some of his less interesting regular patients… That would also allow him to accelerate the training programme for his pups instead of having to drop them off at the Institute all the time.

He returned to the wine cellar and had just closed the trap when he noticed Will lurking at the door.

“Hello, Will,” he said and then waited for the omega to explain himself.

“I was just looking for some juice… for Randall,” the pup lied to him with a casual agility that suggested a significant amount of practice.

“The juice is in the refrigerator,” Hannibal told him. “There’s nothing in here that is suitable for omegas to drink. In fact, I think this room should be out of bounds. The bottles are fragile and some are quite valuable. I don’t want to see you or your brother in here again. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“I will punish you if you disobey me and also if you lie to me again.”

“Yes, Alpha,” the pup replied with a little gulp.

“I need to talk to Randall for a little while. If I let you pick out some books – within reason - from the library, will you be able to behave yourself?”

Will nodded enthusiastically. Hannibal put the meat in the refrigerator, ignoring the omega’s inquisitive looks and led him back to the study.

When he had Will happily settled with an insect encyclopedia nearly as thick as the pup’s arms, Hannibal went back upstairs to check on Randall.

The older omega was curled up in the duvet again but was facing out into the room. He looked more bored than confused and was tracing a pattern in the bolster with his finger.

Hannibal took the vase into the en suite, emptied it, gave it a quick wash and then took a shower.

After towelling off, instead of getting dressed he went back into the bedroom and sat on one side of the ottoman. As soon as he entered the room he was aware of the pup pretending not to watch him. The omega had never seen him naked before in full daylight and outside of the haze of his heat.

Hannibal leaned back and collected the pup under his arms. He gave a little whimper when the Alpha lifted him over the bolster but then relaxed when he was set down on his knees on the ottoman instead of on the floor.

“Dr Du Maurier suggested that we have a talk. She thinks you’ll feel better and won’t need to stay in bed all the time if I explain what I’m doing when I mount you.”

He saw the omega turn beet red and then reached over to put his hand on the back of the pup’s neck giving him an encouraging stroke. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You’re a grown-up omega now and there’s nothing wrong with understanding how your body works, or mine.”
“Would you like me to show you?”

The pup hesitated for a second but then bent forward a little and nodded nervously.

Hannibal leaned back slightly so the omega could see him better. He took one of Randall’s hands and brought it so it was gently holding up his slack cock. The little flutter of the omega’s fingers - uncertain where to place them – sent a quick shiver up his spine.

“This is what my cock usually looks like,” he explained. Randall gave him a darting uncertain look but was otherwise absorbed by the object directly in front of him.

Hannibal brought his hand up to enclose the omega’s hand around his cock and then led him in a few gentle strokes that teased his foreskin down.

“You can touch my cock if you ask my permission first,” Hannibal instructed him. “I won’t always have time, but you’re always allowed to ask.”

He wasn’t sure if the pup heard, however, because he was gazing open mouthed at his Alpha’s swiftly reddening dome. Hannibal gave him a quick kiss on the temple.

“If you’re being a good boy, and I decide to mount you, my cock will start to get big and hard, like this.”

He led the pup’s hand in slightly longer and faster strokes. He smiled and gave a pleased little huff not only from the warm friction but from the look of intense concentration on his omega’s face as his cock began to stiffen.

“The part that feels the best is just under the head here and this little crease on the bottom side of it,” Hannibal lifted his cock up a little further and demonstrated with his other hand. “That’s what I want you to lick when I put it in your mouth.”

Randall looked a little startled, as if he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly.

Hannibal smiled at him, lifted two of his fingers with his opposite hand and slid them into the pup’s open mouth.

“Cover your teeth with your lips. There you go just like that. Now hollow in your cheeks like you’re eating a popsicle. Good pup.” Hannibal pulled his fingers out and slid them under the omega’s hand so that the saliva could start to wet his shaft. “Now do that on my cock.”

Randall shifted forward a little falteringly. When he was close enough, Hannibal put a hand behind his head to guide him down gently. The pup accepted him delicately and then obediently began to lick at his frenulum and the rim of his glans.

Hannibal gave a slight groan and the pup stopped for a second to look at him. “That’s a good pup. You’re doing it exactly right,” the Alpha reassured him. “Lick the rest of it to get it nice and wet for me.”

While the pup was laving him down, Hannibal sucked on two of his own fingers briefly and the spit in his other hand. He stroked himself quickly a few more times with the spit to help things along and then brought the omega’s head down onto his cock, a little further this time.

“See how deep you can take it,” the Alpha instructed. Randall made it about halfway before starting to tense up.
“That’s a good pup, that’s a good start, move your tongue up a little to make it tighter, now suck a little, a little harder, breathe through your nose, now up and down, spiral around a little, that’s right…” Hannibal was finding it more and more difficult to concentrate on giving directions instead of on the accelerating pulses in his cock.

He moved his arm around to gently rest on the omega’s lower back, and careful to avoid the most tender skin, he started to brush the tips of his fingers through the slick around the omega’s hole. Randall gave a little startled hum around his cock that was absolutely delicious and then went back to work.

“This is your hole,” Hannibal told him. “When I fuck you, this is where I put my cock. You make slick to make it easier for me to put it in.”

Randall gave a moan so long and hard Hannibal’s gut clenched.

He reached around again, one hand helping on the bottom of his shaft and the other guiding the omega’s hand to gently bounce his scrotum in rhythm with the strokes on his cock.

His knot started to grow and Hannibal moved the pup’s hand to it.

“Do you feel that?” Hannibal asked.

The pup tried unsuccessfully to nod and then to say “Umm-humm” with a mouthful of cock. Hannibal’s knot almost doubled in size from the sensation.

“That’s my knot. If you’ve been a very good pup, it will lock inside you for a while when I’m done and hold my come in you.”

Hannibal saw the pup’s forehead crease a little and he immediately added, “Don’t worry, we’re getting to that.”

He let the omega get a little more practice sliding on his shaft and then gently guided him up and off so he was back on his knees with just his hand loose around his Alpha’s knot. Hannibal showed him how to tighten it to provide the perfect amount of pressure, gave himself a rapid series of jerks and then came all over the back of his hand. The omega gave a little start and then leaned in closer to watch, wide-eyed but not at all frightened.

When Hannibal caught his breath again, he held his hand up for the pup to see. “That’s my come,” he showed him. “That’s what I leave inside you when I mount you.”

Hannibal was caught off guard and then thrilled when, unprompted, the pup started licking it off his hand. He didn’t seem thrilled with the taste initially but he dutifully licked up a good amount and then sat back on his knees smiling contentedly at his Alpha.

Hannibal supressed the urge to bend him back and ravage him and instead gave him a hard kiss on the cheek and a quick pet behind the ear. He went into the en suite to wash his hand off and wipe it with a towel. When he turned, he was thrilled to see the omega had followed him to the door. He sat on the edge of the tub and signalled the pup to come over and sit on his lap. Randall obeyed without any hesitation.

Hannibal gave him a lengthy series of deep kisses as the omega squirmed happily in his lap. From the fluttering motions on his unconstrained knot, Hannibal let out a few more quick spurts of come onto the side of his omega’s thigh.

When the Alpha released him for a second, Randall scooped it up to look at it more closely.
“What is it?”

“It’s millions and millions of little seeds that can make a cub start to grow in your belly,” Hannibal replied giving him a fond rub there and kissing him again. “In fact, you have my cub growing in there right now.”

Randall seemed not to have heard or understood him at first. “A cub, like a baby?”

“Yes,” Hannibal told him with another long kiss to the forehead. “You were a very good pup during your first heat and quickened with a cub for me.”

“But I’m not an omega,” Randall blurted out.

Chapter End Notes

Dammit, Kinky Sex Ed Scene - you were only supposed to be a few paragraphs long. I absolutely swear to God that the next chapter actually advances the plot.

Also, come on Hannibal! Read your alumni newsletter!
Hannibal noticed that Randall had frozen in his lap before he registered what the pup had said.

He saw Randall eying the door and wrapped one arm around his knees and the other around his stomach.

“It’s all right Randall. You’re not in trouble. I just want to have a talk. Did you say you’re not an omega?”

Randall nodded after a few seconds of frantically trying to think of an alternative.

“What are you then?”

“An Alpha?”

“Are you asking me?” Hannibal asked smiling at him and giving him another quick kiss to reassure him. He was relieved to see that the pup was confused, not convinced.

“My sire told me.”

“But you’re not sure if it’s true?”

“How could he be wrong about it?” Randall shifted a little so he could look the Alpha directly in the eyes.

“I don’t know… But I don’t think we need to worry about him right now. We just need to look at the facts and draw a conclusion that we can both live with moving forward. Do you want to try it?”

“Okay.”

“Do you feel like an Alpha?”

“I don’t know. What does it feel like?”

Hannibal smiled and after a moment of thought said, “I don’t know. That’s a good question… I suppose when I was your age sometimes I would think about finding an omega and mounting them. I even had dreams about it. Is that something you think or dream about?”

Randall tried to remember and then shook his head no cautiously.

“Do you think about sex at all?”

The pup’s blush answered for him.

“What do you think about?”

“With you.”

“With me on top?”

Randall nodded, still too embarrassed to make eye contact. “Yes, with your cock in my hole.”

Hannibal smiled warmly and gave him another quick kiss.
“And that feels good? You like it? There’s no other way you think you would like it more?”

“Yes… but if I’m an Alpha isn’t it bad?”

“Not necessarily. If we are both enjoying it the way we like it the most, how can it be bad?”

He paused for a moment to let the pup take that on board.

“Do you think about it a lot?” Hannibal asked with a microscopic smirk, unable to resist the brief digression.

“Yes,” Randall nodded looking up at him. “All the time. I can’t think about anything else hardly.”

“Then to summarise the facts there’s a DNA test that says you’re an omega, you had a heat, you passed a pregnancy test, you don’t have a knot, you get slick, I’m a doctor and I saw omega reproductive organs on your ultrasound, and you prefer sex in an omega position.”

Randall nodded along, his brow furrowing.

“But on the other hand, your sire thought you were an Alpha for some reason.”

The pup sat expectantly waiting for his Alpha to come to a conclusion.

“I can’t make your mind up for you, Randall,” Hannibal told him. “You’re the only one who knows how you really feel. I just want to say that it doesn’t matter to me either way. You’re mine now, just as much as the cub inside you. If you think you’re an Alpha, then you’re my Alpha. And if you accept that you’re an omega, that can mean whatever you need it to mean.”

Hannibal wanted to sit with him a little longer and answer any questions but he could hear the doorbell ringing downstairs.

Cursing the intruder silently, he carried the pup back to the bed and told him he would be up again shortly in he had anything else he wanted to talk about. It was probably for the best to give him a little time to sit and think about it.

Hannibal pulled some clothes on and then went to answer the door.

Downstairs he saw Will hovering near the front entrance unsure of whether he should or even how to open the door. Hannibal directed him back up to the guest bedroom with his book. Once he’d locked the door, he want back downstairs to answer the persistent ringing.

Jack walked through the door as soon as it opened with a manila case file in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

“If Muhammed won’t come to the mountain, then the mountain must come to Muhammed.”

He held out the wine for Hannibal who accepted it graciously.

“A Gantenbein pinot noir… Swiss.”

“A peace offering,” Jack said coming into the kitchen and placing the file on the counter. “I won’t apologise for my enthusiasm for catching these sons of bitches but sometimes it makes me forget that there can be more important things in life… like family.”

“Yes,” Hannibal replied, lifting the bottle in a casual salute. “Every day I appreciate a little more how important it can be.”
“That reminds me. My omega, Bella, keeps asking me to invite you over for dinner. Ever since I brought home some of those macarons you shared with the office she has been begging me to arrange a dinner party. I can’t promise anything as amazing as what you probably make every night for yourself, but we would certainly enjoy your company.”

“That would be wonderful,” Hannibal replied. “I would be very honoured to meet your famous Bella.”

“Sometime next week then,” Jack concluded.

After a decent pause, he continued, “Now, about the case…”

And here we go, Hannibal thought.

“I’m not sure if you had time to review the case file…”

“Only briefly, I am intending to study it in more detail this afternoon.”

“I think the best place to start is with interviewing the coworkers to see if anything shakes loose.”

“That would certainly seem sensible. Perhaps we can set the meetings up for next week. I can send you an updated schedule with my availability.”

“That was my next thought. Unfortunately, when I called the lab manager he told me that even with our security clearances we would need a specific approval from the Department of Defence to enter the facility, interview anyone that works there or review the copy of their security protocols or the tapes that I requested.”

“I thought Dr Katz said it was just a nutritional sciences lab.”

“Obviously, that’s some kind of cover. I think the theory about identity theft, perhaps by some kind of foreign agent, is now more likely. But we can’t rule out that the killings are unrelated to whatever is going on in that lab. Until we do, I was hoping you could work up a profile based on whatever you can deduce from the crime scenes. It could take weeks to get the clearances we need from DoD. They seem much less concerned about four bodies getting cold and a serial killer or rogue agent running loose than covering their own asses. But in the meantime, let me know if you need me to arrange any site visits.”

“That sounds fine.”

Hannibal saw the other Alpha out, then brought the case file to his desk and opened it to the first page.

After skimming a few words, he closed the file and went up to check on Randall realising that he was still too preoccupied with the morning’s events to concentrate.

He was pleased to see that the pup was kneeling in one of the armchairs staring into the empty fireplace instead of stuck back in the bed again.

Hannibal came over to sit on the ottoman. He beckoned Randall to come sit in his lap again, which he did willingly. He scented his pup’s hair and was surprised to find that it had acquired a richer but more serene fragrance.

Finally breaking the silence, the Alpha asked, “Did you have some more time to think, Randall, about whether you’re really an Alpha or an omega?”
“I don’t know…” he replied with his face half buried in Hannibal’s chest. “I just want to be your omega.”
Will sat on a bench in the exercise yard tracing lines with a stick and waiting for his brother to be released from class and join him. He’d been waiting for more than a week to have a chance to talk to him in private.

At first Randall wouldn’t leave the Alpha’s bedroom. Then he wouldn’t come downstairs. Then he’d happily putter around the house but wouldn’t go outside. And finally Hannibal let them go out into the garden for about ten minutes but with him watching them all the time.

Will did see that some of the neighbours’ houses had windows that overlooked parts of the garden from a distance but it was the middle of the day and nobody seemed to be at home in any of the other houses.

At least the Alpha had let Will go to school on his own for the rest of that week once he was comfortable leaving Randall alone for an hour or two. He had wanted to tell Randall to take advantage of the time he was there alone to build up the stockpile of supplies Will had started under the sink of one of the other guest bedrooms but he never seemed to have a second alone with him.

Randall wasn’t making it any easier. Even when he didn’t have to, he would go sit in the Alpha’s lap and whisper something to him and then they’d disappear again. Almost every night, the Alpha would spend ages trying to teach Randall how to read and Will would have nothing to do. And more often than not his brother would sleep in the other room now without him. The only advantage of all the time on his own with the Alpha distracted was that it made it easy for Will to steal food, money and all the other things they’d need when they ran away.

It was more a question of when and how. It would be a lot easier to escape from the Institute than from the Alpha’s house, where all the doors and windows were always locked and the Alpha was almost always there walking in on them at the worst possible moment.

At the Institute, they weren’t escorted from class to class, just expected to turn up on time. He had overheard the Alpha telling the director when he picked them up the day before that there was a day next week when he needed to drop them off for six hours and could he arrange a lunch break for them with the rest of the omegas in the cafeteria. That would potentially give them a forty- or fifty-minute window when they wouldn’t immediately be missed.

There were a few guards but they were mostly for the dorms at night and to keep stray Alphas out instead of the omegas in. Most of the sheep-like omegas who had tried to befriend Will were happy to stay and looking forward to being sold off.

If they climbed out the windows from the students’ bathroom in the social refinement wing it was only a short dash to the tree line and in the blindspot of the guards at the doors on either end.

The real problem was there wasn’t really any way to bring their supplies with them to the school. Will had snuck some more normal clothes under his vest to hide in the bathroom ceiling panels and he would probably be able to sneak most of the money and maybe some small valuables like cufflinks in the same way on the day they went but there was no way to bring bulkier practical necessities like shoes or food.

He didn’t know how deep the forest was on that side of the Institute. When they drove in it was always from the opposite direction. He didn’t want to double back and go out towards the highway since that seemed like an easy way to get caught, but he didn’t want to strand them barefoot, hungry
and lost in the woods either. They’d just have to trust their luck though. Anything would be better than staying cooped up in that house for one second longer than they had to.

Will looked up to see Randall coming into the yard with Mr Budge, his piano teacher, right behind him. The tutor had his hands on both of the omega’s shoulders. Randall was hunched a little like he wanted to shake the hands off but didn’t quite dare.

Will stood up and hurried over to meet them.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to call your Alpha?” the tutor was saying with concern.

“No thank you, Mr Budge” Randall replied without looking up. “He’s already on the way to pick us up and he won’t be able to get here any faster if you do.”

“What’s wrong?” Will asked.

“Just a little stomach bug,” Mr Budge reassured Will while patting Randall a fraction of a hair above his ass. Randall gave a little shudder and then did pull away from what remained of the tutor’s grip.

“Why don’t you sit down, boys, and we can all wait until he gets here?”

“We’re supposed to do the circuit,” Will reminded him pointing to the various exercise devices spread around the yard while giving his brother a pointed look. “Our Alpha signed us up for it because he was going to be late again.”

“Your brother isn’t feeling well Will, so why don’t you do the exercises and we can sit here and watch?”

“No, that’s OK,” Randall cut in. “I feel a lot better and I want to do the circuit with Will. We’re supposed to spot each other.”

The tutor clenched his jaw for a second but then said, “If you’re sure, pup. There’s no need to put on a brave face for my benefit.”

Randall followed Will to the first station making a face at him as soon as their backs were turned. Thankfully, the tutor just sat on the bench and started reading a newspaper instead of following them. He kept watching them over the top of the paper but he was too far away to hear anything, particularly when they faced the other way. They wouldn’t have much time though because Randall had been so late and the Alpha would be there soon to pick them up.

“I know how we can get away,” he whispered to his brother as they did stretches to warm up.

Randall paused for longer than Will was expecting before saying, “How?”

“Next week when we’re here all day. I have some money we can hide in our vests in the morning while he’s in the shower. Then all we have to do is meet in the bathroom in the social refinement wing instead of going to the cafeteria at lunch time.”

They switched to the next piece of equipment where they could sit back to back while pushing bars together around their shoulders.

“I don’t have an excuse to go to the social refinement wing,” Randall said finally.

“Well make something up,” Will hissed at him impatiently. “If anyone asks you, just say you’re there
“to meet me.”

“Where are we going to go though?”

“Out the window. Into the woods.”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know. We’ll sort it out.”

They switched to the next station, wooden benches where they could do push ups with their heads close to each other.

Randall seemed to be on the verge of saying something else before changing his mind.

“That’s a terrible plan Will.”

“Well I don’t hear you coming up with a better one.”

“I don’t see why we can’t…”

“Don’t even say it.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“Get back to me when your ass isn’t still purple from him beating the shit out of you a week ago.”

As they stood up to go to the next station, he could see from the expression on his brother’s face that he’d gone too far.

“Look I’m sorry. He’s not an absolute monster, the food is good, the house is amazing and for some reason you have a crush on him. But we didn’t choose to live there. He bought us. So nothing else we ever do there will ever be us choosing to do it. I don’t see how you think you can live like that… just mooching around being someone else’s pet. Not allowed to ever go anywhere or do anything. You used to get pissed off for days if dad made you sit in the back of the van. But Dr Lecter snaps his fingers and you roll over to show him your belly. And you’re happy to do it!”

Randall paused, obviously trying to think of even more excuses instead of actually listening to anything Will was trying to tell him. Will could see that they were running out of time. The Alpha had come into the yard and was walking over to greet Mr Budge but his eyes were fixed on them the whole time.

“I just don’t see the point of running away if we’re not sure we’ll end up somewhere better. There could be creeps or something out there. Or wild animals. Or he could catch us and get mad and give us back to the Institute.”

Now the Alpha was signalling for them to come over in that ridiculous manner of his – like he was royalty and assumed they were doting subjects.

“Just wait Will. We can come up with a better plan. I don’t see what the hurry is. And he’s really not that bad if you would just…”

“Over my dead body,” Will hissed at him as they came within earshot and lost their opportunity to discuss the matter further.
He was that bad and Will was going to prove it. That Friday night the Alpha was having dinner at his boss’s house. Will knew he was hiding something in the wine cellar and with a few hours in the house alone he was going to find some evidence and then show Randall how wrong he was.

The Alpha spent the whole endless afternoon making cannoli and sfogliatella from scratch. To avoid suspicion and the risk that the doctor would decide they needed a sitter after all, Will volunteered to stir the custard and even let him feed him a bit on a spoon. It tasted mind-blowingly amazing – at least one reaction that Will didn’t have to fake.

“I’ll leave some in the refrigerator,” the Alpha told him. “If you two behave yourselves while I’m away you can have them after lunch tomorrow.”

Then he went up to his bedroom and spent about an hour and a half getting dressed. Randall and Will lay on their stomachs on the bed watching him in the en suite and snickering to each other as the Alpha spent at least ten minutes brushing his hair until not a single one was out of place.

Afterwards, he brought them downstairs, hand fed them smoked salmon mini quiches (at last a break from liver!) and cubes of cantaloupe wrapped in ham. Then he let them curl up next to him on the sofa while he read for a little until it was time to leave.

Randall fell asleep almost at once curled up with his back along one of the Alpha’s thighs. It wasn’t even six in the evening but he seemed to get tired at weird times now. Will lay with his head resting on the Alpha’s other leg and let him give occasional strokes of his hair while he turned pages.

After an interminable length of time, the Alpha put his book down. He gently lifted Will’s shoulders up so he was sitting up instead of leaning on him. Randall was still asleep, so he rubbed his belly with one hand and stroked up the hairs on the back of his neck with the other.

Randall gave a kind of purring moan that Will couldn’t help rolling his eyes at and then half opened his eyes without otherwise moving. The Alpha stood up, turned around and knelt down again until he was looking directly at them.

“I’m trusting you two to behave yourselves while I’m gone,” the Alpha told them. “You can watch TV, play games or read the books I’ve left up in your room until eight but then I want you to go to bed with the lights out. I will be back before ten. If you have any problems, I expect you to text me immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they told him in unison.

“Good pups,” he told them kissing them each on the forehead and then leaving them there.

Randall was asleep again almost before the front door shut, so Will leapt off the sofa and made a beeline for the wine cellar. He could remember the corner he’d seen the Alpha standing in with a vacuum wrapped package of meat in his hand. Will didn’t think it had come from either of the kitchen refrigerators or from the one in the pantry.

In the wine cellar, he started tapping with his foot in the area where he remembered seeing the Alpha.
Jack was even more wired than usual when he answered the door.

““The son of a bitch is at it again! Nothing for months and then two in as many days,” He was practically rubbing his hands together with excitement.

“Good evening, Jack,” Hannibal replied inviting himself in and handing the director the box full of pastries.

“And he’s getting more ambitious, which means he’ll get sloppier. Gas station attendants and bookstore clerks aren’t good enough for him anymore. This time it’s a college football star and some computer startup millionaire.”

“You’ll have to excuse me, what are we discussing?"

“The Chesapeake Ripper is back. Dr. Katz’s team is sure of it. He took the football player out of a frat house with thirty other residents sleeping right next door.”

“Jack,” a voice called with soft disapproval and they both turned to see an elegant omega standing in the doorway. “You promised not to discuss business tonight.”

“Of course. It’s unforgivably rude of me. Dr. Lecter, please allow me to introduce my omega, Bella. Bella, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

“I wanted for so long to meet you,” she said coming forward and offering her hand, which Hannibal lifted and kissed. “Jack talks all the time with such admiration for your unique gifts.”

“Likewise, but of course words could never do you justice. Your scent, for example is exquisite – like a bolt of lightning.”

The omega gave a modest little blush and then led them into the dining room where a series of tasteful floral bouquets led the eye to roam across an assortment of equally carefully arranged dishes.

“She’s been working on it all week,” Jack told him, giving the omega an affectionate kiss which his unassuming spouse put on a mild show of embarrassment about.

“Of course, I’m almost ashamed to be serving it to you,” the omega continued for him. “Your reputation proceeds you, obviously.”

“It all looks wonderful,” Hannibal told her sincerely. “Although I must admit I’m perplexed at how you found such bright chrysanthemums so late in the season.”

“I grow them myself,” she explained as Jack fiddled with the stereo until some soft jazz music filled in the background.

“Bella is a magician in the garden,” Jack told him. “Give her a trowel, a patch of dirt and a few months and you won’t know where you are.”

“Well, we’re very lucky with the microclimate here. So much of the garden is south facing, I can grow all my favourites from my childhood in Savannah – even flowers I never thought I’d be able to grow for myself again after we moved to DC.”

They continued with pleasant, light conversation as they moved through the hors d’oeuvres and on to the entrees. Bella was a very gifted amateur and Hannibal did not have to struggle to find things to complement.
“What about you, Dr Lecter,” Jack was asking him. “Have you ever thought about settling down yourself?”

“What about an omega?”

“Or a beta. I just assumed a man with such classical tastes in other areas would prefer an omega. And, of course, you would want at least some of your cubs to be Alphas.”

“I suppose I hadn’t really thought about it. My work keeps me so busy… on the other hand time is not on any of our sides. If anything could inspire me, though, I’m sure it’s seeing what a wonderful home life you two have.”

Jack gave a broad smile and kissed his omega again. She also smiled but with a slight thinness that Hannibal found intriguing.

“We shouldn’t put you on the spot though and I’ve been dying to try those cannoli all night,” she said rising to retrieve them from the kitchen.

While she was away, Jack took the opportunity to lean over and say, “Since there’s not much more progress we can make on the Banjos case until we get security clearance, I was hoping you could have a look at the Ripper case files in the meantime.”

“My patient load is very heavy at the moment,” he replied. “I’m reluctant to commit more time if I’m not really able to spare it… but perhaps if you send me the file I will see if I can find some time to review it. Without promising anything, of course.”

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It took Will the better part of an hour to find the catch release for the trap door. Once he had opened it, he felt a sense of dread start to sink in the pit of his stomach. He could feel cold air wafting up from the basement and a very faint musty scent he couldn’t quite place but which made him uneasy.

He thought about running to wake up Randall first so that they could explore the secret rooms together but then he reasoned it would be better to find whatever there was to find first and then decide when and how to break it to him. Otherwise he could waste precious time debating with his brother whether they should go down there at all.

Having made up his mind, Will went cautiously down the steps feeling along the bricks to his right for some kind of light switch. He found one at the bottom and flicked it on wincing from the sudden brightness of the numerous flickering fluorescent bulbs.

The basement was absolutely enormous with a series of large chambers down a long corridor divided by thick soundproofed walls. The first was an industrial freezer almost as large as the study and about a quarter full of vacuum-packed bags of meat and sides of mutton.

The next chamber looked like a butcher’s shop with a standing bandsaw, various sizes of meat slicers, commercial-sized smokers and dehydrators, scales and sausage grinders.

Then there was a wood and metal-working shop, a chemistry lab, a room with a lot of old medical equipment in it and then several storage rooms full of dusty paintings, sea chests full of God-knows what, suits of armour, taxidermy, stuffy old furniture that looked like it belonged in a museum and mountains of old clothes.

Will was about to give up for the night. It was all strange but none of it proved anything, except that the Alpha had more money than sense, had a lot of hobbies and was kind of a pack rat. Maybe there
was something in one of the chests - incriminating letters or something - but it would take days to dig through all of them.

He sighed with disappointment as he moved on to the last room, then gave a little gasp when he walked in.

He had to turn around for a second to check that he was still in the basement. The last room, or rather it was a small suite of rooms, was a perfectly decorated bedroom that wouldn’t have been out of place in any of the rest of the house except for the lack of windows.

There was a normal double bed which had even been made and wasn’t even dusty, a big antique wardrobe, area rugs, wallpaper, a bookcase full of books, three reading chairs and a coffee table.

Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck raise as he went into the bathroom which was also oversized and richly appointed. Before he could take in all the detail of the other fittings, his attention was drawn to the large square spa tub which had something sitting at the bottom of it.

Walking closer, Will could see it was a large grey teddy bear with a red bow wrapped around its neck. He leaned in to examine it and then started when he heard the bedroom door slam shut behind him.
Persuasion

Hannibal wasn’t able to resist pulling over after he left the Crawfords’ house to check the surveillance video.

He smiled slightly as he watched his younger omega throwing a very energetic tantrum against the door of the trap room. He had made sure ahead of time that there was nothing in the room that the pup could use to injure himself or anyone else. Spending a little time alone there would help him understand the consequences of disobeying and sticking his nose where it didn’t belong.

Hannibal switched over to the room controls, turned off the lights and heat for the trap room, turned on the strobe lights for the room opposite which would be just visible through the crack around the door and activated the sound recording which played brief power tool noises, bits of newscasts and predator calls at random intervals.

By morning the pup should be ready for a long overdue talk.

The Alpha finished driving home and then went to find his well-behaved omega still sound asleep on the settee where he had left him.

He lifted him up, fancying that he even felt a little heavier no matter how unlikely that was after only two weeks.

The pup curled into him and mumbled something that sounded like an apology.

“What’s that?” the Alpha asked fondly.

“Sorry… not bed.”

“That’s fine, pup,” Hannibal told him kissing his temple. “I want you to rest wherever you feel tired.”

He brought the omega up to his bed and left him there on top of the covers while he washed up and took off his clothes.

When he came back, he lay down facing the pup and started kissing him softly but urgently. Randall gave sleepy little moans and started rolling onto his belly.

“‘Swill?” he mumbled when his Alpha let him up for air.

“He’s sleeping in the other bedroom tonight,” Hannibal told him. “I want you to stay here with me.”

He brushed at and stretched the omega’s hole to get his slick flowing and then mounted him with long, languid strokes enjoying the change of pace. Usually Randall would be begging and goading him to go harder but now he seemed content to let the Alpha enjoy him at his leisure.

He realised about halfway through that he’d forgotten to put the cock cage on. The pup was erect and grinding himself against the sheets in rhythm with Hannibal’s thrusts but not with any particular urgency.

“Good boy,” he told him. “If I leave your cage off do you think you can hold off coming until I knot you?”

Randall creased his brow and nodded “mmm.”
Hannibal started to slowly pick up the pace until he reached the tempo he needed. The pup was a little more awake, starting to groan and possibly to regret his promise.

The Alpha reached around to stroke him a few times and his omega began to obviously struggle, biting at the sheets and clenching them in his fists.

Finally Hannibal took pity on him, clasped the omega’s organs snugly between his thumb and forefinger while he settled his knot and gave his last few thrusts. He released his fingers as he came and was rewarded with the pup’s orgasm wrapping around his own.

“Such a good pup,” Hannibal told him stroking down his belly as he turned them onto their sides. “Jūs visada taip stengiatės, kad esate toks geras berniukas man.”

His omega didn’t reply but just snuggled back against him, signalling that if it was all the same to his Alpha, he just wanted to be held until he fell asleep again.

Hannibal was happy to oblige.

After a few hours, he woke up again. He was pleased to see that the omega was so far under he didn’t even stir when Hannibal crawled out of bed.

There were a few quick jobs to take care of and then he would have his talk with Will. He turned the lights back on in the trap room and cancelled the sounds and strobe lighting. Then he went around to all the spots where Will had been stashing things and confiscated them.

Finally he went downstairs to retrieve the omega.

He found Will curled up in a corner of the room with both arms wrapped around a pillow over his head, trembling and whimpering softly. As soon as he felt Hannibal’s hand on his shoulder, he gave a little start, rolled over, grasped the Alpha around the neck and started crying convulsively.

Hannibal lifted him up, shushing and trying to soothe him as he carried him up to the study. The Alpha settled into one of the leather chairs with Will in his lap and patiently let him cry until he was down to some light sniffling.

“Is there anything you want to tell me Will?”

After a moment, the omega untangled himself from the Alpha’s arms and then went to sit in the armchair opposite him wiping the last tears away with his forearm. He was still very pale but had recovered some of his self-composure.

“What is that room for?”

“This house was built by my uncle many years ago when he first lived in America. His lover was a member of the Japanese aristocracy and she had a maid who lived with them. His omega consort was very old fashioned about where servants should sleep, so they built some quarters for her in the basement next to the butler’s pantry where she could have some privacy.”

“But then why was the bed made if they haven’t lived here for years?”

“Because I had a suspicion you would disobey me and I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable while you learned your lesson. I’m sorry Will but this is a very old house and even I don’t know every nook and cranny. I admire your inquisitive spirit very much, but if you insist on following it places you’ve been told you’re not allowed to go there is a risk you could be very badly hurt. And what kind of Alpha would I be if I allowed that to happen?”
“Not a very good one,” Will told him bitterly.

“Will,” Hannibal said pausing until the pup made brief eye contact with him. “I’m sorry that we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot and that I’ve had to spend so much more time with Randall for the past few weeks because of his condition. I really do think that we could become good friends…”

“How are we supposed to become ‘good friends’ when you bought us for breeding stock?”

“I don’t think of omegas as ‘breeding stock’. A good Alpha-omega relationship is about companionship… about creating a stable home where cubs will be happy and healthy and everyone is getting what they really need.”

“Like Randall really needed you to beat the crap out of him and you really needed to terrorize me for hours…”

“First of all, I didn’t ‘beat the crap’ out of your brother. I punished him. Perhaps more harshly than I should have, but we’re all learning what the other ones need all the time and we don’t always get it exactly right, especially in the beginning. Still, if I hadn’t done anything, guilt would have caused him to drop anyway. I didn’t punish him because I enjoyed it; I did it so that he could forgive himself and feel the security that omegas feel from having clear boundaries.”

“Do you think what you really need is to be allowed to run around wherever you like being disobedient and disrespectful to the Alpha that is putting a roof over your head, feeding you three meals a day and paying extortionate fees for your education? Why would I be all doing that if I thought you were just ‘breeding stock’? I have the dungeon already, why not just lock you in it until you’re old enough? More or less any other Alpha that bought you would do exactly that.”

“But the point is you *bought* us…” Will spat.

“I don’t make the rules,” Hannibal said. “If there were some other way for you and your brother to be here willingly, then I would choose that way. But there isn’t. And your only other choices are to go back to the Institute or to be split up from your brother and put in foster care with another Alpha who will almost certainly treat you worse. Unfortunately, there’s no magic fairy land, Will, where omegas your age run free and wild and get to make all their own choices. Even if you did manage to run away, you wouldn’t last two weeks before being captured again. There is nowhere else for you to go.”

“I’ll make a deal with you though, if it’s the payment part that’s bothering you so much. You stay here and accept my authority and keep your brother company until you’re old enough to find a mate and then you can have a choice. You don’t have to mate with me if you don’t want to. You can choose someone else or no one if that’s what you really want. I’m your legal guardian now so I can emancipate you when you’re 18 if I choose to and if that’s what you really want.”

“Can you emancipate Randall too?”

“We’re already bonded. He’s my mate. That’s what he chose. So it looks like one way or another we are going to have to find a way to live with each other. But strangely enough I don’t really want to be bonded to someone who doesn’t want to be bonded to me so if, when you’re all grown up, you decide to go your own way, then you have my word that I will let you.”

“Okay,” Will said after a few moments of consideration.

“Okay?”

“Yes, Alpha.”
“Let’s start again then, shall we?”
It took another month and a fifth employee turning up dead in a park before the DoD approved security passes for Hannibal and Dr. Katz to interview the other staff at the lab.

Today they were on their way to meet Dr. Adam Bevier, a moderately distinguished gastrophysiologist who had graduated from Johns Hopkins several years before Hannibal began there and who he knew slightly by reputation but had never met.

Hannibal flipped through his case notes and his copies of Dr. Bevier’s most recent articles to distract himself from Dr. Katz’s somewhat eccentric driving.

As they neared the gate to the facility, for example, Dr Katz swung over to the wrong lane and rolled down her window to address someone sitting in a parked car on the shoulder facing the other direction.

Hannibal looked up sharply to see it was a younger woman with corkscrewing red hair who was sitting in her car watching the entrance to the lab through her rearview mirror and making notes on a steno pad.

“Hello, Freddie,” Dr Katz shouted out waving to her. “Who’s professional reputation are you destroying today?”

“I just report the facts,” the young woman responded evenly. “I leave it to the FBI to worry about reputations. Speaking of which… five workers dead at the same lab and it takes three months before the BAU even starts interviews? To be fair though, getting a new Ripper case every three or four days must be keeping you all on your toes. It’s certainly keeping me on mine. I do assume that you’re planning to catch him before the entire city is depopulated?”

“Dr. Katz,” Hannibal interrupted. “I believe this gentleman is signalling he would like to get past.”

He pointed her towards a man in a car exiting the facility who was leaning halfway out his window and shouting at them for blocking his lane.

“Later Freddie,” Dr Katz called as she pulled back into the correct lane and continued on to the gate.

“All the people that come past my table and it’s never the ones you really want to see,” she mused as she handed their clearances to the guard.

They were met at the front door by a young receptionist who pressed a thumb to a panel to open it. She offered them coffee, which they politely declined, and then led them through a complex maze of offices and lab spaces and stairwells until they arrived at the correct wing.

Hannibal noticed she used the fingerprint on her index finger to get past the reception area and her middle finger to enter the correct wing.

“Do you need all of your fingers to access this lab?” he asked her.

“Just the first three,” she replied with a little shudder, obviously following his meaning. “Only the people that work in this wing and the receptionists have access. Then you need the ring finger to
open each person’s specific office and any of their personal cabinets or drawers.”

“So if someone had those fingers, they could get as far as the wing, but not into the right office?”

“Yes, but the new security protocol is that as soon as anybody is reported missing, the whole lab goes into lockdown, the lab manager does a roll call and then they cancel the security clearances for anyone that is missing. So even if someone killed them for their fingers, they wouldn’t work anymore. And the manager has reviewed all of the security tapes and said they couldn’t find any evidence of someone suspicious trying to break in.”

They stopped at a plain looking steel door with a nameplate reading “Dr. Bevier”. The receptionist pushed a button and a very faint buzzing sound could be heard on the other side of the door.

It was answered a few moments later by a pudgy man in his mid-fifties wearing a white lab coat. He was sweating profusely, although his lab and office were relatively cool. He wiped his palm on the side of his coat before offering it to them.

“Dr. Katz, Dr. Lecter,” he said shaking their hands with enthusiasm. “The lab manager, Dr. Thompson, asked me to clear some time in my schedule to talk with you. I’m so sorry about the mess everywhere. Deadlines, you know. Not that it isn’t terrible what’s been happening. I don’t know how much I can help. I tend to just keep my head down and in my work. But, of course, anything I can do…”

As he spoke, he circled around his desk which was piled more than a foot high in places with stacks of papers, open books, abandoned Chinese take-out and pizza boxes, small plastic carrier boxes for mice and petri dishes. His hip knocked the corner of one stack and threatened to tip it over but he managed to catch everything and push it back into place first.

Unlike the desk area, the main part of the lab was spotless and in good order. One wall was covered with refrigeration units filled with stacked petri dishes and the other with mouse cages. The sound of their spinning exercise wheels and occasional squeaks permeated the rest of the conversation. A third wall had a floor to ceiling window looking down into the office park below.

“Did you know the victims very well?” Hannibal asked as he settled into one of the guest chairs across the desk from the researcher.

“I knew Rachel Anthony, the first receptionist… Just to say hello to really and some small talk at office parties. Really lovely woman. Everyone adored her. She was here for about ten years. Her replacement, only a few weeks. I think her name was Sarah, no Andrea? Dr. Hanks, I would sometimes have lunch or coffee with. His office is down at the end of the hall. He was always trying to give away spare pots of honey, which my wife adores. We all avoided Dr. Pickering so we didn’t have to hear about her work. Hers is the next office over. And now this latest one was on the cleaning crew? I’m afraid they come in overnight so we almost never see them.”

“Can you think of any reason why anyone would want to kill them?” Dr. Katz followed up.

“No, I mean, no. Anyone would tell you Dr. Pickering wasn’t the easiest person to live with, but I can’t see why anyone would kill all of them. On the other hand, I barely knew most of them.”

“Are you concerned that your own life might be in danger?” Hannibal asked, straightening the part of one of the paper stacks that was closest to him.

“Yes of course. You can’t come into an office every day where your co-workers are dropping like flies and not be concerned.”
“And there are fourteen other scientists with labs in this wing.”

“Yes, that’s right. And most of them have lab assistants or students coming and going. There’s probably thirty or forty of us here on any given day including all the support staff.”

“What are you working on at the moment?” Hannibal asked him.

“We have security clearances,” Dr. Katz added when she saw the researcher hesitate. “And our only interest is in whether there might be some motivation for the murders there.”

“Well, my specialty as you know is in the interactions between human digestive enzymes and certain peptide chains. The short answer is that I have been trying to isolate specific combinations of digestive biochemical reactions that can reverse cellular degeneration.”

“And what is DoD’s interest in that?” Dr. Katz asked leaning forward.

“I don’t know, specifically,” he replied. “I was just happy to get the funding. Potentially there are some broad reaching implications for anti-aging treatments, cancer therapies or faster recovery from exposure to radiation… I imagine that’s the kind of thing they want to use it for.”

“That certainly sounds valuable. So perhaps someone is interesting in stealing your work?”

“I’m afraid they’d be pretty disappointed if they did,” he replied. “I’ve run a few series of tests, but haven’t written up any of the results yet and nothing that I’ve seen so far has exactly set the world on fire. If I had cured cancer or aging I’m sure you would have heard about it.”

“Have you had any recent changes in staff? Disgruntled former assistants possibly?”

“No, nothing like that. I prefer to work on my own and don’t have any assistants. The cleaning crew take care of the mice and, as I said I don’t have much interaction with them.”

“Well,” Dr. Katz concluded, looking at Hannibal to confirm he had no further questions. “Thank you for your time, which we won’t take up any more of. Good luck with your research and we hope to read more about it soon.”

“Do take good care of yourself, Dr. Bevier. And don’t hesitate to give us a call if you notice or remember anything out of the ordinary.”

“I certainly will,” he replied giving them another clammy handshake goodbye before shutting the door with a clang.

Chapter End Notes

Again, blame Dr Wikipedia.
Exhumation

The next two months passed largely in a blur for Hannibal. As much as he wanted to trap every moment in his mind palace, he found that getting only a few hours of sleep a night made it more difficult to really take in every detail of the experiences he wanted to capture.

For example, one day Dr Bloom called him to the Institute because Randall was spotting. It turned out to be nothing but Hannibal suggested they hook him up to the ultrasound machine to be sure and he was able to hear his cub’s heartbeat for the first time.

For a moment, he couldn’t tell if the rushing sound of blood was coming from the monitor or from inside his own head. He hadn’t even realised how concerned he had been at the seeming lack of obvious developments. Randall had a little morning sickness, but nothing worrisome and was getting a very faint bulge but not so that anyone who didn’t routinely see him naked would notice. Now, at last, there was some solid evidence.

Dr Bloom pointed out the cub on the monitor, unhelpfully noting it was about the size of a plum which put Randall off fruit for days. Hannibal had gotten him back up to an average weight for his height, though, and had him on vitamins so it wasn’t a significant setback.

Dr Bloom called Will out of his class to come and see it as well. Hannibal hadn’t broken the news to him yet because he wanted to wait past the first trimester to be sure. But since Will had been in the same class with Randall when he got sick, and Hannibal didn’t want to worry him, he decided that was as good a time as any.

Will stood absolutely stunned at the news he was going to be an uncle but then smiled and congratulated both of them tracing the outline of the cub on the screen with wonder. The spine, ribs and leg bones were all clearly visible. Even Randall seemed to believe it was actually happening for the first time.

Hannibal’s talk with Will seemed to have worked and, while he would still push boundaries and couldn’t help sticking his nose into everything, he was no longer plotting to run away or being openly defiant when Hannibal tried to train them.

He hadn’t made as much progress as he wanted to though because Jack was calling him almost every day, sometimes every few hours, wanting an update on their endless interviews of staff with access to the nutritional science lab and trying to get his views on the latest Ripper murders.

And then a few weeks before Christmas, Jack called to tell him that Dr. Bevier had become the sixth victim, this time killed in his office by an intruder only an hour before.

Hannibal dropped his omegas off at the Institute and then drove to meet Jack at the latest crime scene. They were joined by half a dozen DoD investigators and the lab manager wearing Hazmat suits. Jack assured him as they suited up that it was just a precaution.

The lab manager replayed the security tapes for them. A man wearing a baseball cap had gotten as far as Dr Bevier’s wing using the severed fingers of a student who had called in sick that morning. Then he waited until Dr Bevier went to get some coffee, held a shotgun to his head as he reopened his office door. In the office, he tried to get Dr Bevier to open one of the refrigerator units but Dr Bevier had deliberately used the wrong finger setting off the alarm system. The intruder shot Dr Bevier in the back of the head, shattered the lab window with a series of shots and then jumped from the ledge to a nearby tree.
“Whatever he was after,” Jack said. “Thank God he doesn’t seem to have gotten it.”

“He seems to know the security arrangements,” Hannibal noted. “And you can see in every camera shot he has his face turned away.”

“So we’re back to any of the forty people with access to the lab.”

A sudden gust of wind through the open window sent the stacks of loose paper on Dr Bevier’s desk flying in every direction.

“Someone put some plastic sheeting up to secure that window,” Jack barked. “Before the entire crime scene blows away.”

As Hannibal knelt to pick some of the papers up, he paused and then rose with a sheet in his hand.

“This is curious,” he told the director. “Dr Bevier said he didn’t have a lab assistant.”

“He didn’t,” Dr Thompson replied.

“Then why was he paying… Garret Jacob Hobbs five thousand dollars a month?” Hannibal held up the invoice for the other to see.

“He’s one of our suppliers,” the lab manager explained looking a little puzzled. “He’s a ranger for the Park Service and whenever they do deer culls, sometimes he sells us some of the carcasses. Otherwise they would go to waste. It’s all completely humane and above board.”

“Has Garret Jacob Hobbs ever come to the lab itself?” Jack asked taking a closer look at the invoice and then handing it back to Hannibal.

“Yes, he makes deliveries maybe once or twice a month.”

“Then why didn’t Dr. Bevier put him on the interview list?” Jack asked flipping through the file to double check.

“There’s no address on this invoice. Just a cell phone number,” Hannibal noted.

“He recently separated from his wife and has been living in one of the Park Service cabins while they work through some issues. He asked us to just pay him in person when he makes deliveries.”

“Do you have his old address somewhere?” Jack asked leaning in and checking that he still had his gun.

“Yes, I can pull a copy of one of the older invoices on the computer in my office if you’ll come this way.”

“You don’t need to be here for this part, Dr Lecter,” Jack told him as they were getting into their cars and leaving.

“I don’t mind,” Hannibal told him. “This is very instructive. And wouldn’t it be better for you to have some backup. At least until the police arrive?”

“Allright, but make sure you stay well back and in the car. If anything happens, just call 911 again and tell them to hurry up.”

Hannibal followed Jack on the brief drive to the home of Garret Jacob Hobb’s wife. It was only about a five minute trip but he had time for a quick phone call when he was stopped at the sole red
light.

He parked behind Jack and stayed in the car as instructed until he saw the director racing towards the house with his gun pulled. Looking over, Hannibal could see a middle-aged beta woman had stumbled out onto the porch with blood gushing down the side of her dress.

About thirty seconds later, he heard a series of gunshots. Stepping out of his car at last, he could see Jack on the porch waving him over, his hands covered in blood up to the elbows.

In the kitchen, Hannibal found a young girl with a slash around half her neck bleeding freely onto the tile and the fresh corpse of Garrett Jacob Hobbs in the corner. He lifted the girl’s head up and put pressure on the wound to try to slow the bleeding while Jack called for the paramedics.

Her head dropped into his lap like dead weight and she seemed to be smiling up at him.
Accommodation

“What’s the party for?” Will asked as Hannibal showed him how to peel celeriac. The Alpha was also trying to keep a close eye on Randall who was slicing carrots but didn’t always have the patience required to make the cuts even sizes.

“There’s a lot of good news to celebrate,” Hannibal told them coming around the counter to start boiling pigs’ feet for the kholodets. “It’s almost Christmas. One of my colleagues, Agent Crawford, got a commendation for saving that girl I told you about. And when I went to visit her in the hospital yesterday, she seemed very sad about losing her family just before the holidays. So I think it would be nice for Abigail to get out of the hospital and have a real meal instead.”

“Then why can’t we come to it?” Randall asked pushing his chair back slightly to look over a very unsatisfactory stack of julienned carrots.

“Because I haven’t had enough time to train you two to attend full length dinner parties. For example, if these carrots are all cut different sizes they won’t cook evenly. Do it again, please,” Hannibal told him handing him some more peeled vegetables from Will’s pile. “And if they aren’t even, you’re going to sit here all night grouping them in order of size for me.”

Randall rolled his eyes but complied. Hannibal was also planning to work on general comportment at some stage but was still choosing his battles.

“If you behave yourselves, and stay up in your room playing quietly, you can come down for the coffee and desserts,” he added. “I haven’t told anyone at work about the cub yet and wanted to make an announcement. It will have a better effect coming at the end of the meal.”

“Who’s coming?” Will asked with the slightest hint of apprehension. Hannibal had found he was a little shy around new people. Now that the FBI case was solved, he was hoping to have more time for training and to improve his pups’ socialisation.

“Agent Crawford, his wife, some of my other colleagues at the FBI, Dr Bloom, Dr DuMaurier and Abigail.”

Hannibal noticed that Randall had picked up one of the octopus tentacles and was making faces and waving it threateningly at his brother who was starting to giggle and peel celeriac skin onto the floor instead of the counter.

“You’re answering your own question now, pup,” Hannibal told him, gently retrieving the tentacle and then pointing his omega back to the carrots.

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After two solid days of cooking, Hannibal was ready to greet his guests. He’d brought the pups swimming with him and then to the omega store earlier in the day to try to wear them out and find some activities to keep them occupied. He’d found that the only way to keep the omegas absorbed in anything for more than a few minutes was to let them pick out what they were interested in.

After feeding them their dinner, he took them up their room, gave Randall his erector set and Will a stack of junior mystery novels and then ordered them to stay there until he came to retrieve them.

Dr Bloom arrived a little early, ostensibly to help him prepare, but ultimately to sip home-brewed beer and complain about Dr Chilton. She asked after the pups and went up to visit with them for a
little while as Hannibal was greeting his other guests.

Dr Katz and her two colleagues, Zeller and Price, carpooled together from the office. Hannibal heard them even before he opened the door arguing about the most advantageous birth order.

Dr DuMaurier was fashionably late, blaming the red tape involved in checking Abigail out of the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility even though she had a permission letter from Hannibal. He had been named her temporary guardian until a suitable permanent foster family could be located.

Abigail was subdued but more relaxed than she had been at the hospital. She had one of Dr DuMaurier’s scarves wrapped around the bandages on her neck and mostly walked around the periphery of each room looking at the art work.

Jack and Bella were about half an hour late, leading off with earnest apologies particularly from Bella. Her expression conveyed regrets not just for their lateness but for Jack’s obvious terrible mood.

“I just spend three hours on the phone with DoD,” he ranted as Hannibal passed him a cocktail. “Three months I spent trying to get them to upgrade our security clearances to get you and Dr Katz access to the lab for those interviews and then the idiots in their investigations unit let Freddie Lounds tramp all over the crime scene… I mean look at this!”

Jack set down his drink and drew a laptop out of his bag. Pulling up the Tattlecrime webpage, Hannibal could see photos of the chaos in Dr Bevier’s office under a headline of “EXPERIMENT GONE WRONG!”

“I keep telling you that woman is a menace to society,” Dr Katz said coming up behind them.

Jack shut the laptop quickly as he saw Abigail coming back into the room.

“Miss Hobbs,” he said, burying his earlier annoyance for her benefit. “I’m glad to see you up and about and starting to get some colour in your cheeks again.”

“Yes,” she replied. “It will be good to finally get out of the hospital and start moving on.”

“There’s no rush,” Bella told her. “You should take some time to decide what you want to do next. Otherwise, you might find you regret something.”

“I just want to make a decision about something... to remember what it feels like.”

“Well,” Hannibal replied leading her to the table. “Let’s start with appetizers… jamón Ibérico or foie gras timbits?”

They took their seats around the table except for Bella who sat at Jack’s knees with practiced grace. Hannibal was looking forward so much to the time when he could show off his omegas in the same way.

He served them fine slices of smoked ham while they picked enthusiastically from the wide range of platters scattered between the Ostrich egg and Madonna lily centre pieces.

Price and Zeller chattered away happily completing each others’ sentences. Alana and Bedelia made it their mission to ensure Abigail was comfortable and entertained. Hannibal led a series of toasts in Jack’s honour and to Abigail’s health. He was pleased to see that everyone was enjoying themselves, drinking and chatting freely and stopping frequently to complement each dish.
After everyone had finished the hors d’oeuvres, Hannibal brought out the crown roast, carved and distributed it. Hannibal had gone slightly overboard in his efforts to restock his freezer and, finding there was almost no room to store the latest victuals, had decided to throw the party to use up the spares.

Abigail got a bit teary when she saw the roast but explained to Alana that she was just feeling a little homesick but was very grateful to everyone for making the effort to cheer her up.

“There’s nothing to apologise for,” Alana told her while passing her her plate. “Nobody expects you to stop grieving at the drop of a hat. And whatever happened, they were still your family.”

And at least some basic sensitivity for her feelings led Jack to redirect the conversation whenever Price or Zeller made a reference to the Ripper case.

All the plates were cleaned and Hannibal was about to excuse himself to bring his omegas down and introduce them to everyone when all of their phones began buzzing at the same time.

Looking at their screens, they could each see a text message that read:

“Emergency Alert: If you live in the Baltimore Metropolitan or Baltimore County area, you are now under quarantine. Please stay in your house and wait for further instructions. This is not a test.”
“Where’s your television?” Jack demanded as soon as he’d read the text.

Hannibal led them into the sitting room and they all filed into the room behind him.

When he turned on the television, an emergency message, matching the text message, was on one side of the screen while a group of tense looking news anchors spoke on the other.

“We’re just getting some breaking news now that the President has deployed the National Guard to enforce a quarantine order for the City and County of Baltimore, Maryland. Residents are instructed to remain in whatever building they are currently in or to seek the nearest unoccupied shelter and remain there. Curfews are being strictly enforced. Do not leave your building for any reason.

“All flights in and out of BWI Marshall Airport have been cancelled as have all Amtrack stops and bus services in the region. If you travelled to the Baltimore area earlier today or yesterday and have since moved on, please avoid further unnecessary human contact, isolate yourself and call the number on the screen beside us.”

“This is in response to an outbreak of a flu-like illness. The Centre for Disease Control advises that the symptoms include sudden, very high fever combined with confusion, skin lesions and insatiable hunger. A number of patients were admitted to local hospitals earlier today. The CDC confirmed that there had been deaths but have not given us any numbers yet.”

“If you are in an area affected by the quarantine, you are advised to remain calm, stay in your building. Keep phone lines free from any unnecessary calls. If you or anyone around you begins to exhibit any symptoms, isolate them and call the number on the screen below me. FEMA recommends gathering a few days emergency supplies and preparing yourself and your loved ones for a possible evacuation. We will keep you updated if this becomes necessary.”

Looking up, Hannibal could see that Jack was already pacing with a phone glued to one ear. Katz, Zeller and Price were furiously googling. The others were looking around in shock and disbelief.

“My brother just posted on Facebook that an armored convoy is driving past his house,” Price announced. “What the hell is going on?”

“Well, I’m a bit busy here too,” they could hear Jack beginning to shout in the background.

“Jack,” Katz said pulling on his jacket sleeve to get his attention. “The Director of the FBI just posted his orders. We’re supposed to comply with the quarantine unless we get specific instructions to report to FEMA to assist.”

She held up her phone so that Jack could see the email. He quickly hung up his own phone to check if he had the same one.

“So we’re supposed to just sit here doing nothing...” he fumed.

Hannibal noticed that the three nervous anchors on the television had been replaced by a single nervous Homeland Security official in a different location.

“... don’t forget to pack any medications required by your family. You will not be allowed to bring pets to the shelter. They are not at any risk of infection. Leave them somewhere secure with a few days’ worth of food and water. Vėlgi piliečiai išlieka ramūs ir dėl savo priežasčių nepalikite namo...”
“Hannibal,” he heard Bedelia saying and felt her taking his hand. Her skin felt as cold as ice. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied swallowing and smiling at the same time. “I’m sorry, how rude of me.”

He spoke a little louder to get all of their attention. “It appears I will have the pleasure of your company for a little longer at least. I was just about to serve some espresso and sanguinaccio dolce but perhaps under the circumstances, we should take it in here instead of the dining room.”

When there was no response, he went into the kitchen to arrange a tray of coffees and desserts. Alana followed him out and offered to serve the rest of the party if he wanted to check on his omegas or bring them down.

“Yes, thank you Dr Bloom. That would be very kind of you.”

He washed his hands with antibacterial soap and then took the last two desserts and brought them upstairs feeling like he was passing through a veil on the stairs from one world into a completely different one. He tried to count how many people they had been exposed to earlier in the day. The pool and the store hadn’t been crowded but who knew how many people had been there before them or how often the surfaces were cleaned.

As soon as he came through the door, the two omegas stood up beaming at him and asked if it was time to come down now. He smiled to see that they had made the effort to keep their clothes and hair neat.

“I’m sorry pups, but not tonight. I think Abigail has had enough excitement and I don’t want to steal Jack’s thunder.”

Randall looked only passingly disappointed to miss the party and Will not at all.

“Some of my guests are going to stay the night because the weatherman is predicting black ice. I want you to gather up your things and come with me. You can both stay in my room tonight and then maybe you can meet some of them at breakfast tomorrow instead.”

Randall started grumbling about having to share their room and Will wanted to know how there could be ice if it hadn’t rained that day and was trying to look out the slats in the shutters to see.

“Pick up your things and bring them now, pups, or you can both spend the night locked in the attic with sore backsides and no dessert instead.”

That got them moving. Once they had shifted their personal items to Hannibal’s bedroom he gave them the puddings to eat next to the fireplace and then told them to brush their teeth and go to bed when they were finished. He felt both of their foreheads and was relieved to find there was no hint of a fever. They both still looked bright eyed and alert.

He locked the door to his bedroom before going back downstairs.

Back in the sitting room, everyone was still glued to the television and seemed hardly to have noticed either his absence or return.

Finally Abigail looked up at him and said, “They keep telling us to put together some supplies in case we have to evacuate quickly. Like some bug out bags.”

Jack seemed to come alive at the promise of a mission. “And water, just in case the supply is disrupted for some reason. Anything that can be filled with water, we should.”
“Of course,” Hannibal told them. He showed them where he kept his monogrammed leather
suitcases, flashlights and batteries and then led them into the pantry.

“Don’t you have anything in cans besides salted capers and coconut milk?” Abigail asked him.

Hannibal factored her age and recent trauma into his response. “I’m afraid not. But I do preserve my
own artichoke hearts, roasted bell peppers and tomatoes in jars instead. The flavour is less likely to
be tainted by the glass.”

Abigail shrugged and found some dish towels to wrap the jars in so they wouldn’t rattle together
when packed.

Meanwhile Jack directed Katz, Price and Zeller to fill all of the pots, pans, bowls and bathtubs with
water.

They loaded up the trunk of the Bentley and then Jack’s car with supplies. Hannibal noticed Jack
take his shotgun and ammo out of the trunk and instruct Beverly to bring her car around and do the
same with hers.

Standing out on the street briefly he noticed the long line of flickering lights from his neighbours’
television sets and the eerie lack of traffic noises.

“You know I abhor violence,” he told Jack. “Is it really necessary to bring guns into my house?”

“We don’t really know what’s happening here,” Jack told him. “Until we do, we need to take every
precaution.”

Once everything was packed, there was nothing to do except watch the television play the same
messages over and over again and text family members who seemed to know as little about what was
going on as they did.

Bedelia asked if there was somewhere she could wash her face and lie down for a few minutes.

Hannibal explained that he had five guest bedrooms upstairs which they could split up as they chose.
Price and Zeller agreed to share with an unconvincing show of reluctance, Jack and Bella were
obviously together, Abigail chose to share with Alana and then Bedelia and Katz each got their own
room.

Hannibal, with Abigail’s assistance, made sure that they all had fresh towels and toiletries in their
bathrooms.

He went briefly back into his own bedroom to find suitable sleeping garments for his guests who, of
course, had nothing packed. He could see that his pups were sound asleep and did not seem
disturbed at all.

Fortunately, he had enough sets of pyjamas to go around.

Jack suggested that they take shifts with at least one person staying up to monitor any important news
on the television and then agreeing to wake the others up if there were any developments they
needed to know about. Jack volunteered for the first two-hour shift, then Hannibal, Katz and Price.

When they had all retired to their rooms, Hannibal lay in bed stroking his omegas’ hair and playing
through various scenarios in his head. They would be better off staying here instead of evacuating.
He had plenty of supplies, even after what he’d given the others, and couldn’t risk Randall’s
agoraphobia being triggered by some kind of shelter situation.
He would be happy to see the others go if there was an order. More people meant more risk of infection and he had never intended for all of them to be staying in his house for any extended period of time.

There was more security in numbers, but it depended on who those numbers were and whether or not you could trust them. It only took a few rotten apples. But then there could be a cure for the infection any day and he would have to live with the consequences of any actions he took. So he wouldn’t force them to go, but would suggest they did and politely refuse if they insisted he join them.

It felt like only a few minutes had passed when he heard Jack gently knocking on the door to tell him that there had been no major developments and that it was now his shift.

Hannibal waited until he could hear Jack snoring and then gently lifted Randall out of bed. He woke slightly in the wine cellar when Hannibal leaned down to open the trap and mumbled, “Where are we going?”

Seclusion

Hannibal carried his drowsy omega down the stairs, along the corridor and into the spare bedroom in the basement. Randall woke up a little from the lights and was scenting him with his eyes closed.

The Alpha had been intending to have a serious talk with his mate but as soon as he put him on the bed, Randall rolled over onto his stomach and started pulling his legs up under himself. Hannibal felt himself stiffening despite his original resolve. Perhaps the discussion would go better if he spent some time reassuring the pup of his affections first. And he wasn’t sure the next time they would have this opportunity.

He put his hands flat on the omega’s haunches, hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and rolled his palms around until the pants slid down revealing his cleft. All of the hormones surging through the omega made him slick up if Hannibal even laid a finger on him. It seemed like an illogical reaction, since the deed was already done, but Bedelia had explained that it was an instinctive enticement and bonding technique that bred omegas used to keep their Alphas devoted to them during their most vulnerable period.

Hannibal pulled Randall’s shirt up and over his head until it only bound his wrists together loosely and then pulled off his own pyjama bottoms. He climbed over his omega who was already making happy, sleepy little moans for him. Hannibal mouthed at and then gently bit down on his mating mark which woke the pup up a little more.

Randall lifted his backside to wriggle it up against his Alpha’s cock and then chased the contact with his back along Hannibal’s stomach and chest.

“Do you want something, Randall?” Hannibal teased him. “You know you need to ask first.”

The omega gave something halfway between a moan and groan and then said, “Please can I have your cock, Alpha?”

Hannibal tested him with a few fingers and found he was nearly ready. He gave the omega’s pseudocock a few smooth strokes to move things along.

“You can, pup, but we don’t have much time. I’m going to have to make it quick.”

With the omega’s head half turned to him, he could see a mischievous smile spreading on his face and then felt him give another squirm under him.

Hannibal shifted the pup’s hips to the angle and position he wanted, lined himself up and settled himself in. He met almost no resistance for the first few thrusts but then, as he was starting to set up a rhythm, Randall started to clamber and buck a little under him to try to provoke the Alpha into pinning him.

Hannibal took a handful of the omega’s hair, which was finally the right length, and used it to hold his head carefully but firmly against the mattress. Then he gave him a slightly harder bite on his mating mark paired with some more emphatic thrusting.

“Be a good boy and hold still for me,” Hannibal told him. “You know better than to think you’re in charge here.”

Randall gave a satisfied little growl and complied while Hannibal took him vigorously. As his knot began to swell, he could see that the omega seemed to be concentrating hard on something instead of
giving his usual huffing groans and quiet wails.

“Do you need some help not coming?”

The pup furiously shook his head no but then a second later was shaking his head yes. Hannibal reached his hand around to restrain him.

“You’re being such a good pup for me. Don’t forget to breathe.” Randall let his breath out in a great heave which made it easy for Hannibal to lodge his knot. The omega started panting as Hannibal took his last few ruts to tip himself over the edge. He let the pup go a second later and was rewarded with a rush of sensation that spread from his cock down and around and up into every nerve ending.

Rolling on to their sides, he could feel the omega trying to snuggle back closer into him. Hannibal wrapped his arms around him and brought a leg over to enclose him better.

“You trust me, don’t you pup?”

Randall nodded and gave him a blissed out hum.

“You know I would never do anything to hurt you or my cub.”

“Yes, why?” The omega clearly just wanted to go back to sleep and seemed a little miffed to have to answer obvious questions. Hannibal’s heart gave a little leap at how devoted his pup was after such a short time.

“I need you to stay down here in the basement for a little while. It’s not a punishment, you didn’t do anything bad. But I think it’s safer for you and for the cub.”

“Because of the ice and the other Alphas?” Randall was starting to sound confused.

“No, there’s a flu going around and I don’t want you to get sick. It’s better if you aren’t exposed to anyone who might have it.”

“Can Will come to?”

“Yes, I’m going to go get him as soon as my knot goes down. But he might be a little scared to stay down here so I need you to help keep him calm, OK? It’s not my first choice to keep you two here but I think it’s the best way to keep you both safe.”

“How long do we have to stay here?”

“Probably just a few days. Until the others leave and the risk of getting sick has gone down. But I can bring you food and keep you company as much as I can and you two can have any books or games you want and if you need me any time all you need to do is send me a message, OK?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“That’s my brave boy,” Hannibal told him giving him a kiss to the back of the head. Giving a little test, he found that his knot had gone down enough to pull out without causing the omega discomfort. He went in the bathroom to wash himself off and put his pyjamas back on. When he got back, he found that Randall was already fast asleep. He lifted him under the covers, replaced the duvet with a fresh one from the storage room next door, and then went upstairs to retrieve Will.

The younger omega hadn’t woken and remained asleep in his arms as he carried him downstairs. He sat in one of the armchairs with Will in his lap and gently woke him up.
Will gave a start when he realised where he was and then began some soft distress whining until Hannibal reassured him and pointed out that Randall was there too. He explained the risk to the older omega and the cub which Will seemed to reluctantly accept.

“I know you don’t like it down here,” Hannibal told him. “But I need you to be a big pup and help take care of your brother now. He needs to stay here and he’ll be a lot more comfortable if he has you for company. I promise it won’t be for very long and then you can both come back up into the house with me.”

He could see that the omega had gone chalk white but was trying to put on a brave face for him. Hannibal lifted him up and put him in bed next to his brother giving him a kiss on the temple while tucking him in.

As he was moving to leave, Will leaned up to give him a tentative but genuine hug around the neck and said, “Please don’t worry. We’ll be OK.”

Hannibal froze for a second annoyed with himself that he’d let his concern be so obvious and potentially upset the omegas. But then he relaxed a little, returned the hug, resettled the pup and went back upstairs to better compose himself.

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Hannibal woke Katz up for her shift and then retired to his bed. He was trying to think through more scenarios and options but the smell of the omegas lingering on his sheets and pillows distracted him. Turning on the surveillance footage he could see that they were still in bed but were awake and making that soothing trilling noise at each other again.

Switching the camera, he could see that Katz was snooping around in the downstairs medicine cabinet. There was nothing that she would be able to find but the sooner he could have the house back to just him and his omegas the better.

Three or four hours of fitful sleep later, Hannibal stumbled down to the kitchen to start breakfast only to find Price had begun making cappuccinos and was oversteaming the milk. The beta actually started arguing when Hannibal tried to show him how to do it correctly.

Writing off his morning coffee, Hannibal focused on making a large pastry ring with cherry preserves, mini quiches, and pomegranate breakfast cocktails. He set these out in the sitting room, assuming that the others would want to watch the news while they ate.

Jack made a beeline for the television as soon as he came down, grabbing a coffee and ignoring the food.

The news was still being read by a series of increasingly exhausted looking Homeland Security officials. The quarantine had been extended to the DC metro area. All the schools were closed and flights cancelled. There were unconfirmed reports that the flu had spread to other cities which were also considering a quarantine but the official would not say which ones.

FEMA was going to be distributing food packages house to house that afternoon instead of trying to evacuate everyone. They were instructed to put a note on their door saying how many people were living there, what their names and Social Security numbers were, whether they had any dietary restrictions and some proof (a photo and all of their signatures) so that they would know how many boxes to leave. They were also supposed to hang a white towel or shirt out the window if anyone was showing symptoms. They were not to leave the house or to try to approach the distribution workers. FEMA would announce when they could open the door to bring the food in.
As the others were absorbed with watching the news and texting with their friends and families, Hannibal gathered together a bag of food and other supplies to bring down to the omegas. He had checked a few times and could see that they were remaining relatively calm, had woken up, taken a bath and were reading together. Randall had texted him that they were a little hungry and could they please have their breakfast.

Hannibal added some more books for Will and was about to sneak into the wine cellar to bring the bag down when Bedelia cornered him in the study.

“I just wanted to thank you again for your hospitality,” she told him. “I know you’re a very private person and it can’t be easy for you having so many unintended guests in your home, especially other Alphas.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he replied. “But, of course, the circumstances can’t be helped and I’m happy to assist in any way I can.”

“I hope you don’t mind my observing that you seem somewhat more abstracted than usual.”

“I suppose I’m increasingly a creature of habit and find the disruption to my routine somewhat... unsettling. But I assure you that your company and the company of the others is not a contributing factor.”

“Would it be helpful for you if we discussed the contributing factors?”

Perhaps another time. I think it would be best for all of us to keep our minds in the present if we can.”

“How are your omegas doing? I imagine this is very stressful for them as well.”

“I am minimising their stress by limiting their exposure to it. I hope you’ll agree that’s for the best.”

“As long as you’re sure that it’s their stress you are trying to minimise.”

“Yes, of course, Dr. DuMaurier. I assure you that I am well practiced in controlling myself and that the best interests of my omegas is at the forefront of my mind.”

“As your friend, it’s not your control that concerns me. It’s the cost of that control. But I just wanted to let you know that I’m here if you ever want to discuss anything.”

“That’s very kind of you. I will keep it in mind.” With that, Hannibal lifted the bag and headed for the basement.
They wrote up their list of names, social security numbers and dietary requirements to put out on the front door for FEMA. Price insisted on a big cheesy group photo under the horns on the dining room mantle then made a second copy to post on the refrigerator door.

As Hannibal opened the front door to put the note out he saw almost every one of the neighbours had hung out a white towel or shirt. Only a handful of them had put out notes.

Closing and locking the door, he went out into the back garden and stood listening. He could still hear a few televisions in the distance but nothing else. There was no movement that he could see in any of his neighbours’ windows.

Inside, Jack was pacing like a caged bull and checking his phone every five minutes for his orders. Hour after hour nothing came.

A little after one o’clock they heard engine noises in the street and lined up to peek out the front windows to watch a convey of army trucks making their way down the street. They were guarded by armed soldiers on foot wearing gas masks.

There were teams of workers in full hazmat suits running to each door, taking the notes where they found them, noting on iPads which houses had white towels out and how many people were reporting they needed food or other supplies. Then they would signal to a second group of workers who pulled the specified number of boxes, bags of toilet paper and bottles of water off the trucks and ran them up to each porch.

“They’re not fucking around,” Zeller observed.

It took five of them to argue Jack out of going outside to offer help. Katz was only able to convince him by arguing that he might miss his actual orders if he got too far from his car.

They were under strict instructions not to open the door until the driver read out the last digit of their house number. He waited until the convey had moved completely on to the next street but left guards on each end to make sure everyone went directly back into their houses. Hannibal's house number ended in a nine so they were the last ones to go.

When the number was called, they all ran together to move the boxes and bottles in as quickly as they could. Hannibal noted that the half the boxes were still sitting on their respective porches.

They’d been given three boxes with thirty-six “meals” in each, three bags of toilet paper and three ten-gallon bottles of water. Mostly the boxes were filled with canned chicken and tuna, raisins and branded snack foods like tortilla chips, crackers and chocolate chip cookies but there was a surprising amount of fresh fruits and vegetables which FEMA must have grabbed from the grocery stores or distribution centres assuming it was just going to rot otherwise with the quarantine in place.

Abigail arranged everything neatly in the pantry swapping out the items that were more practical for travel with the ones they had loaded in the cars on the first night.

She breathed a faint sigh of relief once she had everything organised but then the distant sound of gunshots sent them all scrambling upstairs to see if they could catch a glimpse of anything from the windows. Whatever was happening was too far away for them to see and there was no mention of anything on the news except for more airports, schools and other facilities closing and the same instructions to stay inside repeated over and over again.
Hannibal made them another crown roast for dinner, preferring to use up the perishables first in case they lost electricity. He had solar panels so that his energy consumption for his freezers would not draw attention from the power company but wasn’t 100% sure that they would provide enough power for the whole house if they needed to rely on them completely especially in the dead of winter.

And if he did end up having to show the others the basement for some reason, it would be better to have used up anything potentially recognisable first.

This time Bella and Alana helped him prepare gratinéd potatoes, onion soup and a spinach salad.

The meal was a little more subdued than the night before. Abigail noted that she was glad if she had to be stuck in a house under quarantine that it was with such amazing chefs although she added not, perhaps, with so many psychiatrists.

Zeller, Price and Katz launched into their desert island favorites but were interrupted by what sounded like an explosion coming from the direction of the port. Again, there was nothing they could see from the windows and nothing on the news except amplified warnings reminding them that looting was a crime and would not be tolerated.

While the others were distracted watching the news, Hannibal boxed up some of the food and brought it down to the omegas. They perked up as soon as he entered but he noticed they were both looking a little haggard, especially Will. Randall mentioned that he hadn’t been able to get any sleep because his brother kept tossing and turning.

After he fed them, they started begging him to let them go back upstairs even for a little while because they were dying of boredom.

To burn off some pent-up energy, Hannibal decided to let them help reorganise the storage rooms to see if they could find anything useful. His uncle had left crates and crates of things behind when he had moved back to Paris after Lady Murasaki’s death and Hannibal had barely touched any of it in the fifteen years since.

He pulled the canvas cover off an 1820s Sienna velvet sofa with enormous rolled arms. It had once belonged to his mother’s family and sat in their music room in Druskininkai.

He sat in the centre of the sofa directing the omegas to bring him different things so he could tell them which pile to move them to. He had them pile anything vaguely useful to bring upstairs in the corridor, anything he didn’t want to throw away but didn’t have any immediate use for into a corner of the same storage room and anything he was happy to throw away in a pile near the door to the ramp that led up into the garage.

They made slow progress because the pups kept wanting to curl up next to him and look at things instead of rummaging around in dusty boxes. Hannibal didn’t mind, however, since the point was just to keep them happy and occupied.

They were very excited about the katanas and armour— which Hannibal had them pile carefully in the corridor. There were a lot of clothes but not many that he would consider seriously offering his guests if the quarantine dragged on. The handful of items that weren’t absurdly old fashioned or moth eaten went out in the corridor and most of the rest that didn’t have any specific sentimental value went to the ramp.

Will carried over a heavy box full of things from Hannibal’s boarding school days.
“Is this from your school?” He asked holding up a class photo and grinning. Randall jumped over to have a look almost tripping over another box in the process.

“Yes,” Hannibal told them.

“Which one is you?”

“Can you guess?”

“The frowny one with bangs in the back?” Hannibal gave him a kiss on the forehead in confirmation. Will handed the photo to his brother and dove into the rest of the box.

“Is this all your homework? It’s all in French.”

“Haha, your uniform!” Randall exclaimed as Hannibal elbowed him playfully in the side.

“Yes, I went to boarding school in Paris.”

“They all say ‘TB’,” Will announced after flipping through a handful of dusty exam papers and school themes.

“That means ‘tres bien’ ‘very good’ – the best.”

“This one’s just a ‘B’ though...” Will said climbing onto the sofa next to Hannibal and handing it to him.

“That still means ‘good’.”

“What’s it for?”

“Physics, the instructor was very unreasonable... Randall I think that’s enough. If you dig through every single paper we’ll be here all night.”

“Did you draw these?”

“Yes, Will start putting those back, that box can go in the corner.”

“Is this a castle? It’s better than a photograph.”

“That’s my school.”

“Who’s this?”

“My uncle’s omega.”

“She’s very pretty.”

“Yes, put that back in the box now and go get me that other one. That one can go in the corner, thank you Will and then go get that flat box over there.”

Randall carried over another large box and dropped it in front of Hannibal, his face red from the effort as he pulled the flaps open.

“There’s nothing in this one but ropes and... whatever these are,” Randall said holding up spreader bars.

“That box can go out in the corridor,” Hannibal told him briskly.
“But what are they?”

Thankfully Will interrupted with “This one’s just baby clothes.”

“That was Misch... my christening dress. It’s been in my mother’s family for hundreds of years.”

“Did you really wear it when you were a cub?” Will asked holding up all the lacy frills and the improbably small arm holes.

“Yes, but only for one day. Put it back now. It’s a bit fragile and we’re still going to need to get some use out of it.”

When Will had set the last box gently in the corner, Hannibal told them “I think that’s enough for one night. We can look around a bit more tomorrow. I need to get back up to my guests.”

The pups grumbled a little but were genuinely tired now and let him lead them back into the bedroom. He drew them a hot bath because they were covered in dust and told them to brush their teeth and go to bed afterwards. He could see Will was already nodding a little and hoped they would both get a good night’s sleep.

Upstairs he found the others increasingly panicked as they listened to the sound of cars tires squealing in the streets, more shouting and gunfire, distant explosions. A neighbour’s dog was barking incessantly, then gave a sudden high-pitched yelp and stopped.

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Bella was trying to convince Jack to come to bed for the fourth time when suddenly all of the FBI agents’ phones chimed at the same time to indicate a new message. Jack dove across the sofa to grab his phone and check it.

“They want us to report to the naval depot at Fort McHenry as soon as possible to assist FEMA,” he announced retrieving his shotgun from the hall closet.

“Don’t worry my love, I’ll be back before you know it and, in the meantime, this is the safest place you could possibly be.” If he had to leave his omega with another Alpha he supposed Hannibal and Bedelia were the least threatening ones he could think of. It was better than having to worry about her waiting alone in their empty house.

Katz, Price and Zeller filed after him to Katz’s car. He was probably forgetting something important and had barely slept for two days but the only thing he could think about was getting out of the house and finally having a chance to do something useful and better assess the situation.

It was well after dark and there was a dense fog but they could just see, as they backed out of Hannibal’s back drive, that some of the townhouses still had their FEMA packages sitting on the stoops.

Zeller had his window rolled down to try to hear better but Jack ordered him to put it back up. The damp air was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

It was about thirty short blocks to the depot and Jack was gunning it despite the fog, figuring that with the curfew the streets should be empty.

Only about ten blocks away, at the corner of Riverside Park, he had a brief glimpse in the headlights of three people bent over a prone figure in the middle of the road before he plowed into two of them and ran over the figure on the ground.
He came to a screeching halt once the tires made contact with the ground again and then jumped out of the car to see how badly injured the people he had hit were. The others sat stunned in the car. He couldn’t see the bodies in the fog but could hear their hideous groaning some distance away. He leaned into the car to flick on his high beams and could just see the third figure he had missed lurching towards him.

She had been a young smartly dressed woman but every vein in her face was black and protruding, her eyes were drained of all color and she had a length of intestine hanging out of the side of her blood drenched mouth. She stumbled to the ground on one of her high heels but kept crawling towards him with a rasping moan not even registering what should have been a very painful fall onto the asphalt.

Without thinking, Jack pulled out his Glock and shot her in the head before she could grab his leg. Black sludge splattered all over the bottom of his pants.

“Jack, get in the fucking car,” he could hear Beverly shouting behind him. She leaned over and yanked him into the driver’s seat by the back of his belt with all of her strength, bashing his head slightly against the doorframe. Then she leaned over him to pull the door shut.

Suddenly the croaking, wheezing, rasping sounds seemed to be coming from every direction.

“Drive, drive, drive, drive...” Zeller or Price or possibly both were chanting as something smacked into the left side of the trunk behind them hard enough to shake the whole car.

At the edge of his high beams but still shadowy from the fog he could see what looked like a solid wall of figures advancing towards them down the street.

The car was still running, so Jack slammed on the accelerator and turned into the park speeding down the empty footpaths and away, he hoped, from the main mass of whatever it was that was out there.

“Get me another route to the depot,” he shouted at Zeller throwing his phone back at him.

As he turned back around, he slammed into two more figures and then into a tree.

When the airbags deflated they stumbled out of the car and gathered a few feet away. The car horn was blaring loud enough to be heard miles away.

“Jack, we have to go back,” Katz was trying to shout at him through the ringing in his ears.

Zeller was leading the way using the map application on his phone. Looking back, Jack could see that several of the figures were gathering around the car, not seeming to realise that they were no longer in it.

They ran in a loose formation, Katz and Price with the shotguns and Jack with his sidearm drawn. Outside they could hear more screaming, gunfire and that eerie moaning but the fog made it impossible to judge what direction it was coming from.

They passed block after block of tidy brick townhouses with white towels hanging out of almost every window.

Zeller kept them on back streets and mostly away from the streetlights. When they got to Hannibal’s block he led them up the back alley past all the garages. At Hannibal’s back gate, Katz dialled his number desperately on her phone while Price banged on the garage door.
They heard a groaning noise; Zeller shone the flashlight app at one of the figures that was only a foot or so from Price and Katz blew it away with her shotgun. Price clapped his hands over his ears and sunk to his knees.

Jack could hear more groaning now, coming from both directions in the alley, attracted by the sound of the shot.

“Hannibal,” he started roaring repeatedly at the top of his lungs while Zeller swung the light around desperately trying to find the closest one.

They could hear a rattling and clanging of keys against the gate and then it was open and they were through. Jack grabbed Price around the chest and lifted him bodily through the gate and into the garden.

Hannibal had the gate locked and had stepped back before the first figure crashed against it, reaching through the bars towards them. It was an elderly man with a full grey beard and skin lesions all over his forehead. He was quickly joined by several others who pushed him up so hard against the bars, his skin seemed in danger of slipping off his face.

“Will the gate hold?” Jack shouted barely able to hear either himself or the answer.

Hannibal signalled that they should carry out some furniture to barricade the gate just in case. With nine of them they were quickly able to bring out an armoire and several side tables and desks to completely block the gate even if the hinges gave. The rest of the garden wall was brick and more than ten feet high.

“Bullshit, that’s the flu,” Zeller said as they stood panting in the garden and listening for any further sounds.
Abigail watched with frustration while the two Alphas squared off against each other. Hannibal didn’t want to let Agent Crawford back in the house because his pants were covered in some kind of black goo that might be infectious. Meanwhile the three other FBI agents wanted to take one of the other cars and go find their families. Agent Crawford shouted at them that they were staying put until they got further orders. Hannibal was annoyed that Agent Crawford was assuming they were going to be let back into his house without bothering to ask. And the whole time the clanging and moaning outside the gates was getting louder and louder.

Finally Bedelia suggested that they hose Agent Crawford off in the garden and keep the FBI agents in the garage for another 24 hours to monitor whether they got sick or not. Abigail, Bella and Alana got busy carrying blankets, pillows and sofa cushions out to the garage for them. Then she went around to all the ground floor windows and made sure all the shutters were closed and locked. Looking out towards the front street all she could see was the fog. She turned all the lights out in the front of the house and got a chef’s knife to hide up her sleeve just to be safe.

Her neck was aching by the end of it and Alana checked her stitches, redressed everything and suggested she lie down and get some sleep. She took Agent Katz’s room since the FBI agent was sleeping in the garage.

Lying down made her heart race and her thoughts fly all over the place. Literally a week ago she had been in her own bed in a boring commuter suburb pissed off that her mom had grounded her for being fifteen minutes late for her curfew. She still woke up every morning wondering if her mom would be making pancakes or sausage and eggs for breakfast downstairs.

And she couldn’t shake the feeling that her dad was somehow responsible for whatever was going on. He had flipped out when he came home one day to find that her mom had changed the locks and gotten a restraining order against him. If her mom had just made a bit more of an effort to understand all the stress he was going through, maybe he wouldn’t have tried to do something so desperate.

She had missed her curfew because she was out visiting her dad at his cabin bringing him some soup, fresh fruit and clean clothes. He didn’t cook anything but barbecue and didn’t have a washing machine at the cabin. If he kept wandering around unshaven in filthy clothes covered in deer blood he was going to lose his job - the only thing keeping him anchored.

The last thing he told her that night was that he was working on a Christmas present for her and that everything was going to work out fine.

Unable to sleep, Abigail went downstairs to watch TV again. She didn’t know why she bothered since it was the same old bullshit hour after hour. Now they were replaying a message from the President who had relocated to an undisclosed location somewhere in the Rocky Mountains but was urging everyone else to stay calm and remain in their homes.

“Easy for you to say,” Abigail told him.

“What’s that?”

Abigail started as she saw Hannibal entering the room. She winced as turning her neck pulled at the stitches. How was it possible that she kept forgetting they were there?

“Are you alright Abigail?” he asked, coming over to have a better look.
“Yes, sorry. I just keep forgetting not to turn my head.”

“Do you want me or Dr Bloom to have another look? I have some painkillers upstairs if it’s bothering you.”

“No, thank you. I’m really fine.”

“You should try to get some sleep,” he said cupping his hands behind her ears. “Whatever happens in the next few days, I have a feeling that sleep will be one of our most precious commodities. I have some Valium as well if you want to try one. I’ve agreed to take the watch for the next few hours and I promise if anything happens I will come and get you.”

She let him lead her back up to the bedroom with his hand on her side suddenly acutely aware that she was wearing his clothes and that the rest of the house was absolutely silent.

“Do you think Agent Crawford will be OK?” she asked to cover the awkwardness.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Hannibal told her. “But in the meantime we can’t be too careful. We don’t know how the infection is spread yet and shouldn’t take unnecessary risks.”

They arrived at the door and Hannibal asked her again if she wanted something to help her sleep. Abigail said no and then he gave her a little kiss on the forehead and told her to sleep well before heading back downstairs.

She didn’t sleep well but time dragged along anyway. Here she was trapped in a house with total strangers, surrounded by zombies, and all she could think about was her dad and whether he was ever going to be buried now. The coroner still hadn’t released his body and she was supposed to be meeting with the funeral director tomorrow to finalise the arrangements.

Instead, the power grid crashed the next day. Hannibal had solar panels but they didn’t generate enough power to meet all the demands of the house. He adjusted the system on his phone to prioritise the refrigerators and hot water heater but it meant that they couldn’t use the TV and do laundry or take showers at the same time, for example, and had to limit how many rooms had the lights on.

Meanwhile, Abigail wandered around the second floor windows looking out for signs of the infected either in the alley or out on the main street. They seemed to have mostly cleared out from the alley once they stopped making noise there.

With the fog lifted, she could look out into the street. Small groups of them would shamble past every five or ten minutes and Abigail and the others would rush quietly to the windows to try to get a look at them. They all had the same jerking walk that made them looking like puppets being yanked on strings and had the same black veins and skin lesions but for the most part no other obvious injuries.

Just before dinner time Dr Bloom let Agent Crawford and the other FBI agents back into the main house. None of them had so much as the sniffles but they had obviously been getting on each other’s nerves all day.

The internet was down along with the power grid so they hadn’t been able to check in with their families from the garage. As soon as they were back in the main house, Katz, Price and Zeller lined up at the landline phone and started trying to call their families. None of them could get through. The phone would ring but no one would answer.

Abigail was almost glad for a fleeting moment that she didn’t really have anyone left to worry about.
Agent Crawford was trying to call his bosses but got a busy signal for about forty minutes.

Hannibal convinced him to put the phone down for a while and join them for dinner. They had steak and kidney pies served with a salad of beetroot slices and goat cheese. Abigail felt a bit angry that Hannibal had obviously spent a long time preparing one of the best meals she had ever eaten in her life and all the FBI agents wanted to do was argue about whether they should try to evacuate or not.

They decided to wait one more night and then try to get through to Quantico once there was daylight again. There had been no new news for almost eight hours – just the same unconvincing reassuring messages being played on a looped tape – and no signs of FEMA planning another supply drop. Agent Crawford was determined to better understand the extent to which they were surrounded by the infected and what they could possibly do about it.

Abigail asked if she could go along – anything to get out of the house and be doing something for a little while – but Agent Crawford told her it was too dangerous with her injury. She pointed out that she could shoot and he just said all the more reason to stay behind so that someone could protect Bella. She asked how she was meant to do that when they were taking all the guns but he ignored her.

The accumulated exhaustion of the past three days caught up with her that night and she slept for twelve solid hours without a single dream.

When she finally woke up, the FBI agents were loading themselves into Jack’s car this time and promising to either be back soon or to call once they reached Quantico or another safe location.

Bella was obviously distressed but her Alpha wasn’t going to be dissuaded so instead she went back up to their room instead of seeing him off. Bedelia went to sit with her.

They were gone less than ten minutes when Abigail heard engine sounds on the road. Peeking out the window she could see an army truck slowly moving down the street but this time the soldiers wearing gas masks were picking up all of the unclaimed boxes off the porches and going into some of the houses to bring out boxes of more supplies.

“Looters,” Hannibal told her and she almost screamed with surprise he had snuck up behind her so quietly.

“What do we do if they try to come in?”

“Go upstairs and turn off all the lights,” he told her. “And ask Bella, Dr Bloom and Dr DuMaurier to please stay in their rooms. You should all be safe upstairs. I doubt they will try to come into the house when we are surrounded by so many easier targets.”

Just as he was finishing they could hear a brief burst of gunfire from one of the neighbouring houses.

“Go on,” Hannibal repeated. “Everything will be fine.”

Abigail ran upstairs, turned off all the lights and checked that the others were all in their rooms reading. She went to get the kitchen knife she had hidden in her bedroom and then started when she heard their front door being smashed in.

She crept back into the hall and signalled for the other women to go back in their bedrooms.

From the top of the stairs she could hear some harsh whispering between the looters interspersed with muffled coughing.
She hid herself partway in the music room where she had a clear view of the top of the stairs but could not be seen from them. She thought about trying to warn Hannibal who was still downstairs but couldn’t think of a way to do it that wouldn’t expose both of them.

After a few minutes, she could see the back of one of their heads coming up the stairs. He had taken off his helmet and gas mask and she could see he had dirty blonde, almost ginger hair swept entirely to one side. It didn’t look like there was anyone else coming up behind him.

After he had taken a few steps onto the landing, he stopped to bend over and cough again. Abigail stalked up behind him as quietly as she could and shoved the knife into the side of his neck and shoulder. He collapsed with a seizure, kicking one leg against the stair landing rails in a way that Abigail was certain would bring more of them up to investigate.

She tried to pull him into the music room but found that he weighed a lot more than she expected. She was surprised to see that he wasn’t much older than her and only a little bit bigger. He had some small sores on his face but didn’t seem to have reached the final stage of his infection.

She heard a creak on the stairs and dropped the body, focusing instead on frantically trying to pull the knife back out. It had caught on something, however, and wouldn’t pull loose.

Desperate to find another weapon she turned, only to see Hannibal at the top of the stairs with a katana in each hand.

“Well done, Abigail,” he told her checking to see that the looter at her feet was definitely dead. He handed her one of the katanas and told her to continue guarding the top of the stairs while he dealt with the driver.

She waited, listening as carefully as she could for any sounds of more fighting downstairs but all she could hear was her own heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Finally she could hear the engine on the army truck revving up again and then a beeping sound as it backed closer to the house. She started to creep downstairs with the katana raised, not really sure how to use it but determined to finish things if she had to.

At the bottom of the stairs she could see the rear of the truck backing up to block the stairs into the house.

Then she breathed a sigh of relief when the engine stopped and Hannibal climbed from the cab of the truck into the back and then jumped smoothly onto the porch. Together they carried the four bodies of the looters out into the garden by the back gate. Abigail noted that Hannibal had decapitated all three of his and didn’t seem the slightest bit shaken.

Bella, Alana and Bedelia came downstairs and helped them unload all the boxes off the back of the truck and repair the hole in the front door. Mostly the looters had been stealing food, water and batteries but there were also two pistols, a rifle and a few dozen boxes of ammunition.

Hannibal handed the rifle to Abigail and watched as she checked and loaded it. Bella suggested that they wash up and that’s when Abigail realised she was still covered in blood. It was still red, instead of the black blood of the infected, but it was obvious from the sores on the looters that they were at least in the early stages of the disease.

She went upstairs to take a shower. She wanted to stand under the hot water for hours but was too worried about missing another attack downstairs. As she was getting dressed again she heard engine sounds in the back alley and raced to see who it was. At the window she could see that it was just
Agent Crawford and the other FBI agents returning.

She ran downstairs to meet them in the garage. The FBI agents looked frightened and discouraged. Agent Katz said they had barely made it four blocks before encountering too many of the infected to bulldoze through and had spent the rest of the time trying to double back without leading the infected back to Hannibal’s house.

Agent Crawford saw the bodies stacked in the garden and wanted to know about the looters. Hannibal explained that they had been able to ambush them because they thought the house was deserted. Looking down at their bodies, Abigail could see that the one she had killed now seemed to have black veins.

Agent Crawford gave him a little kick to his shoulder and Abigail screamed when the body started trying to turn over and crawl towards her. Hannibal sliced his head off and then the body was still again.

Just to be safe, they made a bonfire to burn the rest of the looters.

“It seems like you have a killer instinct after all,” Agent Crawford told Hannibal once his omega had gone back into the house. “I never would have guessed it.”

“We were just fortunate they were so sick and inexperienced,” Hannibal replied shooting Abigail a look she interpreted as an instruction to keep quiet.

“Well, I couldn’t be gladder for it,” the director told them staring at the remains of the bonfire. “I have the feeling we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

Everyone was very quiet over dinner. The FBI agents seemed to have accepted that there was no viable evacuation route for the moment and no way to contact their families. Agent Crawford spent half the afternoon listening to either busy signals or unanswered rings on the telephone.

After dinner he told Hannibal, “It looks like we’re going to need to impose on your hospitality for a while longer, Dr Lecter. But hopefully more of us here will make it easier to defend this position from whatever’s out there.”

They made plans to watch both sides of the house in shifts and to put sheets up on the roof to signal that they needed to be evacuated. Katz was put in charge of their little armoury and handed out weapons to whoever was on watch.

Abigail looked out the windows one last time before going to bed. She could see groups of the creatures wandering up and down both the main street and the back alley almost continually now. They didn’t seem to pay any particular attention to Hannibal’s house but would turn and shamble after any loud noises.

Shivering, she went back to bed. Dr Bloom insisted on checking for the tenth time that she wasn’t showing any signs of a fever. Whatever the disease was, it didn’t seem to spread just by contact with blood or gore.

Abigail closed her eyes as tightly as she could trying not to see the surprised look on the face of the young looter she had butchered and to shake the feeling that she was as guilty as her father.
“Please come down,” Randall was texting him at three o’clock in the morning.

Hannibal was supposed to be on watch but he had had to ignore the last two texts from his omegas because Jack was with him constantly trying to better organise their defences and he hadn’t been able to slip away. He shouldn’t really leave his watch post but he was also feeling guilty that he hadn’t been able to bring them their dinner that night and had only been able to arrange very short visits for the last two days.

The Alpha gave one more close check of the street. He could see infected wandering around in the moonlight but they hadn’t shown any particular interest in Hannibal’s house compared with his neighbours and didn’t seem interested in, or capable of, climbing through the truck or over the railings to get to his front doors or windows.

He decided to risk it, grabbed the bag of food he was keeping under a kitchen counter and snuck into the wine cellar. Katz was his watch partner upstairs and on the other side of the house but she tended to wander wherever she wanted or to get bored and come for a chat. He was going to have to keep the visit short again so she didn’t notice his absence.

Once he was through the trap, he took a quick shower in the safety shower in his lab and changed into spare clothes to try to reduce the risk of infection. So far the omegas didn’t seem to have been exposed to anything but it wasn’t worth taking any chances.

His heart dropped though when he went into the bedroom and saw the state that Will was in. His little omega was white as a sheet and drenched in sweat, curled up in one of the armchairs and staring blankly into space. Randall paced fretfully next to him.

Hannibal moved over to feel Will’s forehead and, finding it was clammy instead of feverish, lifted the omega up and sat down again with him in his lap.

“How long has he been like this?” Hannibal asked Randall as Will clutched at his shirt and tried to bury his face in the Alpha’s arm.

“Since lunchtime,” the omega replied, sitting in one of the other chairs. “But he was still talking until about an hour ago. He wants to go back upstairs. He said he can’t sleep in here and he hasn’t slept for five days.”

“Is that true Will?”

The omega nodded into his arm.

“What happens when you try to sleep?”

There was a pause for quite a while before the omega whispered, “I can see the monsters.”

“What monsters are those?”

“The ones upstairs.” Hannibal worked hard not to react.

“What do they look like?”

“I don’t know. They’re just dark shapes. You’re worried about them.”
Hannibal shifted the omega in his arms so he could look him in the eyes. “How do you know that’s true Will?”

“I don’t know. I just know it.”

“He’s always right,” Randall added, starting to look even more anxious himself. “Are there monsters upstairs? Is it the other Alphas?”

Hannibal’s mind raced to find an explanation that would keep the omegas calm and also convince them of the need to stay downstairs for their own safety. On the other hand, he didn’t know how long the epidemic was going to last and it probably wasn’t going to be feasible to keep them in the basement for weeks, especially with Will reacting so badly to it. He seemed to be even more sensitive to isolation than Hannibal had suspected.

“There’s some people who are very sick. And that makes them act like monsters. But they move very slow and can’t come in the house and there are a lot of people upstairs who can protect you so you don’t need to worry about them.”

“So why do we have to stay in the basement?” Randall asked for at least the twentieth time.

“Because I don’t want you to get sick,” Hannibal told him again.

“But we are getting sick,” Will replied. “I can’t sleep in here. Can’t we come up even for a little bit?”

“It’s the middle of the night, pup. There’s nothing for you to do upstairs even if you did come up.”

“Can’t we sleep with you?” Randall begged. “We’ll come straight back down in the morning.”

“I don’t think that’s safe,” Hannibal replied and could feel Will sagging with frustration in his lap. “But once my watch is over, I can come down here again and sleep with you two. If you want we can go in the room next door and you can sleep on the sofa. Maybe you can have the whole basement instead of just this suite so you can get more exercise. There’s a few rooms I need to lock because they’re dangerous but you can play in the storage rooms and in the hall.”

He lifted Will up and put him on his knees next to his leg. He signalled Randall over to kneel on the other side and then brought out their dinner. Will sagged against his leg and barely had the energy to lift his head a little to take the bites that were offered to him.

When they were done, he really needed to get back up for the remainder of his watch. He promised them as he was leaving, however, that he would seriously consider if there was a way that they could come upstairs for at least part of the day.

Back upstairs, he had about twenty minutes left on his watch. Luckily Katz had stuck to her part of the house and nobody had tried to break in while he was away.

It was unsustainable really to only be able to grab a few minutes with them while none of the others were looking and generally when he was supposed to be doing something else important.

If he was honest, he was less worried about the risk of infection at that point than he was about having the omegas around other Alphas. If the disease was transmitted by air or by blood one of the others would have been showing symptoms by now. And Bella would have shown if there was any special risk to omegas.

There was still a risk of looters or possibly some of the infected breaking in but if they could secure a better perimeter around the house, he would be more comfortable bringing the pups up for a few
hours at a time and possibly even letting them out in the garden to get some fresh air and sunlight.

When his shift was over, he woke up Alana and Zeller to take the next watch.

While they were distracted getting their weapons and agreeing which post they would take, Hannibal went back downstairs and found Will’s condition was the same. He lifted him up and brought him into the storeroom next door where they could lie on the sofa together. It was a little bit dusty, but Will seemed slightly happier to at least not be in the bedroom anymore and to have the Alpha there.

Randall brought over a pile of pillow and blankets for all of them and then lay down on the floor next to the sofa. Hannibal told him he was welcome to the whole bed in the other room but he didn’t want to be on his own.

Stroking Will’s hair, Hannibal could feel the omega relaxing against his chest and then beginning to breathe more evenly. He found that the scent of both of them so close by made him sleepy almost at once. He was always surprised by how much they were able to affect him more often than not without his even noticing it.

Lying here like this it seemed ridiculous to even worry that the other Alphas were a threat to what he had with his omegas. He would give Will a choice about who to mate with when he had his first heat because that’s what the omega needed, but he was confident that in five or six more years their bond would be unbreakable. After only a few months, the pup was attuned to his Alpha’s thoughts and emotions in a way that Hannibal had never experienced before and to an extent that was almost unnerving. He realised that he needed to be even more on-guard around the pup than he usually was but the more he tried to shield his feelings the more Will seemed to sense that something was off and to pursue them.

As Hannibal drifted off, he felt an overwhelming sense of affection for his two pups and was rewarded with a contented hum from Will wrapped around his chest.

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Hannibal sat on the big sofa in the music room watching his mother put little jewels into torn up pieces of bread and then swallow them. It all seemed very unfair. When he was much younger, one of his favorite things to do was rolling her pearl necklaces around in his mouth and his sire would always spank him for it, saying he was going to choke one of these days.

Mischa was crying because she was dressed in so many layers of winter clothes she could barely move or see anything. She had gone over to try to turn the radio on. They were usually allowed to listen to their favorite music programs in this room while drinking hot apple cider after dinner. But this time their mother had snapped at her to keep the radio turned off.

Hannibal climbed off the sofa and went to stand next to her. He reached a hand into the side of her hood and through the heavy scarf covering half of her face and gave her earlobe a little rub between his thumb and first finger.

The little omega interrupted her crying with something like a giggle and then reached up to do the same to him. Ever since she was whelped, their mother had always said that Hannibal was the only one who could get her to stop crying once she really got started.

Their sire came in wearing his blue dress uniform and carrying two suitcases stuffed so heavily they almost dragged along the ground. He leaned down to give each of his children a kiss on the cheek and to ruffle Hannibal’s hair. Hannibal played with the epaulettes on his uniform for a second wishing that he was still small enough to be carried like his little sister was.
Their mother picked Mischa up while their sire put on another heavy overcoat and then picked up the bags again instructing Hannibal to hold on to the strap of one of them so he wouldn’t get lost. He wanted to ask why they were going out the back way through the woods when the road had already been plowed but his sire didn’t seem to be in the mood for answering questions.

A blast of cold air hit them as they opened the door at the back of the pantry.

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Hannibal sat up with a start and realised that Will was no longer on the sofa with him and a cold draft was coming in through the door. He stepped carefully over Randall who was still asleep on the floor next to him and then paced quickly into the corridor. The draft was coming from the right, from the direction of the trap door, and he chased after it with a terrible premonition that Will was defying him and had decided to go upstairs on his own.

When he reached the trap door, however, he could see that it was still closed. Then he noticed that the freezer door was wide open.

Walking in he saw Will halfway towards the back running his hand down one of the long loin roasts stacked on a shelf. He was still barefoot and dressed only in his pyjamas but didn’t seem to notice the cold at all.

“Will,” Hannibal said softly but urgently. The omega did not respond and was still turned away from him.

Hannibal took a few quick paces into the freezer, the metal floor stinging his bare feet, and then picked Will up and carried him out. The omega didn’t struggle at all or seem to notice that Hannibal was there.

Back in the corridor and with the freezer door shut, Hannibal knelt down and found that the pup’s eyes were unfocused and his lids were drooping.

“Will,” he said again giving him a gentle shake. Will turned around in his arms and then started to walk into the wall.

Hannibal stopped him and lifted him up again. This time the pup responded a little better by wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s neck and resting his head on his shoulder.

“You’re sleepwalking, pup,” Hannibal told him fondly, rubbing his cold back.

“Why can’t we use the road?” the omega responded reaching up to rub the Alpha’s earlobe between his thumb and first finger.

Hannibal froze for a second despite himself. “What did you say?”

“Why can’t we use the bed?” the pup mumbled dropping his hand and then rubbing his own earlobe.

“We can,” Hannibal told him. “Would you be more comfortable there?”

The omega made a circular head movement against his chest that was both a nod yes and a shake no. Hannibal carried him into the bedroom, placed him carefully on the bed and then made a few more trips to the storage room to retrieve Randall and then the rest of their blankets and pillows.

Both of the omegas seemed to be sleeping soundly now, but Hannibal decided to close and lock the
bedroom door before joining them just in case.
The omegas were making puppy dog eyes at Hannibal when he moved towards the door after feeding them their breakfast. Then they started begging him to either stay longer or let them come with him. Finally, as he was about to shut the door, they started crying just a shade away from the distress tone that would have compelled him to go back in and comfort them.

He did manage to get the door shut and to get back up into the wine cellar without going back to check on them but only by exercising extreme self-discipline.

As he walked into the kitchen, he ran into Bedelia sipping her morning coffee and looking out into the garden as if nothing even slightly out of the ordinary was going on.

She started when she saw him and he realised he was standing there in rumpled pyjamas, his hair a mess.

“You look tired,” she told him coming around the counter to pour a second cup of coffee for him. “What’s wrong?”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t sleep very soundly,” he told her accepting the coffee and holding it under his nose as if the steam itself could wash some of the exhaustion off his face.

“You’re worried about your omegas,” she told him in a matter of fact tone. Hannibal was briefly annoyed that the entire world now seemed to have an open window into his innermost thoughts and feelings.

“Will is coping very poorly with the confinement,” he decided to tell her. “He won’t sleep unless I stay with them and is sleepwalking and having nightmares.”

“It’s very stressful for omegas to be separated from their Alpha for extended periods of time.”

“Everything seems to be very stressful for omegas... I can’t leave them downstairs and I can’t bring them upstairs.”

“What are you worried about if you bring them upstairs?”

“That someone will break in and I won’t be able to protect them.”

“So if the house was better defended, you would be more comfortable letting them up into it.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed after thinking for a few moments. “If I was confident that I would have enough warning to get the omegas back downstairs if I needed to, then I would be comfortable with letting them come upstairs for at least part of the day.”

Finishing his coffee, he took a quick shower, got dressed and went into the study to get a few pieces of paper and a pencil. Back in the kitchen, the rest of the group were having breakfast.

He quickly sketched his block and several of the neighbouring blocks. There were seven houses on the west side of his block including Hannibal’s, and then the church next door and on the corner. Then there were ten houses on the east side, three on the north and six on the south flanking the entrances to the back alley that led to all of the garages.

“If we barricaded these two roads at the north and south sides and both entrances to the alley,
secured the houses around this block and the ones facing us on either side and then shored up the iron railings around the church, we would have a solid perimeter for this block,” Hannibal said mostly to himself.

“The belltower in the church is one of the highest points for several blocks,” Jack added coming up behind him to look over his shoulder. “If we post a sentry there and at the other three corners of the block we’d have a better advanced warning system.”

“We should also see if anyone else is still alive and not sick in one of the other houses,” Alana added. “The more people we have coordinated and working together, the easier it will be.”

“What do we do with the people that are sick?” Katz asked. They all fell silent and looked at their feet.

“Can we just lock them up somewhere in their houses where they can’t get out?” Price suggested.

“We wouldn’t be safe,” Hannibal replied.

Jack agreed, “The point is to create a secure area that we know is clear. We can’t secure an area where there is any chance those things could potentially break out or keep exposing us to a mutated form of the virus. And it’s too risky for the people trying to corral them. It’s not worth losing some of you on the off chance that we can maybe cure the infection at some point in the future.”

“So we just kill all of them?” Katz asked with disbelief.

“If there is a no-risk way to lure them outside the perimeter, use it. Otherwise, we need to prioritise our own safety and put them out of their misery.”

“Even the ones that are just sick and haven’t turned yet?” Alana asked.

“If they are still in the early stages, we should see if there’s a way to treat them,” Katz added. “Maybe we can figure out why some of us seem to be immune while other people succumb so quickly. We also need to understand the progression of the disease and the mortality rate.”

“Fine,” Jack said. “If their blood is still red and they don’t attack you isolate them somewhere they can be observed and treated without exposing the rest of us. If they have black blood or make even the slightest aggressive move, put them down.”

Relieved to finally have a mission, Jack set about organising everything. They split into two teams of four each with Bella staying home to sort and inventory whatever they brought back with them. They would take turns climbing with ladders over the fences into the neighbours’ back gardens, checking the houses thoroughly and, if no one was left alive inside, taking any cars whenever it was reasonably clear and using them to block part of the alley or one of the roads. Then they would return to Hannibal’s house to rest while the other team checked the next house. They decided to save the church for last and go in with most of the group together because there was no way of knowing how many people were in there.

Hannibal had four katanas which the teams took turns carrying. They also carried guns but Jack instructed them to use them as sparingly as possible both because ammunition was limited and to avoid the noise attracting more infected. They wore disinfected gas masks which they had taken off the looters as an additional precaution.

Hannibal brought two ladders over to the side wall of his garden, allowing Jack, Katz, Price and Alana to climb onto the garage roof. They pulled the second ladder up onto the roof, walked over to the adjoining neighbour’s garage and then dropped the ladder down into their garden.
The house belonged to Miss Matilda Ogle who was eighty-seven, largely blind and confined to a wheelchair. She adored Hannibal who sometimes helped her with heavy lifting in the garden and brought her marzipan pastries every Easter.

Jack told him later that Miss Ogle had been partially eaten by her homecare nurse, who they managed to trap and behead in a closet. Miss Ogle was still animate and trying to wheel herself after them when they ended her suffering.

They piled the bodies in the garden, then went through room by room to check that there were no other occupants in the house. This was also confirmed by the note left on the door for FEMA. Once they were sure there was no one left, they barricaded the front door and windows and back gate with the furniture and piled anything useful next to the ladder to be taken back to Hannibal’s house.

It took the better part of two hours to clear and secure the first house but Jack was confident they would get quicker once they had their system down.

Finally, Jack took the keys to Miss Ogle’s Lincoln Continental and, once Abigail gave the all clear from the roof of the garage, drove it out into the alley to partially block the way in from the north.

When the car was in position, he leapt out and ran back to Hannibal’s gate where Bedelia let him in. Looking back, he could see Price, Alana and Katz lifting suitcases full of scavenged food, batteries and medicine down the ladders.

Hannibal was sorry to hear that Miss Ogle had not survived but was glad to see that she still had unparalleled good taste in caviar, foie gras and truffles.

They decided to try one more house before nightfall so Hannibal, Zeller, Abigail and Bedelia climbed through Miss Ogle’s yard and into the yard of the next neighbour over, the Hammonds. Mr and Mrs Hammond were empty nesters with four or five grown children. He worked in insurance and she sat on the boards of various political organisations. He had both of their cards in his Rolodex but had not had an occasion to use them yet.

They found the Hammonds, four of their children or children-in-law, and several grandchildren wandering around in their ground floor dining room, obviously infected. Zeller was about to climb back to tell Jack they needed more help when Abigail started tapping the handle of her katana on the metal porch railing so they lined up at the back door and could only come out one by one once it was opened.

Bedelia pulled the sliding glass door partially open and they took turns dispatching the Hammonds one by one.

They all hesitated, however, when the last one shuffled out, a male omega cub of about five or six. Abigail froze, unable to swing at him even as he snarled and lunged for her. Bedelia had to step in and put him out of his misery severing his neck in a single smooth motion.

Hannibal could see that Abigail was shaking afterwards, although she was determined not to let it show. While Zeller went to get the list off the door to check it against the infected they had already found, Abigail stood looking at the Hammond’s Christmas tree and the stack of presents under it.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Bedelia told her. “We’re only doing what we have to do and it’s putting them at peace.”

“You can’t really think of them as people anymore,” Hannibal added. “They certainly don’t see you that way. There’s no sin in defending yourself.”
“Yes, I know,” Abigail replied brusquely kneeling down to start tearing wrapping paper off the nearest presents. There was nothing vaguely useful except for a titanium rod and reel and some boxes of chocolates.

“One of them is missing,” Zeller announced after checking the line of bodies against the photo they had put out on their door. “Another kid – Daniel - eight years old.”

“I’ll check upstairs,” Hannibal told them.

He found the other infected child on his hands and knees in the master bedroom clawing at the closet doors. He quickly put the snarling creature out of its misery. A few seconds later he could hear a very faint whimpering on the other side of the door.

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Will leapt out of his armchair as soon as he heard the trap door open. Hannibal had left the bedroom door unlocked that morning, just locking a few doors to some of the rooms with more dangerous equipment in them and the trap door itself.

After the Alpha had left, Will and Randall made a half-hearted exploration of the other rooms but then ended up back in the bedroom again with nothing to do. They wanted fresh air and someone else to talk to, not more dusty rooms and boxes.

Will ran down the corridor to greet the Alpha but was surprised instead to see Dr Bloom coming down the stairs with a large shoebox under one arm. Hannibal was right behind her and closed the trap after them.

“Hello Dr Bloom,” Will said looking down at her shoes which were covered in mud. He could still smell the crisp winter air on her clothes.

“Hello sweetheart,” she told him giving him a quick hug around the shoulders and a kiss on the forehead before moving down the corridor.

“Where’s your brother?” Hannibal asked him.

“Still asleep,” Will replied following them closely.

“It’s this one,” Hannibal told Dr Bloom holding the door open for her. It was the room with all the old medical equipment.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked trying to see if either of them had hurt themselves anywhere.

“Nothing pup, do you want to see?” Hannibal replied.

Will nodded enthusiastically and Hannibal lifted him up under the arms so he had a better view of the top of the examination table.

Dr Bloom put the shoe box down and took the lid off. Will gasped when he saw that there was a small tri-coloured puppy dog in it. It seemed barely to be moving but its head tilted a little as Dr Bloom lifted it out. Will could see a slightly tattered red ribbon had been tied around its neck.

“Where did you find him?”

“In one of the neighbour’s houses... there’s an electrolyte solution in the refrigerator behind you,” Hannibal told Dr Bloom putting Will down for a moment.
Dr Bloom got a bag of liquid and Hannibal pulled a small needle, plastic tubing and some bandages out of a drawer. Will pulled a chair over so he could kneel on it and watch.

“I’m not sure about the dosage,” Dr Bloom told them. “We’ll need to monitor him closely.”

She warmed the liquid under the tap while Hannibal removed the ribbon, carefully shaved an area between the puppy’s shoulder blades and inserted the needle. The poor little thing was so weak it barely responded.

“He’s going to feel cold when we start giving him the fluids,” Hannibal explained to Will. “Go get the towels from your bathroom and I’ll bring you some more later when I come down with your dinner.”

Not wanting to miss a second, Will raced back to their bathroom, grabbed the towels and a throw from the armchair for good measure and then ran back to the medical room.

“Good boy,” Hannibal told him, stroking the back of Will’s head. The Alpha folded the throw several times and set the puppy on top arranging rolls of towels on each side to enclose him and placing a flap of the last towel gently across his back.

Meanwhile Dr Bloom rolled over a hook to hang the bag from and attached the end of the tubing to the needle. She adjusted a dial on the tubing to control the flow rate.

“Is he hungry?” Will asked reaching over to very gently pet the top of the puppy’s head. Its eyelashes fluttered slightly but that was the only response.

“The fluids include all the nutrients he needs for the moment,” Dr Bloom explained. “He needs to get some more strength back before he’ll be able to eat solid food.”

“I’ll bring something down with dinner though and you can try feeding him if he’s feeling better,” Hannibal added. Will gave the puppy a very gentle pet under the chin and then lit up with a big smile when the puppy extended his little tongue slightly to just touch his finger. It felt very dry and raspy.

“Have you ever had a puppy before, Will?” Dr Bloom was asking him.

He shook his head no. “I asked for one every Christmas but our sire said we couldn’t because we were always travelling.”

“Well, if you can take very good care of this puppy and he gets better, maybe your Alpha will let you keep this one...”

“Can I?” Will asked, swivelling around to ask Hannibal. “Please?”

“He’s very sick Will. I don’t think he’s had anything to eat for a few days and he’s still very young.”

“But if he does get better...”

“If he does get better, we’ll see. A puppy is a very big responsibility.”

“Please... I read every book in the libraries about how to take care of them. I know you have to feed them and give them water and take them for walks and how to train them and give them baths and clean their teeth...”

“OK, pup,” Hannibal said, smiling and kissing the top of his head. “If he gets better, we’ll see.”

“What do you want to call him?” Dr Bloom asked.
“Max,” Will replied without a moment’s hesitation.
When Hannibal came down to the omegas’ room a few days later, he was delighted to see both pups on all fours teasing the border collie puppy with an improvised toy made from an empty toilet paper roll and a mesh sponge on a rope.

The dog responded very well to the fluid therapy, thanks to Will hovering over it and sending Hannibal what felt like quarter-hourly updates. By the second day it was eating solid food and clambering after Will everywhere. And now it seemed almost fully recovered.

Hannibal could see a remarkable difference in the omegas as well now that they had something concrete to occupy their attention. Will still wouldn’t sleep unless Hannibal came down with them, but at least they weren’t moping around all day and clinging to him when he had to leave.

They beamed up at him when he came in the room and then continued to yank the toy across the floor and throw it back and forth between each other to try to entice the puppy to chase it.

Hannibal sat down in one of the chairs and watched them for a few more minutes while they chattered back and forth at each other and at the dog. He couldn’t remember ever seeing them as relaxed and happy as they were at that moment.

For a moment, it helped him forget entirely about his own exhaustion from the slow and tedious task of clearing houses. After three days they were still less than half done and hadn’t found another living soul. Meanwhile larger and larger groups of the infected seemed to be starting to gather just outside each of the barricades as quickly as they were able to set them up.

However, all of their hard work meant that in only a few more days he would be able to bring the pups upstairs at least for part of the time. That meant he needed to work on their manners and socialisation if they were going to be around the rest of the group continually.

“Come here pups,” he told them. “Come kneel over here next to me.”

They looked briefly hesitant to abandon their game but then shuffled over on their knees obediently until they were facing him in the chair. The puppy followed after them worrying at the hem of Will’s pants.

Hannibal stood up briskly, collected the dog under one arm, ordered the omegas to stay and then carried the dog into the bathtub where he left him with a chew toy covered in peanut butter to occupy himself with. He shut the door to the bathroom on his way out and then made his way back to the chair.

The two omegas were looking at him with some apprehension now, having noticed the rattan cane that he had brought in with him and left leaning against the chair.

“It’s OK, pups,” he reassured them. “We have some work we need to do and I require your complete attention, do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they replied promptly and he gave them each an affectionate pat on the head in reward.

“Right now, my colleagues and I are working very hard to make sure it’s safe for you two to come upstairs at least part of the time. In a few days, I should be able to bring you upstairs and introduce you to them.”
The pups grinned broadly first at each other and then at him.

“Did your sire ever teach you how to present yourselves when you’re formally introduced to someone new?”

They both shook their heads no after a moment’s consideration.

“That’s fine, I can teach you now. It’s more important for you, Randall, because you’re my mate and how you behave in front of other people reflects on me. But it’s also never too early for you to start to learn Will. It’s very important that you send the right messages with your behaviour. Otherwise there can be all sorts of unfortunate misunderstandings.”

“Yes, Alpha,” they agreed although they still looked a little confused.

“Stand up,” he told them and the two omegas scrambled to their feet.

“I’m going to bring the others down here, I think. Turn around and face the door. Good boys.” Hannibal shifted them so that they were standing in an even line facing the entrance with Randall on the right, closest to the door, and Will on the left.

“Stand up straight and cross your arms behind your backs, keep your eyes at about the level of their navals. Pull your stomach in a little Will. Yours can relax, Randall,” he instructed them as he circled around adjusting the angles of their arms and how they were holding their hands together. He used the markings on the cane to measure the gaps between their arms and the distance between their clasped hands and the waistband of their pants.

The differences in their height meant that their jaws were at different angles when they tried to keep their eyes focused at the right level. Hannibal decided that a uniform angle for both of them was more important than each having the technically correct angle so he adjusted both of them to a median position and then stood back to review the effect.

When he was happy with their positioning, he gave them each a piece of chocolate and told them to take a few moments to remember it for when they stood up again.

As they were eating, the puppy gave a lonely mournful howl from the bathtub and Will partially turned to look at the door.

Hannibal brought the cane down with swift whistle on his backside. Will spit the chocolate out, more from surprise than pain and turned around to look wide eyed at the Alpha.

“The puppy is fine where he is, Will, and I told you that I expect your complete attention right now. When I put you in a position, stay there until I give you permission to move. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the pup responded giving a little sniffle with his eyes cast down and trying to remember which position he had been in. Hannibal helped him back.

“When I come in, I want you both to kneel down at the same time, like this.”

When they were both on their knees he continued adjusting them so that the backs of their necks were presented at just the right angle, their legs were in the right position and their feet were crossed behind them.

“Fold your hands over your stomachs,” he told them. Then he adjusted Randall’s folded hands lower so they sat under the slight bulge of his stomach instead of over it.
“Pull your shoulders back and curve your back a little, Randall,” he told him, holding his shoulders in position with one hand while he pushed his lower back forward slightly. The curve of the pup’s belly was much more obvious when he finally stopped fidgeting.

“There, hold that position and remember it.” He gave them each another chocolate.

“When I introduce you, bend forward at the waist and drop your head down so they can see the backs of your necks.” He showed them how far he wanted them to go and how long to stay there before letting them come back up and rewarding them again.

“In the future, when you see me for the first time in the morning or when I come back to the house, I want you to kneel down like this except lift your hands up by your ears, palms up and, Randall, you uncross your feet and keep them parallel to each other.”

After some more adjustments, Hannibal asked them, “Can you remember both positions?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the two omegas said.

“How do you bow when I introduce you?” They returned to the previous position. “And how do you greet your Alpha?”

When they showed him, he gave them each another piece of chocolate.

“Stand up again when I tell you. Push back onto your heels and stand up in one motion. Don’t scramble around. And now stand again the way I taught you until I say “sufficient.” That means you can behave normally again. Good pups. Let’s practice some more.”

He had them stand, kneel, present and stand up again over and over again. In each position he would measure and adjust them, rapping with the cane any body parts that were out of position or that moved without permission.

Will had excellent muscle memory and was patient enough to hold position until he was rewarded but Randall struggled to remember multiple instructions at once and was constantly fidgeting besides. Hannibal could see that the pup was getting frustrated and sore and that watching his younger brother get praised and rewarded was distracting him.

“That’s enough for today, Will, thank you. You’re doing very well.” Hannibal told him giving him a kiss on the top of the head. “We can keep practicing tomorrow. In the meantime, why don’t you play with the dog while Randall and I practice some more in the other room.”

The older pup looked crestfallen as Hannibal led him into the storage room. The Alpha thought about giving him a break but they only had a few days to get it right and Randall’s performance as his mate had to be flawless or he wouldn’t be able to let the omegas upstairs. If his omega couldn’t kneel or present properly it would signal to the other Alphas that Hannibal was ineffective at handling him and that their bond was weak. A rival Alpha would see that as an invitation.

Hannibal put Randall through the paces a few more times, each one worse than the last. Now the pup was having trouble standing up straight because of the marks on the soles of his feet from forgetting to cross them. Hannibal decided to focus on at least getting the kneeling and presenting positions right.

“Arch your back,” Hannibal told him for the tenth time kneeling behind him to show him the correct angle again. “I want them all to see what a good pup you are getting round and full with your master’s cub.”
When the omega finally held the correct position for a decent length of time, Hannibal praised him and then gave him an affectionate pat on the ass. He was surprised to find that the seat of the omega’s pants was soaking.

He stood up and walked around looking down at the pup. He could see that he was erect and that his cheeks were flushed with humiliation. He could smell now how aroused the little omega had gotten just from being positioned by his Alpha.

“Randall,” he said, more bemused than scolding. “How are you going to learn anything like that?”

“Sorry, Alpha,” the omega responded with his head still hung.

Hannibal lifted him up and bent him over the arm of the sofa, careful to avoid any pressure on his belly. Then he reached around to knead at his pup’s groin while draping himself over his back. As his own cock started to stiffen, he ground it up and into the omega’s wet seat.

“Are you having trouble concentrating?” Hannibal asked.

The omega whimpered, bit his lip and finally shot out, “Yes, Alpha. Sorry.”

“Will you be able to pay attention better if I fill you up first?”

Randall nodded his head enthusiastically. “Yes, Alpha. Please.”

Hannibal stepped back a little and tugged the omega’s pants down to his knees. There was a beautiful pink blush on the pup’s haunches. The Alpha had only been swatting them with the cane to keep their attention – not to cause any kind of persistent damage.

His omega’s rump was glossy from all the slick that had spread around it. Hannibal started to lick it up relishing the heat radiating from the pup’s skin. He tasted like buttery honey with his usual light jasmine and orange notes. Hannibal found himself opening his mouth wider and wider to take in more of the pup and then gently biting down on the ridges of flesh this created for him.

The omega started writhing and crying out in a feeble protest for his aching backside.

Hannibal moved both hands to the omega’s hips to steady him.

“If you’re a good boy for me and you hold perfectly still where I put you, I’m going to fuck you until my come starts leaking out of your ears. But if you disobey me and move without permission, I’m going to get dressed again and you’re going to stand here like this until you dry up. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the omega panted unsure if he was even allowed to open his mouth wider.

Hannibal moved the pup’s arms so that he was better braced against the sofa arm and then took off his suit slowly, folding it neatly in a pile on the other side of the sofa. He was aware all the time of the omega’s increasing agitation as well as his determination not to let it show.

When he finished undressing, the Alpha moved around behind the pup. Taking himself in hand, he rubbed his cock up and down along the edge of the omega’s furrow to start to wet it. Randall moaned deeply but managed to hold still.

Hannibal gave him an approving pat on the ass and then started nudging his cock slowly but insistently into the omega’s passage. He was wet enough to sink all the way into on the first slide but the Alpha wanted to test his composure.
Randall squinted but stayed in position as Hannibal worked himself in and then gave a long panting sigh when the Alpha bottomed out.

Gripping the sofa arm on either side of the pup’s shoulders, Hannibal began a series of punishingly slow slides up and into the little omega. In truth, if the pup was moving, the Alpha probably wouldn’t have known it. His eyes were closed and the only thing he could focus on was the exquisite friction of the warm, tight ridges of the passage encasing him.

Hannibal’s lengthy, powerful thrusts pushed the omega forward and over the arm where he was afraid to move himself back again. The Alpha gripped him around the chest to pull him back but then eventually lost patience with having to do this each time. He pinned the omega’s chest to the sofa arm with his weight, wrapping over him and then stepped up his pace.

As Hannibal’s knot started to grow, the omega tensed and struggled to hold still and started to wail and mouth at the sofa cushion.

The Alpha groaned as his knot caught hold and then growled out his climax deep inside the omega. When the hot rushes subsided, he reached around to give the pup a few brisk strokes to finish him off and was rewarded with a second round of luscious contractions around his cock.

Lifting the omega up under his legs, Hannibal carried him onto the sofa where they could lie down side by side.

“That’s sufficient, pup,” the Alpha told him with another pat on the side of his rear. “You were a very good boy for me.”

The omega dropped his arms at once and chased contact back against his Alpha. The pup was squirming so much now that he was finally allowed to move, Hannibal couldn’t resist rolling over slightly to contain him better and then rutting even more into his tender hole.

This turned into a third round for Hannibal who was able to use the leverage from one leg on the floor to plant himself even deeper in the omega. The pup was clutching to the edges of the cushions like he thought the floor was about to open up under them.

When he had finished again, the Alpha lay curled around his omega gnawing at his earlobe and sucking on the side of his neck and shoulder.

“You’re mine,” Hannibal told him bluntly. “I just want to make sure everyone else knows it the second they see you.”

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It took them five days to clear the remaining houses on Hannibal’s block and to set up vehicle barricades on the surrounding streets and the back alley. They found black-blooded infected in almost every house, but no one else who was still alive. The only other living things they saw were pigeons, crows and increasingly feral cats.

The number of infected wandering the streets seemed to grow every day but they showed no interest in or ability to climb over or under cars or other significant obstructions once they had been put in place.

In each house, they moved all of the furniture to block the ground floor doors and windows or to shore up the fences or railings correcting houses where they were detached. Once the alley was secure, it was much easier to move the stockpiles from each new house into Hannibal’s garden.
They found a reasonable amount of food in each house as well as clothes for the others, a few handguns, medicine and other useful tools and potential weapons like axes and knives. Most of the infected seemed to have fallen within the first few days and hadn’t made serious preparations to either evacuate or dig in.

The church took an entire day by itself. There were hundreds of infected just in the nave, including a large number of children. Even after they left the doors open for a day to let them clear out by themselves, there were still dozens milling around who had to be isolated and carefully dispatched.

Then it took hours to better barricade and shore up the cast iron railings that ran around the church and its small yard mostly using the pews from the church itself. Infected started congregating on the other side of the railings as soon as they saw them moving around in the yard and they had to be careful to avoid all the arms reaching through. They had begun to stink of decay and seemed increasingly desperate to find food. They beheaded dozens more of them along the railings as they moved parts of the barricade into place.

Zeller and Price questioned continually whether or not it was worth including the church in their perimeter but Jack insisted that the tower, once it was secure would be invaluable to their defences. Climbing to the top, Hannibal could see his point. There was a reasonably clear view of the roads approaching his block from all directions. A guard posted there would be able to give a warning to the others and would have a clean shot from a protected position.

Once they finished in the church, they moved all of the bodies they had found in the houses into a yard for a house on the opposite side of the block to Hannibal’s and made a bonfire.

It was exhausting work, particularly because they had to also arrange night watch shifts, but they tried to rest as much as they could.

Finally, on Christmas Eve, Hannibal told the others over breakfast that he had a basement where they could store some of the recovered supplies that were currently cluttering up the halls and corners of the house. He also suggested that there might be some additional items, amongst his uncle’s many things, that might be useful for them.

Hannibal led them down into the basement cautiously monitoring every micro-reaction. Alana and Bedelia were on watch, but Jack, Bella, Abigail, Katz, Zeller, and Price filed down the steps after him. He would have preferred to reveal the basement to them one by one so that it would be easier to react appropriately to each response but unfortunately there was no plausible way to stop one of them from telling the others so he decided it was best to rip the bandage off quickly.

“You thought there might be something useful down here...” Jack was saying as he looked in the freezer. When he closed the door again, it was just short of a slam.

“My uncle experienced significant... instability... during his youth in Lithuania during the war. He was eight when our ancestral home was taken by the Nazis and twelve when the Soviets appropriated it. I’m afraid it left him with some idiosyncratic attitudes to property and to the power of the state. He used his remaining wealth to build a number of homes in different countries where he felt that he could be secure no matter what the circumstances and to retrieve as much of our family’s property as possible after the fall of the Soviet Union.”

“As I was raised by my uncle, I’m afraid that some of his paranoia as well as some of his hoarding tendencies may have rubbed off. It’s certainly not personal, Jack. I couldn’t be sure before how long we would be staying here and if the rest of you did decide to evacuate then my position would be less exposed if I did not tell you. I’m sure you can understand my perspective.”
“And now...”

“Now it is clear that we may all be here for some time and I think it puts us all at best advantage to
know all of the facts.”

Hannibal led them down the corridor showing them each room in turn. Katz squealed in delight to
see the lab and wanted to start poking into each of the cabinets but Hannibal led her along.

“My uncle also built an escape passage into the garage which you should all be aware of in case...”

Hannibal cut himself off in response to the silence that had spread as each member of the group
noticed the bedroom and walked into it.

Stepping into the bedroom himself, he was proud to see the omegas kneel down exactly as he had
taught them to. Will was wearing a vertically striped tunic in muted jewel tones that Hannibal had cut
down for him from one of his own jackets. He had a plain white training collar on and his curls had
remained more or less as Hannibal had painstakingly arranged them. The dog was nibbling at his
stockinged feet but Will was doing a good job of ignoring him.

Randall was wearing one of Lady Murasaki’s old thigh length silk tunics because he was too tall and
broad in the shoulders to fit any of the other omega clothes and there hadn’t been enough time to
custom design something from scratch. It was dark green with a wide embroidered border covered
with wisteria vines and small woodland animals like stoats and foxes.

He was wearing one of her favourite collars as well – a rich black leather embroidered with red
camellias. It rested low on his neck just above the slits in the shoulders of the tunic that showed off
his mating mark.

He looked a little embarrassed to be shown off this way but just enough to lend a healthy flush to his
cheeks.

“This is my mate, Randall,” Hannibal explained to the others. “And this is his brother Will, my
ward."

The pups presented perfectly. Hannibal could not have been more proud of them.

“He’s bred,” Jack observed. “How long were you planning to keep this a secret?”

“I obtained them several months ago and Randall quickened during his first heat. It was not my
intention to keep anything a secret but I did not want to risk saying anything while he was still in his
first trimester. I was planning to tell you about my omegas and about the cub at the dinner party but,
obviously, that announcement was interrupted. After that, I was concerned for their health and
brought them here so they would not be exposed to anything harmful.”

Hannibal signalled to the omegas that they could stand up again and they managed with acceptable
grace and dignity.

Bella stepped over and stroked one of Will’s cheeks. “You both presented so well,” she told them
and then, turning to Hannibal, “They’re so beautiful. Both of them.”

Jack and the betas moved on to see the escape exit but Bella stayed behind to ask the omegas
everything about themselves. Hannibal was pleased to see that after a very brief initial shyness they
warmed up to her and started to happily chat about their puppy dog and their favourite books.

When they went back upstairs, they brought the two omegas with them. Hannibal had an arm around
each of them and could feel the sigh of relief they each released as they stepped up into the wine cellar and then back into the kitchen.

He let them stay upstairs for the rest of the day as long as they remained in the same room with him and within sight. It was very quiet – a bright winters’ day with no sign of the infected anywhere. The pups sat near the open windows where they could feel the fresh air and enjoy the sunlight.

In less than an hour, Bella had entirely adopted them bringing them hot cocoa to drink, sitting on the floor with them, hanging on their every word, her frequent melodic laughter brightening up the entire house.

As he was cooking lunch and watching them, however, Hannibal could sense some lingering tension with Jack and decided to feel him out.

“I apologise again, Jack. It was never my intention to hide anything from you or the others. But the safety of my mate and cub had to be my primary consideration.”

“Of course,” Jack responded, still somewhat distracted. “If I had known about the safe room, I probably would have insisted that Bella go there as well.”

“I’m very relieved to hear that you understand.”

“Which omega institute did you get them from?” Jack sipped at his coffee with a show of nonchalance.

“Baltimore State. Dr Bloom works... or rather used to work there.”

After a brief pause, Jack continued. “They’re very young. I wasn’t aware that they could legally be acquired so young.”

“There were special circumstances because they were orphaned and it would have been cruel to separate them. Dr Chilton agreed to a contract allowing me to train Randall myself and to foster Will as a companion for him.”

“So Will is still unmated.”

“Yes, of course. He’s still a cub really.”

They watched as Will showed Bella the first trick he had taught the dog – an awkward kind of handshake. The dog yipped happily at all three of them in turn and Will broke into a wide and unselfconscious grin.

“Well, you’re obviously a very lucky man, Hannibal.”

“I’m quite aware of it,” Hannibal replied with a tight smile lifting his own coffee in a toast.
Will woke up smiling at the feeling of soft sunlight on one cheek and Hannibal’s velvet pillowcases on the other. Opening his eyes, he could see Randall lying right across from him also looking supremely contented in his sleep.

Coming to a little more, he could remember the Alpha from the previous night agreeing that they could stay in his room but absolutely forbidding Max to be on the bed with them. Rolling over, Will could see that the faithful little puppy had curled up on the carpet just below his side of the bed.

He reached down to scratch Max’s head and then noticed the sounds of harpsichord music drifting down the hall and through the open bedroom door.

Turning over again, he could see that Randall was awake now too either from the sounds of the music or from the motion of Will shifting around in the bed. Either way, he gave his brother a happy little trill and then jumped out of bed to investigate the sound.

They walked down the hall to the music room together peeking curiously in some of the guest bedrooms where the doors had been left open. They weren’t used to seeing signs of occupation in any of them and the scents of so many strangers all at once was a little confusing.

In particular, Will didn’t like the scent of the beta girl who wore a scarf around her neck in their old bedroom but he supposed it wasn’t really reasonable to begrudge her one room when they had the run of the rest of the house.

Randall gave a little gasp when he walked into the music room and Will turned and hurried after him.

At first he didn’t entirely understand what he was seeing. Their sire had never been big on holidays – calling them a damned nuisance and an excuse for retailers to separate a few more fools from their money. The only Christmas trees they’d ever really seen before were on TV, at shopping malls, or in the windows of other peoples’ houses as they drove by.

But in one corner of the music room was the most perfect Christmas tree Will had ever seen. It was covered in purple and white lights and hundreds of crystal ornaments shaped like snowflakes and icicles. There were dozens of wrapped presents underneath it as well and ornate decorations along all of the walls and over the windows. The Alpha must have been up half the night putting it all together for them.

He had stopped playing the harpsichord when they came in and turned on the bench to smile at them and watch their reaction. Randall ran over to give him a hug while Will took a closer look at the presents. They all had different, but colour-coordinated, wrapping paper and a tag attached to a ribbon with either “William” or “Randall” written in the most beautiful calligraphy he had ever seen.
“Are they for us?” Will asked trying to sound casual but dying to start ripping in to them.

“Yes, of course,” Hannibal told him. “Do you want to open them?”

Both omegas nodded furiously in unison.

“Why don’t you start with this one?” Hannibal said taking another present off the shelf of the harpsichord and handing it to Will.

Will wanted to rip all the wrapping off sideways but thought that Hannibal might not approve of all his expensive paper being treated that way so he carefully removed the ribbon and then tugged along the seam until the gift was revealed.

It was a dog training manual and the collar that was sitting inside it like a bookmark had the name “Max” stitched into the side of it.

Will burst into tears before he was aware of what he was doing and the next thing he knew Hannibal was pulling him onto his lap and asking what was wrong.

Will sobbed a few more times like a basket case and then managed to explain “It’s nice” in between gasps for air.

Randall had come over to see what was wrong, concluded that Will was just being nuts and went back to ripping through every present he could find with his name on it.

“I can really keep him?” Will asked when he’d managed to calm down a little.

“Yes,” Hannibal replied. “But he is completely your responsibility. Anything he needs, you’re going to provide and if he makes any messes you’re going to clean them up.”

Will nodded along already looking for Max on the floor so he could put the collar on him.

“And when he’s a little older, we’re going to train him to help keep watch over the house and to protect you and your brother. But otherwise, he is all yours.”

Will dropped off his knee and put the collar on the little puppy. Even tightened to the narrowest punch hole it still threatened to tip off his head at any moment.

“Thank you,” Will said standing up and wiping the last tears away from his eyes. “He’s the nicest present I ever got.”

“I glad you like him,” Hannibal said sincerely giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “But I think if you don’t start opening the rest of your presents soon your brother is going to do it for you.”

Randall had in fact reached the end of his pile of presents and, wrapping himself in the heavy fleece blanket Hannibal had given him, came over to sit on the Alpha’s lap and get his help making out some of the words in the copy of Call of the Wild he’d just opened.

“Thanks,” Randall told him after a few minutes. “But we forgot it was Christmas and didn’t get anything for you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hannibal replied. “Where I come from, it would be unusual for an omega to get gifts for their Alpha. There’s nothing you could possibly get for me that is better than what you give me every day just by agreeing to be mine.”

Will wanted to roll his eyes at the schmaltz but could also tell that the Alpha actually meant it and
that Randall, although he would die a thousand painful deaths before admitting it, was eating it up.

After Will finished opening the rest of his presents, mostly interesting looking books, dog toys, and some new clothes, Hannibal had the omegas clean up the paper and then come down to the kitchen where he put the strata he had prepared the night before in the oven.

While the Alpha was preparing the rest of the breakfast and talking to Jack and Abigail, who were just coming in off their watch, Will and Randall went into the dining room where they could see flurries of snow drifting into the garden adding to a dusting that had fallen overnight.

They had never really seen snow in real life before. Their sire didn’t like the cold and would rarely take them much further north than where they were now - certainly not in winter which he liked to spend repairing engines and doing odd jobs around the Gulf Coast.

The fluffy white flakes were rapidly masking everything, giving the garden an enchanted air.

“Isn’t it lovely?” Bella said coming up behind them. “The first time I ever saw snow falling, I was twenty-seven and I still thought it must be some kind of magic.”

“We’ve never seen it before either,” Randall told her.

Max was scratching at the bottom of the door and Will picked him up so he could see better.

“Do you want to see what it feels like?” Bella asked them.

Will wanted to more than anything and nodded in response.

Bella flipped the latch on the door and opened it and the two omegas stepped out onto the patio.

Wearing only their pyjamas and thick wool socks, they could feel the chill as soon as they stepped out of the dining room. But it was a pleasant, bracing sensation compared with the slight stuffiness inside.

Will reached his hand out from under the wide eaves of the house and could feel the flakes of snow landing gently on it. Randall knelt down to run his hands over the shallow drifts that had settled on the patio tiles and trace figures on them.

Will put Max down for a minute so he could step out from under the eaves and feel the snow falling on both arms and on his face. He laughed when they tickled his cheeks and eyelashes.

The puppy took a few tentative steps into the garden and then started plowing his nose through the snow trying to eat it and skipping around trying to find a less cold place to set his feet.

Bella made a little snowball and threw it towards the fountain. Max chased after the movement and then looked confused, turning around and around, when he couldn’t find what she had thrown.

Randall took the rope toy that Will had brought down with him and threw it as hard as he could into the garden. It landed in some bushes behind Max. He heard the sound and turned around to sniff at the bushes but couldn’t find it.

Ignoring the biting cold under his feet, Will ran over to retrieve the toy so he could throw it again.

About two thirds of the way to the bushes, he could hear the Alpha calling his name. Turning around, he saw that Randall and Bella had gone back into the house and that Hannibal was standing on the patio motioning for him to come back.
He pointed to Max to explain that he was just going to get him to bring in with him and then turned to finish collecting the puppy who raced along the edge of the bushes just ahead of him.

When he was just inches away from catching Max, he felt Hannibal’s arm wrap around his waist and lift him carrying him back into the house. Looking back, he could see that Max was confused about what game they were playing at first but then trailed after them trying to nip at the loose part of Will’s sock.

Looking down, Will could see that the patch of bare skin between the bottom of the Alpha’s pyjamas and the tops of his leather slippers was turning orange and blue in patches. He tried to look up but Hannibal’s grip around him was too strong. He seemed angry but then he didn’t seem angry.

Back in the house, Hannibal closed the door behind them just seconds after Max managed to race in. He set Will next to Randall who had his head hung and looked close to crying. Will tried to gauge Hannibal’s reaction again but his face was unreadable as he pulled off his wet footwear.

“Go stand in the study, both of you” Hannibal told them as soon as he was done and Will felt his stomach flip. It had been such a perfect day and now everything was ruined.

“I told them they could go outside,” Bella was saying in their defence and stepping partially between them. “It’s not fair for them to get in trouble for it.”

Will would have given her a big hug if he could.

“Are you their Alpha?” Hannibal asked her stonily.

“No,” she replied looking for help from Jack who had just come in from the kitchen.

“No, what?” Hannibal prompted.

“No, Alpha,” Bella replied looking down at her hands which she had begun wringing together.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Jack was barking at Hannibal, his shoulders starting to hunch up for an even stronger follow-up. Their arguing was starting to draw some of the others and Will would have given anything to be able to disappear into the wallpaper at that moment.

Ignoring Jack, Hannibal continued to address Bella evenly. “If you’re not their Alpha, it is not your decision where they go or what I do with them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha” Bella responded into the floor tears starting to roll down her cheeks.

“Go wait in the study,” Hannibal said turning to address Will and Randall again. “I’m not going to tell you a third time.”

They all but tripped over each other to get around the dining table and out of the room. Will caught Alana’s sympathetic expression which just made everything a hundred times worse.

Behind them, they could still hear Jack arguing with their Alpha in muted and then increasingly open and angry tones.

With the door of the study closed, all they could hear was a dampened version of Jack’s loudest shouts.

They stood on the carpet in the middle of the study for what felt like ages until Hannibal finally came in. He was still carrying his wet slippers and placed them on the ground next to him when he sat in
his favourite chair. The two omegas shifted around to stand in a line in front of him.

“When I agreed to let you come upstairs, what did I tell you to do?” Hannibal asked them evenly.

“Stay in the same room” - “Stay where you can see us” they mumbled over each other.

“Look at me please.” Will forced himself to focus on the tip of the Alpha’s nose so that it looked like he was making eye contact without actually having to. He could tell that Hannibal was disappointed in them just from his posture and tone of voice. He felt like if he actually had to see it in his eyes it would sink him. And where the hell was that coming from?

“Is that what you did?”

“No, Alpha,” they whispered.

“Do you know why I told you to stay where I could see you?”

“S’dangerous” Randall replied shifting from one foot to the other.

“That’s right,” Hannibal told them. “So you knew what I expected you to do and you knew why I wanted you to do it. But you decided to disobey me anyway.”

“We just forgot,” Will offered in feeble protest and immediately regretted it when he met the Alpha’s eyes for a second.

“Did you just forget too, Randall?”

His brother was trying to figure out which answer the Alpha wanted to hear but quickly gave up and nodded. At least the truth would be easier for him to remember.

Hannibal paused for quite a while obviously thinking carefully about what he wanted to say. Both omegas were in agony waiting but there was no way to rush things along.

“I don’t want to alarm you pups,” he began before pausing again. “We are in potentially a very dangerous situation. But it is only really dangerous if we don’t all work together and trust each other.”

“Is it the monsters?” Will guessed.

“Yes. But I can manage them so you don’t need to worry about them.” Hannibal reached over and cupped a hand over each of their ears. “I don’t want you to feel afraid all the time. I want you to trust me that I can take care of you and I need to trust that you will do what I tell you to. Can you do that?”

The pups nodded at him in unison.

“That means you stay exactly where I expect you to stay, you come immediately when I call you and you go where I tell you to go without hesitating. If I can’t trust you to do those things, I’m going to have to put you back in the basement until I can. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they replied quickly. Will would do anything not to have to go back downstairs.

“You’re not going to just forget?” Hannibal asked with a very faint teasing smile.

“No, Alpha.”
“OK. Let’s make sure. Come here Will.”

Will stepped over immediately eager to show that he’d learnt his lesson but then his enthusiasm sank as Hannibal manoeuvred him over his knees. The Alpha pulled his far arm back around to hold him in place and then picked up one of the slippers from the ground.

Even though he could see the Alpha’s arm descending from the corner of his eye, Will was still surprised by the loud thwack of the rubber sole on his backside. He started more from the sound than from any actual pain but found that Hannibal was gripping him so securely he could barely move an inch.

Their sire used to belt them all the time – or at least he used to belt Randall all the time and Will now and again. That had been a lot more painful than this but Will was also usually indignant and/or pissed off enough to hold back any tears.

Now he could already feel them starting to well up even though they had barely started.

After a few more smacks it was obvious that Hannibal was hitting harder and the continual burning across his entire backside started his tears flowing. At about ten, Will started blubbering for real and that’s when Hannibal let him back up again.

When Will was standing back in place again, the Alpha had Randall lean over and try to touch his toes and then gave him about ten good whacks as well. Randall was already crying just from watching Will get spanked and was a mess by the time Hannibal let him stand up again.

“Now what do you have to say?” Hannibal asked them.

“Sorry, we’re sorry,” they told him in between sniffles.

“And what are you going to do next time to show me you’ve learnt your lesson?”

“Stay put... come when you tell us to... do what you say,” they offered.

“Good pups,” he replied giving them each a steadying hug and kiss on the temple and then leading them over to the chaise lounge where they could lie down with their heads on his lap.

Will felt exhausted and started to drift off even though it was only mid-morning and his ass was burning. Hannibal was working on a sketch of something but would stop every once in a while to rub their backs or bend over to give them another quick kiss.

Finally Will woke up as Hannibal was standing and asking if they wanted to help him make lunch. They trailed after him first up into the bedroom to change into real clothes and wash up and then down to the kitchen.

The Alpha had them stand at the counter shelling pistachio nuts while he prepared a pork roast and half a dozen side dishes. He stuffed the roast with dates and the pistachio nuts and then put it in the oven.

Then they followed him back into the study and read for about an hour while lunch was cooking.

When they came back out into the dining room, the rest of the group were waiting for them. Bella shot them an apologetic look and Will tried to convey back to her that it was unnecessary with his expression. She still looked really sad though.

They all moved around the table, Hannibal sitting at one end and Jack at the other. Will watched
how gracefully Bella knelt for Jack and envied her what seemed like a completely natural elegance. If he trained with Hannibal for a hundred million years he would never be able to be as refined as she was. And he could tell, just from Hannibal’s expression, that that’s what he really wanted from his omegas.

He knelt down as well as he could next to Randall and looking up could see that the Alpha was smiling at him and then pushing his hair back. He thinks it’s just a matter of time and training until we both act like Bella, Will thought to himself. He doesn’t think there are any other factors that are important.

Once they were all seated, they served themselves from the central dishes onto their individual plates. There was some stilted conversation, mostly between the betas, peppered with compliments on the dishes.

Abruptly Jack announced, “I’ve decided to move into one of the other houses. Number nine on the north side of the block next to the alley. I think it will be better for our defences to spread out a little in case we’re attacked at night. Bella will be coming with me. And any of the rest of you if you like.”

“None of the other houses have electricity or hot water or working stoves,” Katz pointed out after a moment.

“Well hopefully Hannibal won’t mind if we continue to use the facilities here when we need them.”

Looking up, Will could see that Hannibal was nodding impassively.

“I just think it will be for the best if we all give each other a little more space... now that we have it.”

“That sounds sensible,” Hannibal replied.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. Youtubed "puppies playing in snow" for research and fell down the rabbit hole.
The squeal of air brakes under his bedroom window may not have been the single most beautiful sound Jack had ever heard but it was certainly in the top ten. He could barely remember the last time he had heard traffic noises.

Pulling back the curtains, he could see a tri-tone beige motorhome pulled up next to the railings in front of the house Jack had moved into a few days before. It was late-model and expensive looking, more like a bus than a camper van. He could see some shifting around inside but the angle and tint of the windows made it difficult to see how many people were inside or what they looked like.

After a few moments, however, one of the sunroofs opened and a man boosted his head and arms through. He was classically handsome, wearing a suit and a wide grin.

“Hello there,” he said. “You and your sign are a sight for sore eyes.”

The man pointed to the banner Jack had hung out of his window – a bedsheets with “Still Alive” painted on it. He had hung another from the church tower which he hoped would be visible from the highway overpass.

The infected started to gather around the sides of the RV as soon as it stopped, moaning and banging into it but unable to climb up or reach the occupant.

“How many people do you have in there?”

“Just me and my omega. How many do you have up there? You must be busy beavers. It looks like you have half the block barricaded.”

“Just a second,” Jack called. Behind him, he could see Katz, Price and Zeller running in with the guns. Bella must have run to alert them or else Abigail, on watch up in the tower, had sent them over.

Once they were covering him, Jack leaned out the window to let the stranger see him better. “It might be easier if you come in and meet them. I promise we don’t bite.”

The stranger widened his grin even more and said, “That would be super. But I seem to be surrounded for the moment.”

“Hang on, we’ll get a ladder,” Jack called back. Turning from the window, he signalled Price and Zeller to run down to the garden and get one.
“Are you sure we can trust him?” Katz whispered, her sidearm at the ready.

“I’m sure that we can’t,” Jack said. “But if he can tell us something about the road conditions outside this neighbourhood, it’s worth taking the risk.”

When Price and Zeller returned with the ladder, Hannibal and Alana were following them.

“I think we should discuss this, Jack” Hannibal said as he directed the two agents to extend the ladder from the window to the top of the RV.

“My house, my rules, Doctor,” Jack replied turning to watch as the stranger pulled himself onto the roof and then reached back down into the skylight to pull a second figure through. Presumably this was his omega. He was much smaller than the Alpha, scrawny, bird-like and hunched over with thin black hair flying in every direction.

The Alpha whispered something in his ear and then he started reluctantly sliding along the ladder towards the window. It was barely ten feet but the omega shook so hard the ladder rattled at both ends and had to be held down by three people.

As soon as he was with arm’s reach Jack, growing impatient, grabbed the shoulder of the omega’s peacoat and hauled him through the window. The omega squeaked, rolled into a ball and then let himself be deposited in an armchair where he remained curled up and tremoring.

Alana knelt down to try to talk to him while the others went to watch the Alpha crawl along the ladder. He made much quicker work of it, waving away their arms when they offered to help and then leapt neatly through the window and onto his feet, adjusting the bottom of his suit once he was there.

“Clark Ingram,” he said, refreshing his grin and holding out his hand to no one in particular.

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After a short round of introductions, Jack led Clark and his omega, Petey, down to his dining room. He had Zeller and Price bring them some copies of local and state road maps and instructed them, along with Katz, to debrief the Alpha on as much as he could remember particularly for any potential routes out of the city.

Meanwhile he told Clark he would find him something to eat. The newcomer seemed willing to share as much as he could remember in exchange for a hot meal and his omega curled up at his feet with his face buried in his Alpha’s ankle.

Jack went back with Hannibal to the main house (Jack hated calling it that but had to acknowledge that it was where they all seemed to congregate when they had something important to discuss).

They found Bedelia sitting in the lounge reading back issues of some of the psychiatric journals Hannibal subscribed to. She had also theoretically moved into her own house, flanking the entrance to the back alley on the south side, but it was difficult to tell any difference based on how frequently she was found wandering around Hannibal’s house.

“We found another survivor – well two,” Jack announced moving over to stand by the fireplace mantle.

“Another Alpha and his omega,” Hannibal added continuing to stand in the doorway. Of course he would refuse to sit down like a sensible person as long as there was another Alpha standing in the room. Jack had started to theorise that Hannibal had emerged fully formed from a 18th century novel
instead of actually being whelped from an omega.

At least Bedelia was secure in her dynamic and remained seated although she did put the journal down and uncross her legs to make it easier to stand if she needed to.

“Yes, Bella told me when she came to fetch Zeller and Price.”

“I don’t know if we can trust them,” Jack began.

“A complication, you’ll recall, that Dr DuMaurier and I raised when you first suggested advertising our position,” Hannibal interrupted.

“And I considered that point and decided that the risk was necessary,” Jack finished for him. “Clark has been out there for weeks. He’s a potential gold mine of information.”

“If you can trust him,” Bedelia added.

“What’s the alternative? Sending them back out there to their deaths? Clark said he saw literally millions of infected wandering the highways... and spreading out. How long is a lone Alpha going to last in that? How much food and water can he cram into one RV - which can only keep moving as long as he can keep finding gas for it? He needs us more than we need him.”

“He needs our food and water and weapons more than we need him,” Hannibal clarified.

“And we outnumber him eight to one.” Jack reminded himself not to start shouting again. “I like our chances.”

Jack sighed and then decided to try again. “Look, we’re not in a terrible position for the moment but it’s untenable in the long term. We can eat through all of our food and the food in the neighbouring houses but at some point we are going to need to find more sources. We need at least four people to stand watch over the compound. That’s two teams of us in twelve hour shifts plus eight hours for sleeping and eating only leaves four hours a day for us to do anything else we need to do – foraging, building up our defences, digging up the gardens to try to grow food – strenuous work. And at the point where we’ve used up all the food within a four-hour search radius we’re going to start really struggling. And we have absolutely no margin for error if one of us gets sick or injured. We need more people to make this work.”

“People we can trust,” Bedelia reiterated.

“Well fortunately, Doctor, we have at least three preeminent psychiatric experts with lots of time on their hands.”

“If Dr DuMaurier, Dr Bloom and I agree to interview him and the omega, will you accept our conclusions?” Hannibal asked.

“You’re the experts.”

“If two of the three of us decide they go, they go.” Bedelia clarified. “No questions or arguments.”

“Yes, fine,” Jack said starting to get impatient. “I’ll invite them over for lunch, you ask them whatever you like, and then we can decide afterwards what to do with them.”

Clark seemed willing enough to be interviewed and followed Jack down the alley to Hannibal’s
house with Petey on a lead. The little omega obviously struggled to keep the correct pacing distance from his Alpha, wanting to curl into his side where he would feel more protected. Normally, Jack would take this poor form as a sign of incompetent handling but given the circumstances, he could understand that the omega was just badly stressed.

When they reached the dining room, he was surprised to see that Hannibal had brought his own two omegas back upstairs to eat with them. To date, the other Alpha had been over-protective to an absurd degree – lying for months about the fact that he even had omegas - although part of that was probably to cover up that they were technically underaged for private ownership. While there was no evidence that he had done anything illegal, Jack would certainly have been re-evaluating his decision to employ Dr Lecter if he had found out earlier to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

The omegas had their puppy with them and as soon as Petey saw it he started straining forward on his lead to get a better look. Clark snapped him back but then when Dr DuMaurier suggested he let the omegas spend a little time together to see how well they were socialised, Clark unhooked the lead from his collar.

Bedelia knelt on the ground with the three omegas and the puppy in the corner while Clark sat on one side of the dining table with Dr Bloom and Dr Lecter on the other. Jack wandered back and forth listening to both conversations while Price and Zeller not very subtly covered the exits.

“How long have you had Petey?” Dr Bloom was asking as Hannibal poured some kind of flower tea for the newcomer.

“Five years,” the Alpha responded distractedly watching the three omegas for any signs of trouble.

“No cubs yet?” Hannibal asked.

“He’s miscarried a few,” Clark responded turning back to address them directly. “To be honest, before all of this started, I was thinking about sending him back – everyone told me to - but my inner social worker finds it hard to give up on a project once I’ve started.”

“That must be so hard – losing a cub. How did it make you feel?” Alana was asking.

“Terrible. Worst days of my life. But, you know, you have to move on.”

Alana reached out across the table to try to hold the Alpha’s hands sympathetically but he jerked them away and then brightened his grin at her.

Jack drifted over to listen to the omegas. Randall and Will had been a little cautious around the new omega at first but Bedelia seemed to be smoothing things over. Petey was painfully shy, twitchy and stuttering but was very interested in the puppy.

“He looks like the one from the farm,” Petey was saying as Max started to lick his fingers.

“Did you live on a farm before?” Will asked him.

Petey looked startled, then guilty, then said, “No, we live in a townhouse too. Just a little one. We had a cat.”

“What happened to the cat?” Randall asked looking a little bored and like he would rather be napping or doing anything else.

Seeing Petey start to tear up, Bedelia intervened asking when they had visited the farm with the dog.
The omega seemed to grow even more agitated and asked her which farm she was talking about.

“Did you go to the farm before you came here?” Bedelia asked in her kindest tone.

“No, we didn’t see anyone before we came here,” Petey replied urgently before crawling over to lie down under his Alpha’s chair.

Randall shrugged at Hannibal and Jack and Will whispered something in Bedelia’s ear. She gave him a little encouraging side hug and then stood up asking Hannibal and Jack if they would help her carry in the lunch dishes.

“What do you think?” Jack asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

“He’s a psychopath,” Hannibal replied continuing to monitor the situation in the dining room through the open door. “Completely incapable of empathy or remorse. We would never be able to turn our backs on him for a second.”

“Do you concur, Doctor?” Jack asked turning to Bedelia.

“Will thinks they’re lying about not finding any other survivors,” she replied.

“Will is nine years old and an omega. I’m asking you for your professional medical opinion.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss omega instincts,” she replied. “Research has found omegas with very heightened empath...”

“I’m not interested in ‘research’, Doctor. We have to make a life or death decision here.”

“I’ve only had a five minute conversation with the omega, but I suspect that they are not being entirely forthcoming about either their experiences or their intentions.”

“So your vote is also to send them away?”

“I would like to observe the Alpha directly and hear Dr Bloom’s opinion before I cast my vote,” she responded.

They carried the dishes back to the dining table together. Clark beamed at them sunnily, obviously well aware that they had been discussing him. Dr Bloom had settled back in her chair, regarding the new Alpha frankly, and seemed to have little else she wanted to ask him.

Will and Randall came over to settle at Hannibal’s knees and he bent down to stroke their hair and give them each a kiss on the cheek. It wasn’t entirely out of place for foster-sires to show physical affection for their wards – in fact young omegas required it - but watching them together still made Jack’s skin crawl slightly for some reason.

There was an assortment of antipasto for them to assemble. Clark leaned forward eagerly scraping about half of one of the platters onto his own plate and trying everything himself before offering anything to his omega.

“This ham is amazing,” he offered as the others served themselves from what was left. “I can’t believe you still have all this stuff. We’ve been living off Doritos for a week, haven’t we Petey?”

He gave the omega at his feet a sharp nudge with his foot and the omega started and then muttered out an agreement while rubbing one of his temples against his Alpha’s calf.

“How have you been finding food?” Bedelia asked him.
“You know. Wherever we can. Who would have thought that all the rules could be thrown out the window in just a few weeks? Obviously, it’s been a struggle.”

“Not necessarily for everyone,” Dr Bloom noted. “Some people are uniquely evolved to thrive in that kind of environment.”

“What kind of people are those?” Clark responded while fishing a stuck piece of prosciutto fat out from next to one of his incisors.

“Psychopaths,” she replied without breaking eye contact with him. He paused for a fraction of a second and then grinned brilliantly at her again.

“Well, Petey and I thank you very much for this reminder of civilisation but if it’s all the same to you” he said starting to rise to his feet but then wobbling at the knees and bracing himself on the table.

“The fuck...” he said straightening himself and moving his legs to the side of the chair like they were attached to the rest of him with strings.

“That will be the flunitrazepam from your tea,” Dr Lecter told him without moving.

Clark looked directly at the psychiatrist for a split second with an unreadable expression before shoulder checking Zeller, snatching his rifle out of his hands, kicking open the patio doors and racing for the end of the garden.

Jack was after him like a shot, shouting for him to stop and put his hands in the air. Clark stumbled to the gate and, finding it was locked, turned and pointed the rifle directly at Jack.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jack told him calmly, aware that Price had stepped up behind him with his own rifle raised.

“Unlock the gate.” Clark shouted, wiping sweat out of his eyes with the hand not holding the rifle.

“You’ve only got two rounds and there’s five of us,” Jack told him. “You might be able to kill me, but I guarantee it’s not going to go well for you afterwards.”

“Unlock the gate or I swear to God I’ll kill every last one of you if I have to do it with my teeth.”

A second later Jack heard a rifle shot and, before he could duck, saw half of Clark’s head explode backwards. Clark pulled the trigger as he was falling back but the shot went high and wide, shattering Hannibal’s second story bathroom window.

Jack turned to look at Price but he looked just as surprised as Jack felt. Turning again, he could see Abigail standing in the church tower window with her rifle raised. She lowered it again and stepped back from the ledge when Jack raised his arm to signal the all clear.

Before he could gather his thoughts, however, all he could hear was the frantic screaming as Clark’s distraught omega raced out to try to get a closer look at the body. Bedelia and Alana were unable to fully restrain him but just before he reached Clark’s corpse Hannibal caught up with him and injected him with something in the meat of his thigh.

The omega dropped to his knees but continued to keen hysterically at the top of his lungs for about thirty more seconds until the rest of him collapsed.

Looking up again, Jack could see that Abigail had started shooting at something near one of the
barricades. Unlocking the gate and looking out into the alley, Jack could see that the noise from the disturbance had motivated some of the infected to start crawling under the parked cars to find its source.

Locking the gate again, Jack turned to find Hannibal hoisting the unconscious omega over one hip to carry him back into the house.

“This seems to have gone poorly,” the other Alpha offered smugly and unhelpfully.
Reverberation

Hannibal carried the scrawny unconscious omega back into his office where, after Clark had run out of the room, he deposited Will and Randall with strict instructions to stay put. There was no time to bring them downstairs as he would have preferred.

Now the two omegas were crowded at the window staring out into the garden where Jack was frantically trying to organise the others to fight off the infected crawling under the barricade.

“Come here, pups,” he told them and was gratified to see them turn around at once and run obediently over to him, wide-eyed and looking for direction.

He dropped Petey at the foot of his desk, fished the arm restraints out of one of the drawers and fastened him to the hook under the writing surface. The omega slumped unconscious against the side of the well. It wasn’t ideal, but Petey should be out for a few hours and hopefully Hannibal would have time to move him somewhere more secure before he woke up.

Hannibal scooped Max up and then instructed his two omegas to follow him. They looked panicky but followed him quietly back down into the basement and into the safe room.

Hannibal wanted to spend more time to reassure them but knew that Jack would need his help so a quick kiss and “Everything’s going to be fine,” had to suffice.

Back in the alley, Jack and Price were trying to hold off the infected as they crawled through the barricade while Katz and Zeller raced with more furniture from the houses to lay blocking the bottoms of the cars.

“They must have some kind of hive mind,” Price was saying as Hannibal joined them. Once one of them figured out that they could crawl, the rest of them seemed to understand how as well. Or at least the ones that had been pressing against the same barricade and had seen the first one go.

“What the hell does she think she’s doing?” Jack responded.

As soon as Hannibal took his place slicing off heads, Jack took a few steps back and shouted up at the church tower, “Stop shooting! You’re just attracting more of them!”

Less than a second later, another shot shattered a rear-view mirror two feet from Price splashing broken glass at the side of his face as he bent down to plant an axe in the skull of one of the crawling infected.

“Put that goddamn gun down before I come up there and take it from you!” Jack roared before Price could say anything.

After that there were no more shots from the tower. Jack ran to help move furniture and after about twenty minutes they had the barricade reinforced and no more infected were coming through. To be on the safe side, Jack also had them reinforce the other barricades and double check all the houses to ensure nothing had slipped through.

Once he was sure the barricades were secured, Hannibal went to check on his omegas. His heart started to race when he found they were not in the safe room... not in any of the rooms in the basement. Fighting to hold back a complete panic, he raced upstairs and felt a wave of both fury and relief wash over him when he heard the dog whimpering in his bedroom.
They were both lying on the bed facing each other with their foreheads pressed together and making noises for each other again. The dog was sitting on the floor looking up at them.

“Up, come over here,” Hannibal ordered brusquely as soon as he could stop himself from shouting. He crossed over to the closet to get his belt.

Will rolled over and around looking at him wide-eyed and not sure where he was supposed to go. Randall just curled up into a tighter ball and covered his head with his arms.

“He can’t... he’s sick again,” Will said rolling off the bed and coming over to take one of Hannibal’s hands.

Hannibal let himself be led over to the bed where Randall had started shaking and apologising over and over again.

He sat down against the headboard and dragged the older omega up into his lap, letting Will settle under one arm next to him.

“He just panicked and couldn’t stay down there,” Will explained. “And I would have come to find you but I didn’t want to leave him alone and we didn’t know where you were.”

The little omega ended sniffling with tears filling his eyes.

“Okay, pup,” Hannibal replied kissing him on top of his head and feeling some of his anger melting away.

“Sorry,” Randall added miserably a few seconds later. “His whole head... And then they just kept shooting and we didn’t know where you were.”

“That’s OK,” Hannibal said. “It’s not the sort of thing you pups should have to see or hear. I thought we had the situation under better control than that and that you weren’t in any real danger, especially with the other omega right there, but things are always unpredictable when strangers are around. I’m going to tell Jack that we can’t bring any more of them in.”

“Are the monsters still coming in?” Will asked.

“No, they’re all taken care of. You’re just as safe as you were before and there’s nothing that you pups need to worry about.”

Will leaned forward to hug his brother around the stomach and Hannibal sat still for a few moments enjoying the weight of both of them pressing into him.

“He broke the window,” Randall said finally pointing to the en suite. “There’s glass all over the floor.”

“If I clean it all up, will you take a hot bath? I think it would help you relax.”

The omega considered for a moment and then nodded, taking another deep scent from under his Alpha’s neck.

“Okay. Good boys,” Hannibal told them.

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Once he had his omegas settled again, Hannibal agreed to help Jack search the RV to ensure there was no one else left in there. Sliding across the ladder only a foot or two above the grasping hands of
the tallest infected in the crowd below below them, Hannibal then dropped through the sunroof and stepped to one side so that Jack could drop down next to him.

The interior of the RV looked clean and modern, if a bit cluttered by boxes, plastic bags and suitcases. There was a strong smell of urine coming from the rear of the vehicle. Jack went forward to inspect the kitchen and then the contents of the glove box while Hannibal headed towards the back.

As he was passing down the corridor he heard some fluttering sounds behind the heavy grey curtains on his left. He grasped a kitchen knife while he lifted up a corner of the top row of curtains but then smiled and dropped his arm when he saw that it was just dozens of cages stacked on top of each other packed into the two bunk beds and filled with various small animals.

“Ha ha,” Jack called triumphantly from the front seat.

“CB radio,” he told Hannibal as the other Alpha came up behind him.

“Would it be able to transmit to the radio in the house?” Hannibal asked.

“Probably not, but the police scanner in my car will pick it up if its transmitting with a few miles I think. When we decide to get out of here, it will make it a lot easier to stay in contact between the different vehicles.”

After some more discussion, Jack backed the RV up onto the sidewalk until it was right under his window and then they lifted all of the animal cages out and into the houses along with any other useful looking supplies. When they were done, Jack pulled the RV back out onto the street just to be safe.

In Jack’s hall, they separated the animal cages into ones that would useful to keep (rabbits, chickens, guinea pigs, pigeons, turtles) and those that would not (a small racoon, rats and squirrels).

Hannibal carried the cages and tanks for the useful animals to Miss Ogle’s garage and then fed the animals. They could construct some hutches and a coop for the birds. Taking care of them would be a good project for the omegas. Will in particular seemed to like animals and being responsible for them would encourage his nurturing instincts.

The animals that were not useful, Hannibal dispatched quickly, skinned, vacuum packed and put in the freezer.

As he was working, he could hear Petey waking up and starting to keen again under the desk in the study. Bedelia was sitting and talking with him but his crying just got louder no matter what she said.

After about fifteen minutes she came out to ask Hannibal for the keys to his restraints.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Hannibal asked. “He seems distraught and unpredictable.”

“I think it’s best to muzzle him and put him in a full restraint jacket for the time being,” Bedelia replied. “I can keep him in a quiet room at my house until he calms down a little.”

Bedelia went back to her house to get her restraints while Hannibal watched the omega and tried to stop him from banging his head repeatedly against the inside of the desk. This was easier said than done and Hannibal nearly had his fingers crushed between the omega’s surprisingly thick skull and the desk several times.

He tried to let the omega scent his wrists but this only seemed to make things worse and Petey was in
full on hysterics by the time Bedelia returned.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t sedate him again?” Hannibal asked.

“No, he needs to work through this one way or the other and he can’t do that if we knock him out constantly,” she replied as she secured the muzzle around his head and unhooked his arms.

Petey tried to scramble across the floor but Hannibal was able to hold him down while Bedelia got the jacket on him. When it was secure, Hannibal took his shoulders while Bedelia took his feet and they carried him to her house, locking him in the now empty pantry with a mattress and a suspended water bottle with a soft plastic nozzle that could fit through the holes in the muzzle. After some more consideration, Bedelia added a bike helmet so he couldn’t injure himself if he kept banging his head on the wall or floor.

Back out in Bedelia’s kitchen, Hannibal asked quietly, “What do you think his chances are?”

“Very poor,” she responded. “The majority of healthy, well-adjusted omegas do not survive more than six months after the loss of their Alpha unless they have young cubs they are also tending. Petey does not seem particularly healthy or well-adjusted. But I will do my best.”

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When it was Hannibal’s turn to relieve Abigail on watch he found the young beta sitting in a dark corner of the tower. As soon as she saw Hannibal she wiped her eyes and stood up again.

“You don’t have to hide your feelings from me, Abigail,” he told her and the beta crossed the room to clasp his chest in a tight hug.

“Is Jimmy OK?” she asked after a few halting sobs.

“He’s fine,” the Alpha told her. “He’s already showing off his battle scars and asking Dr Bloom if he needs stitches.”

“Does he?”

“No,” Hannibal told her smiling and clasping her jaw briefly in both hands.

“I’m so sorry. He was pointing that gun at Jack and I didn’t know what to do and I just wanted to help.”

“You did. That Alpha was a threat to all of us and you ended that threat. That’s the only thing that’s important.”

“Is Jack mad?”

“Not at you, Abigail. When Jack’s fears overwhelm him, he lashes out – often at the ones whose help he needs the most.” Hannibal told her pulling her back into another hug against his chest.

When she had calmed down, he relaxed his arms and she pulled away slightly before coming back in on her tiptoes to plant a brushing kiss on his lower lip.

He smiled at her as she pulled away with a searching expression her face.

“What was that for?”

“You make me feel better,” she said before fleeing down the stairs.
Hannibal smiled again once she was gone. If Jack took the RV and the group did split, he would keep Abigail. She was an excellent shot and refreshingly low-maintenance and tractable compared with some of the other betas. He was reasonably sure Alana and Bedelia would not leave the omegas. If he decided he needed a larger pack, the rest of the betas would probably need some more working on. Katz could go either way; Price and Zeller would follow her like lemmings.

At least until his cub was whelped, he didn’t need betas to service him sexually, but Jack was right that the group were safer and would be more successful with more people to keep watch, clean the houses, gather supplies... if they only lost Jack and Bella and maybe a few of the betas, they should still be able to manage.

And if Abigail needed a formal bonding to tie her more closely to his pack, Hannibal was not averse. She was obviously lonely and looking for somewhere to belong. He would just need to be clear about establishing the dynamics with all of them to avoid any misunderstandings or hurt feelings.
Perception

Chapter Notes

***Please read first***

So, um... the end of this chapter includes the extremely gross and disturbing reason why Petey is so messed up - which is related to his miscarriages. I'm a bit reluctant to just tag it because it's a spoiler, would be a super-inflammatory set of tags for a comparatively minor plot point and I'd have to explain which pregnancy/ies it relates to which would potentially cause confusion/angst about/more spoilers for the main story.

Basically, if you think pregnancy-related horror/abuse is likely to squick you out or trigger you or you suspect it's just TMI, I'd suggest bailing on this chapter at the first section break when Will falls asleep. He has a lovely dream about puppies and unicorns. See you next chapter.

You'll be able to get the drift from later plot developments. I wouldn't have included it at all if it wasn't at least kind of relevant to the main story but it's more an early clue than something you absolutely have to know about to understand what's going on.

Also happy if people want to comment on this chapter (and thanks so much for all the amazing supportive comments to date!) but please if possible when you're commenting try to work around the fact that other readers might have deliberately chosen not to go all the way through with the last part of this chapter.

Will was bored again. Hannibal had the overnight watch so he was sleeping in all morning. Randall still wouldn’t really leave the bedroom and, anyway, seemed happy to snooze away twenty hours a day now. Will might not be allowed to leave the house but bedamned if he was sitting around watching everyone else lying in bed all day.

He decided to go down to the study where he could read awhile in peace. On the way down, he was surprised to see flickering lights and sound coming from the television in the lounge. There was never anything actually on TV anymore and Hannibal said they needed the electricity for more important things. Someone must be watching a video.

Walking into the lounge, Will could see Jack and Katz on one sofa and Abigail and Bedelia on another. They were watching a black and white movie of a man in a baseball cap walking down a corridor.

“Are you sure that’s your father?” Jack was asking Abigail.

“You can take your time,” Bedelia reassured her. “It's fine if you’re not sure or if you’re not ready to talk about this.”

“It’s very important that you tell us anything you can remember, though,” Jack followed up quickly. “It’s too big of a coincidence that someone was trying to break into a lab potentially researching potential biological weapons just before all of this started.”
“If we can learn some more about how everything started, maybe we can find some way out of this,” Katz added.

Abigail looked back and forth between them all seeming lost. Will was overwhelmed by her sadness and confusion. Before he knew what he was doing, he had crossed the room and sat in her lap, hugging her around the chest.

“Will,” Jack said, grasping his arm and starting to pull him away. “Now isn’t the best time.”

“It’s OK,” Abigail cut him off tightening her arms around Will. “I don’t mind if he stays.”

Looking back at the video, which was frozen on an image of the man in the hat holding a gun at the head of another man in a lab coat, she said, “He’s wearing a hat but... I think it could be him.”

Will could feel how badly she was shaking and tightened his hug slightly.

“Did he ever tell you anything about the lab? What kind of work was going on there or why he might be trying to access Dr Bevier’s samples? Did he ever talk about any friends who might be helping him or asking him for help?”

Abigail shook her head no. “I know he made some extra money selling deer carcasses whenever they did culls. He hated for anything to go to waste. I think there were a few different places he would sell them. He was trying to save money. He and my mom were in a rough patch and he thought she would take him back if he replaced some of the old or broken things around the house she was always complaining about.”

“He wanted to get a present for you,” Will said softly watching the screen and startling even himself as he spoke. He felt Abigail freeze under him.

“What was that?” Jack insisted.

“He said he wanted to get a present for me,” Abigail replied. “My father did. The day before I think. The last time I saw him.”

“Who does their Christmas shopping in a nutrition lab?” Katz asked before Jack’s look shut her down.

“How did you know that?” Abigail asked partially turning Will on her lap so he was looking at her. He felt Abigail freeze under him.

“What was that?” Jack insisted.

“He said he wanted to get a present for me,” Abigail replied. “My father did. The day before I think. The last time I saw him.”

“Who does their Christmas shopping in a nutrition lab?” Katz asked before Jack’s look shut her down.

“How did you know that?” Abigail asked partially turning Will on her lap so he was looking at her. He shrugged sleepily.

“I think that’s enough cuddling for today,” Bedelia said lifting him off Abigail’s lap and carrying him into the study where she deposited him in a chair. “Why don’t you read in here for a little while, sweetheart?”

Once Bedelia was gone, Will was dying to get back up and eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation in the lounge but he had been more or less ordered by the Alpha to stay in the study and didn’t want her, or Jack, getting angry with him and telling Hannibal. He cracked open the closest door, however, trying to see what he could hear from the other side of the hall.

It wasn’t much and after a few minutes he was bored again and started scanning the book spines for something Hannibal wouldn’t normally let him read but that he wouldn’t be in too much trouble if he was caught with.

Bedelia came back in just as he was settling into The Science of Evil. As soon as he heard the door open, he shoved the book into the top drawer of Hannibal’s desk and tried to look innocent.
The Alpha didn’t seem angry though - she just signalled for him to come over and sit in the seat across from her.

“Thank you for helping Abigail,” Bedelia told him as he sat on the edge of the armchair. “She was very nervous about watching the video and I think she felt better with you there.”

“She’s still sad though.” Will picked at the lining of the chair cushion to avoid looking directly at the Alpha. He wondered briefly if Hannibal would be annoyed that she was sitting in his seat.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favour, Will.” Her tone was unreadable.

“What’s that?”

“You know I’m taking care of Petey while he recovers?”

“Yes.”

“He’s very sad too about losing his Alpha. And it’s hard for him to talk to me about it right now. But I thought maybe he would talk to you.”

“Why would he talk to me?” Will didn’t mind and didn’t have anything else to do with his morning but wondered why the Alpha had such a strange energy about asking him.

“Because you’re both omegas and because I think you’re very good at knowing how to talk to people when they need help.”

Will blushed a little at the compliment and then nodded hesitantly in agreement. Bedelia took his hand and led him into the dining room. He stopped when they reached the garden door, looking up at her and saying, “Is he outside?”

“He’s at my house.”

“I’m not allowed to go outside.”

“Hannibal won’t mind as long as you’re with me. And it’s only for a few minutes.”

Will shifted from one foot to the other looking from the door up to Bedelia and back. “I’m not allowed to.”

“OK,” she said after a moment. “I’ll bring him over here.”

Bedelia returned about ten minutes later carrying Petey by the handle in a muzzle and a full restraint vest. She set him down kneeling next to one of the dining room chairs and then asked Will if they had any omega snacks she could give him. He hadn’t been able to eat anything since the few bites at lunch the day before.

Will dashed into the kitchen to check the fridge. There was a shelf full of better omega snacks like chocolates that Hannibal used for training but it was in one of the highest cupboards and they definitely didn’t have permission to go in there without asking first.

Hannibal also kept a drawer in the fridge that they were allowed to go in any time if they were hungry and he was asleep or wasn’t around to ask. At the moment there were packets of raisins, pretzels, hard boiled pigeon eggs and some juice boxes from the FEMA supplies.

Will grabbed two handfuls of the snacks and brought them back to Bedelia who had taken Petey’s muzzle off and tied his lead to the bottom of the table. Petey slumped against one of the table legs
looking at the floor despondently.

Will knelt down on the other side of Bedelia and said, “Hi, Petey.”

The other omega didn’t even seem to know he was there.

“You must be hungry,” Bedelia said opening a bag of pretzels and offering Petey one. He gave a minute “no” shake with his head so she offered it to Will instead. He leaned forward to take it out of her hands trying both to show how delicious it was for Petey’s benefit and to avoid expressing the slight discomfort he felt. He’d never been hand fed by an Alpha other than Hannibal.

She offered Petey another pretzel but he looked at her like she was trying to force feed him rat poison so Will got that one as well.

He didn’t have any idea what to say. All he could sense from the other omega was waves of crushing grief with brief spikes of terror. He didn’t have any idea how to make that better.

He looked up at Bedelia for guidance, about to give up, when she gave him an encouraging stroke through the hair and he had an idea. Rising to his feet, Will ran up to the bedroom to get Max who was still sleeping at the foot of the bed. Hannibal and his brother were still out like lights when he lifted the puppy and carried him back downstairs keeping a finger pressed to his muzzle so he wouldn’t wake them up.

He didn’t quite get the reaction he was expecting when he set the puppy down in front of Petey. The other omega became a bit more lively but seemed more anxious than interested in playing.

“What’s wrong sweetheart?” Bedelia asked him in her mellowest tone. “Maybe we can help.”

“B-b-b-bus,” he stuttered more like a hiccup than a conscious communication.

Will suddenly felt a wave of concern and guilt from the other omega.

“Are you worried about the animals?” Will asked him. Petey started nodding his head so fast against the table leg Will was worried he would scratch some hair off.

“They’re fine. My... my foster-sire got them out and we fed all of them yesterday and again this morning. He said my brother and I could take care of them for you until you feel better.” This wasn’t strictly true. Hannibal had actually said they were Will’s to take care of from now on but he didn’t get the sense that would be helpful to mention. And as thrilled as he had been to have more pets, he didn’t want to take them away from their real owner.

“Can I see them?” Petey asked with some hesitation.

“When you finish your breakfast,” Bedelia told him holding down another pretzel in one hand and a juice box with a straw inserted in the other.

Petey took a quick sip of juice and then started a lengthy explanation of the names of each animal and their dietary and other care requirements. He only paused when Will asked questions and Bedelia would take the opportunity to give him some more food. He was reasonably willing to eat everything offered to him except the eggs which filled him with so much revulsion just to look at Will started feeling queasy as well.

When Petey had finished eating the other snacks, Bedelia stood to get something more substantial for him from the kitchen. But just at that moment, Hannibal walked in wearing his pyjamas with his hair still mussed from sleeping.
He and Bedelia greeted each other while Will scrambled to his feet suddenly feeling guilty again.

“Come here, Will,” Hannibal told him and the omega hurried over to his side. “Are you OK? You look a little flushed.”

Hannibal felt his forehead while he assured the Alpha he was fine.

“Will and I were just talking to Petey about how best to take care of his animals,” Bedelia explained pointing to the other omega who was hiding under the table.

“I see,” Hannibal replied and Will detected the slightest edge to his reply. It didn’t surprise him that the Alpha’s next instructions were for him to go play upstairs while he discussed something with Bedelia.

As soon as he was out of Hannibal’s line of sight, he belted up the stairs, into the music room and knelt down with his ear to the floor register that was located closest to the ceiling fan over Hannibal’s desk in the study.

A few second later he could just start to make out their conversation.

“I’m sorry for not making my expectations clearer,” Hannibal was saying, “but I assumed it went without saying that I don’t want my omegas interacting with strangers without my permission and supervision.”

“It was not my intention to go behind your back,” Bedelia replied evenly. “However, I was concerned about a patient in critical condition who was non-responsive and would not eat. I suddenly saw an opportunity to draw him out. I assure you that Will was never in any danger – the other omega is fully restrained. And Will was enormously helpful.”

“In what sense?”

There was a brief pause before Bedelia continued. “What he has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine.”

“Dr DuMaurier... I’m surprised to find a therapist of your qualifications and experience subscribing to a theory like ‘pure empathy’. Next you’ll be telling me that Randall has telekinesis or that Jack can see ghosts.”

“While the theory may be outside the mainstream, I have personally witnessed breakthroughs achieved using therapy omegas that I would struggle to explain in any other way.”

“Well, I don’t consent to Will being used for this purpose, regardless of his abilities.”

“I understand that you want to protect your omegas but locking them away in a room and denying them the ability to use their natural talents will end badly for them - for all of you. You can’t protect them from who they actually are.”

“I’ve said everything I intend to say on the subject,” Hannibal said curtly. “In the future, please do not address my omegas when I am not present and I would appreciate it if you would have the courtesy not to enter my home without my knowledge and permission. Now that we have the space again, perhaps it is time to reinstitute some essential social conventions.”

Sensing that the conversation was about to end and that Hannibal might come up again at any moment to check on him. Will padded carefully and as quietly as he could back to the master bedroom and crawled into bed next to his brother.
He only intended to pretend to be asleep in case Hannibal was coming up to lecture him but even though it was barely lunchtime as soon as he was curled up in the warm bed listening to Randall’s breathing, Will realised that he was absolutely exhausted.

His mind was spinning but instead of being able to sort through any thoughts in an orderly way he just found himself sinking into unconsciousness.

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He was strapped down completely to some kind of angled table with his legs up in stirrups. An Alpha wearing a surgical mask swam in and out of the edges of his vision. They were in the basement. The walls were all three-foot-thick concrete. He had learned the first few times that no matter how hard he screamed nobody would hear him.

He was aware that someone was making a noise like a pig straining to escape its slaughter pen. He had a sense that it was probably him but couldn’t find the part of his mind or body that was generating it.

“Petey, Petey, Petey,” the Alpha was saying in a voice that sent chills up his spine. “I’m very disappointed that we’re back here again.”

Shame flooded his system overwhelming his ability even to feel pain or fear.

“I’ve told you again and again what I expect. I do my part. I work hard at it too. You know the calibre of progeny that is worthy of me, don’t you?”

“Yes, Alpha,” his voice scratched out, more from force of habit than any conscious effort.

“Is this it?” the Alpha demanded shoving a clipboard in front of his face. It was some kind of test results but the only word that registered was “omega”.

“No, Alpha,” he replied. “I’ll try again. But please, please...”

“You will try again,” the Alpha told him. “And next time you’re going to get it right. Do you think I enjoy eating castoffs any more than you do? But I’m not letting all that hard work go to waste. If you don’t like it, start putting a little more effort into meeting my expectations.”

The Alpha swam out of view and he could hear a machine starting to whirr up. He thrashed back and forth on the table so hard he thought his joints might pop out of their sockets but...

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Hannibal had lifted him up and enclosed him against his chest with one hand pinning his neck against the Alpha’s shoulder. He could flap his arms and legs around a little but not enough to get any traction. He was soaked in sweat and realised from the raw scratching in his throat that he had been screaming in his sleep. Randall was on his hands and knees on the opposite corner of the bed looking petrified and almost snarling with shock.

“I’m gon... sick,” Will spouted renewing his struggling.

Hannibal stood up swiftly and dashed with him into the bathroom. They made it to the sink milliseconds before Will spewed up the entire contents of his digestive tract. Hannibal ran the faucet to keep the sink clear, splashed some of the cool water against his forehead and rubbed his back to reassure him.
When his stomach finally settled, he collapsed back into the Alpha who sat on the edge of the bathtub with Will in his lap.

“Did you have a bad dream, pup?” Hannibal was asking him stroking his hair back and rubbing his belly now. He felt his forehead again to make sure he didn’t have a fever.

Will nodded, still trembling.

“Can you remember what it was about?”

He couldn’t and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. He had barely understood what was going on while it was still happening. All he was left with was the emotions – shame, terror, helplessness and nausea sinking into his bones.

“Something about eating something bad,” he mumbled and then buried himself back in the Alpha’s chest where everything was safe.
Expedition

“There’s 620,961 people in the city of Baltimore and as far as we know 620,950 of them want to eat us.” Jack paced along one edge of the table while he spoke. The rest of the group, except for Alana and Abigail who were on watch, sat around listening intently.

“Except for the neighbours we already...” Zeller made a slicing motion across his neck.

“And anyone staying in guest accommodation,” Price added. “Although at least it was the off-season.”

“Whatever the number is,” Jack wrestled the conversation back, “I don’t like the odds of eight of us clearing the entire city out and trying to keep it secure. We have enough food for a month or so, maybe two or three with tight rationing. We still have running water but we don’t know for how much longer. If we want more supplies, we’re going to have to start going out there to get them. Or we need to try to get out of the city altogether.”

“Randall can’t travel until the cub is whelped and probably not for some time afterwards,” Hannibal stated. “Whatever you decide to do, we’re staying here.”

Jack nodded in acknowledgement.

“So what are the options? We have an RV, some cars and, for the moment, a secure compound.”

“We should go back to the lab and see if we can find any more evidence about what caused the virus,” Katz offered.

“I’d quite like to know if my brother and his family are still alive,” Price added.

“Me too,” Zeller said. “Well, not his brother, but you know...”

Jack added their suggestions to a large piece of paper on the table along with “find escape route(s)”, “try to re-establish outside communications” and “stock up on supplies.”

“We need chicken wire to build the hutches,” Randall piped up hesitantly.

“And seeds,” Bella added.

“Chicken wire... and seeds,” Jack said as he wrote, smiling at the omegas to encourage them.

“More solar panels,” Hannibal suggested. “And security cameras. We could get away with fewer people on watch if we had a surveillance system hooked up for the whole compound.”

They worked for another hour mapping out the supplies they needed and where they thought they could find them. Jack connected up a series of routes that would take them past as many locations as possible.

“Right,” he said when he was finally satisfied. “That looks like a plan. Let’s get to work”

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For the first run, Jack planned a short route that would take them past the highway offramps and then around to the railyard. They could check for supplies in the boxcars and then, if they were feeling ambitious, scout out the cruise ship terminal or the makeshift FEMA depot at Fort McHenry.
Katz’s latest theory was that the infected didn’t like sunlight, potentially because it sped up decomposition and irritated their skin. They didn’t disappear in a poof of smoke, unfortunately, but she had noticed on sunny days there were fewer wandering the streets and the ones that were out tended to stay in the shade if there was nothing actively attracting them.

So at the sunniest, brightest time of day they could find, Jack, Katz, Price and Zeller gathered their supplies, crawled into the RV and set off south.

Ignoring the decaying monstrosities shambling around him, Jack felt his heart lighten for the first time in weeks. It was a beautiful, sunny winter’s day and they were finally out of the house and doing something useful.

There were a reasonable number of cars on the roads but someone, presumably FEMA, had cleared a path wide enough to drive through. The highway off-ramps were about four blocks south of Hannibal’s house. The nearest one was blocked by a six-car pile-up but the second one had two lanes and one of them was clear.

From the top of the highway overpass, they could see fifteen or twenty blocks in each direction. Everything was eerily quiet except for the scattered bands of infected that would knock on the sides of the RV whenever they stopped. In the distance, they could see that some of the cranes at the port had been knocked sideways or burned.

There were surprisingly few cars. Jack supposed that most people had complied with the quarantine order until they fell too ill to leave their homes. Once it was clear that they weren’t recovering and that help wasn’t coming, the few people who were still healthy enough had tried to flee. Most of the cars still had infected in them, banging on the windows, not able to remember how to open the doors.

They were able to drive through to the next off-ramp and decided to get off rather than risk getting stuck at the Fort McHenry tunnel. They could already see that the traffic was much heavier ahead and suspected that at least a few lanes of the tunnel were blocked. The groups of infected also seemed to be larger and more active along that horizon.

So instead, they swung around to the cruise ship terminal. There were no ships docked, and the terminal itself was almost empty but Price suggested they check the warehouses to the east to see if there were any usable supplies. He had worked for a cruise line during his summer breaks in school, he explained, and knew that the ships stored and carried a huge amount of food.

All three of the warehouses had hundreds of pallets full of food. The perishables were well on their way to rotting but there were still dozens of pallets worth of canned goods and shelf-stable foods.

The warehouses were more or less empty of infected and easy to secure. They filled the back of the bus with as many supplies as they could, noted the location of anything else that would be useful in the future and then closed and locked the doors behind them so the infected couldn’t get in later.

Jack was more than happy with their haul already and wanted to keep the first supply run reasonably short so they decided to head back. He kept his eyes peeled, however, for anything useful.

A block to the west from the cruise terminal was a yacht repair yard with a small marina. Jack could see dozens of boats, mostly recreational day fishing boats, moored along two jetties.

“If we’re looking for a quick way out,” he told Katz, “it might be easier to use some of those boats. No traffic to worry about and no risk of running into the infected once they were cleared.”

Price groaned involuntarily and then said, “Sorry, I get seasick in the bathtub,” when they all turned
to look at him.

“We can just knock you out,” Zeller offered. “Better a little queasy than zombie chow.”

“Do any of you know how to sail?” Katz asked. They all shrugged.

“How hard can it be?” Jack replied. “It seems like the kind of thing we could learn with the proper motivation.”

A few blocks later, they drove under the highway overpass, cut back the wire fencing and drove into the railyard. There were about two hundred boxcars lined up on twenty tracks. They could see some of the infected wandering around on the highway overpass above them but none on the tracks themselves.

“Stay alert,” Jack told them as they started to search through and inventory the cars. They each took a can of spray paint and, after a quick look inside, sprayed a symbol for the contents on the door. “X” meant nothing usable. A circle with a line through it meant usable food. As they progressed, Katz assigned new symbols for “cleaning products”, “sporting goods”, “gas” and “baby furniture”.

“Can you believe all this crap?” Zeller asked Price, closing the door on a shipping container full of Pokemon plushies.

“That’s late stage capitalism for you...” Price told him with a shrug.

At that moment a rat ran across Zeller’s foot. As he tried to step back into the air, one of his shoes caught in the coupling and he ended up falling on his back, shooting his gun in the air and shouting “Son of a bitch. Argh!” at the top of his lungs.

Jack and Katz came running over hissing “shut up, shut up, shut up” as loudly as they dared.

“Where is it?” Jack asked as Katz gingerly tried to free Zeller’s broken leg from the coupling mechanism.

“Fuck! I don’t know. Ask Che Guevara over there.”

“It was a rat,” Price told them. “Rattus norvegicus. Not a very big one either. Probably a juvenile.”

“That’s enough,” Jack told him, signalling them all to quiet. The rattling moans of the infected had gotten louder but they seemed to all be coming from a pile up of them on the highway overpass above them.

“They can’t climb over that barrier can they?” Katz asked. It was about waist high which seemed to be holding them back for the moment but it seemed possible if enough of them crowded around, they might start pushing the front ones over it.

“Let’s not stick around and find out,” Jack said. He lifted Zeller up by the shoulders while Price grabbed his thighs and they carried him back into the RV.

They drove back to the compound with Zeller making noisy complaints about every single pothole or turn. As the road on the south side was relatively clear of infected, Jack had them clear part of the barricade so they could drive the RV into the alley and then close it back up behind them.

They carried Zeller into the basement and set him on the operating table so that Dr Bloom could examine and set his leg. She sent them out of the room while she x-rayed it. About half an hour later she came up to find them unloading the RV. She announced that he had a spiral fracture of the tibia
that would require surgery to repair.

“He’s going to need to be completely immobilised for three weeks and then he’ll be in a cast for another four to six months,” she told him.

“Can Dr. Lecter help you with the surgery?”

“He could, but I’m hesitant to ask him. He’s a bit distracted at the moment.”

“With what?”

“Will has a fever.”
“I’m so sorry,” Katz was saying. Hannibal knew it was bad news the second he entered the lab and the three seconds it took to cross the room and for Katz to speak felt like an entire lost lifetime.

Tamping down the urge to throttle her, Hannibal asked, “What can you tell me?”

“I’m not an epidemiologist so take everything with a boatload of salt... but from the samples I collected from the infected, as near as I can tell, the infection looks like some kind of prion. Some agent causes their brain proteins to twist so they can’t receive normal nerve signals but can still send them. Whatever it is, it causes a massive immune system response with characteristic, but apparently not sufficiently effective, antibodies. Hence the fever and confusion.”

“And Will’s blood sample had these antibodies?” Hannibal supplied for her.

“Yes,” she replied looking down. “And so did Randall’s.”

Hannibal could feel his vision swim and heart pound in his throat. And then a black wave of anger and bitterness washed everything away. Of course he was never going to be allowed to experience the most basic human satisfactions for himself. There were weak, addicted, vicious, sub-moronic filthy parasites casting off offspring left and right, anywhere you look, but no amount of effort or merit on his part would ever allow him to keep a family of his own.

“Randall doesn’t have any symptoms though,” Katz was saying a hundred thousand miles away. “And all the antibodies mean is that they are fighting off some antigen or have in the past. Maybe they were successful? We don’t know whether some people have a natural immunity or not.”

Hannibal’s thoughts crashed back into the conversation. “But it is unlikely, wouldn’t you agree Dr Katz, that if natural immunity does exist the eleven people who happened to come to my dinner party would all be immune when we’ve seen hundreds of infected and only two other survivors.”

“I’m just saying we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Will has some of the symptoms but not all of them. Randall doesn’t have any. And lots of things can cause a fever. Will’s blood sample did also have some bacteria in it.”

“So what do you suggest we do next?”

“I’ll get blood samples from the rest of group and test them for the same antibodies. And I suggest assuming that Will has a normal infection and treating accordingly, since that’s all we can do for the moment. If there was no Disease X, what would you suspect he had based on his symptoms?”

“Meningitis,” Hannibal replied.

“So you do the lumbar puncture, I’ll test it and we’ll hope for the best... or you know... the less worse.”

Hannibal was still in a daze as he walked out of the lab and into their make-shift medical bay. Zeller was knocked out and in traction on the only bed, recovering from the surgery on his leg. Hannibal helped administer the anaesthesia but had to leave the rest of the procedure to Dr Bloom so he could look after Will.

He grabbed a needle, some local anaesthetic and some iodine and headed for the safe room where Will was resting with Dr Bloom. She was exhausted from the surgery and had curled up on the bed
next to him with his head resting on her shoulder.

She woke up, though, when Hannibal turned the lights on and sat up to greet him. Will whimpered and curled up in a ball trying to hide his eyes from the light.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” she said feeling his forehead again as she moved off the bed. “We didn’t mean to wake you up.”

Hannibal could see from the door that there was little change in his condition – he was still flushed but pale around the edges of his face and barely responsive.

Dr Bloom came over to join him and whispered, “What were the results?”

“Dr Katz suggested a lumbar puncture to be sure. Perhaps you can assist with restraining him? I’m just concerned he might have another seizure in the middle of the procedure.”

“Yes of course. If you want I can do the puncture while you restrain him. You might have better luck.”

Hannibal considered the risk of his hands trembling and agreed with her proposal.

They rolled him to the side of the bed and then Hannibal lay down across from him and pulled him into a fetal position to extend his spine. Will started crying and protesting when Hannibal tried to pull his head down so his chin touched his chest.

“OK pup, you’ll be OK. Dr Bloom is just going to give you a little shot in your back, just like the blood test, and then you can lie down how you like again.”

Working quickly, Dr Bloom pulled his shirt up, smeared iodine around his back, administered the local anaesthetic and, after a minute or so, drew the sample of spinal fluid. Meanwhile Hannibal held the omega steady and let him scent at his neck.

“There you go,” Dr Bloom said at last. “That’s all there is to it. You did so well, Will.”

She leaned over to ruffle his damp hair while handing the sample to Hannibal.

“Can you stay with him?” Hannibal asked barely avoiding a choke in his voice. “I’ll give this to Dr Katz and then I need to check on Randall.”

“Yes, of course,” she replied curling up with Will again and offering him some electrolyte drink.

Dr Katz wasn’t in the lab. Hannibal assumed she was out collecting blood samples from the people on watch. He left the CSF sample in the centre of the workbench with a note explaining what it was.

Then he took a shower and went upstairs to check on his mate. Randall was curled up on his bed with Bella, sniffing miserably about being separated from his brother. Bella looked a little teary herself but was trying to reassure him.

“Thank you so much for your help, Bella,” he told her as she stood up. It couldn’t have been comfortable for her lying in another Alpha’s bed.

“That’s no trouble at all,” she replied as she was leaving. “Please don’t hesitate to ask if there’s anything else I can help with.”

Hannibal was relieved to find that Randall still didn’t have a fever or any other symptoms. He was distressed out of concern for Will but not otherwise unwell. He was also very clingy and almost
desperate for contact. Hannibal would have mounted him (who knew when he would ever have a chance again? the darkest and most unwelcome part of his subconscious asked) except he was exhausted himself and didn’t want to be tied in case he needed to leave suddenly to look after Will.

Instead, he sat in one of the lounge chairs and pulled Randall over so he was kneeling down on a cushion between his legs. He pulled his cock out and then directed the omega to just hold it in his mouth without sucking. Randall rested his head against one thigh while Hannibal carded his fingers through his hair and told him what a perfect boy he was and that everything was going to be fine.

Gradually he could feel the omega relax against him, his breath steadying as he took in deep drafts of his Alpha’s scent. Hannibal felt himself drifting outside of time where the only things that mattered were his breath and the omega’s occasional soft, warm swallows and the motions of his breathing over and around his cock and the feeling of sinking deeper and deeper into the leather chair.

It was probably an hour or two later when he pulled himself back up. Randall was completely spaced out against his leg but otherwise seemed calm and well. Hannibal lifted him up onto the bed so he could drift off to sleep there. He felt his forehead one more time to be sure and then left to go back downstairs.

Katz was back in the lab when he returned, bent over a microscope. Price was helping her prepare and read samples and record the results.

Hannibal cleared his throat so they would know he was there.

“I don’t know if it’s good news or not, but every sample I’ve tested has been positive for antibodies for the infection. Which means we’ve all been at least exposed. Since it’s likely been at least a month and Will is the only one who has ever shown symptoms, we might be able to assume that we’ve successfully fought off whatever it is out there.”

“What about the results from the CSF analysis?”

“His protein levels are elevated suggesting bacterial meningitis,” Katz replied and Hannibal felt something in his heart unclench for the first time in two days.

“It’s probably Listeriosis from exposure to the chickens,” Price added. “Or maybe the rabbits. How sanitary are any of those cages going to be?”

Hannibal was already crossing over to the cabinet where he kept his pharmaceutical supplies. It had been some time since he’d had a long-term patient and he didn’t have much beyond the basics. He could write his own prescriptions but it generally wasn’t worth the risk of drawing attention to himself.

He had some broad spectrum IV antibiotics he could start Will on but not really a full course if Zeller ended up needing them as well. Will would be better off with a more specialised approach anyway. Likewise, he had corticosteroids and anti-convulsants but not the ideal types and not in a quantity he was confident in.

He started Will on what he had, consulted his old medical text books to draw up a shopping list and then went to find Jack. They checked their maps to find the nearest pharmacy and then Jack, Hannibal and Price loaded their gear into the RV.

Hannibal suspected that there would be a number of infected at the pharmacy and his suspicions proved correct. They could see at least thirty of them wandering around the aisles.

Jack decided that given the odds and the time pressures, they should go in shooting. They parked the
RV so that it blocked the front entrance and then climbed out the sunroof and through a second story window into the office. From there, they were able to take the infected out one by one as they were drawn to the foot of the stairs.

Once the floor of the pharmacy itself was cleared, they made their way towards the dispensary. Hannibal saw a flash of white under the counter and Jack unloaded his shotgun into a small refrigerator on the desk behind it.

“Don’t shoot,” they heard someone calling. “I surrender – don’t shoot.”

“Who’s there?” Jack shouted in reply. “Stand up with your hands where I can see them.”

A middle-aged man with balding hair and glasses and wearing a grubby white lab coat stood up slowly with his hands raised over his head. He was a beta but unusually tall and with a thick beefy neck.

“I’m just a pharmacist,” he called. “Don’t shoot.”

“What’s your name?” Jack said as he tried to look around the corners behind the dispensary counter. “Is there anyone else in there?”

“Eldon Stammets,” the beta replied. “It’s just me. I was the only one that turned up for work and then suddenly those things were just everywhere – all over the store and in the alley out back. They couldn’t come over the counter though so I just stayed back here.”

“How are you still alive?” Price asked.

“I’ll show you,” Stammets said. “Just let me unlock the side door for you.”

The pharmacist was gone for a second and then they heard the deadbolts being pulled back on the security door.

Coming through they could see that Stammets had smashed through the glass on all of the vending machines in the employee break room. There were also several open boxes of empty potato chips bags that he had pulled out of the back room.

“If I never see another stick of gum again it will be too soon,” he told them in an awkwardly confidential tone.

“My friend here has some supplies he needs,” Jack said once they had confirmed that Stammets was alone.

“Take whatever you want... just please don’t leave me here when you go.”

“Yes, that fine. Pack up whatever you want to take with you,” Jack replied without hesitation. Hannibal felt another twinge of annoyance but decided it was more important for the moment to get Will’s medicine.

He dumped out the contents of the cardboard boxes and started loading them up with everything vaguely useful he could find – antibiotics, anti-inflammatory, anti-convulsants, pain killers... Stammets was happy to unlock all the cupboards and point him towards whatever he wanted. The refrigerators had all gone dead weeks before but fortunately everything Hannibal needed was shelf stable.

He filled four large boxes and then signalled to Jack that they had enough for the time being.
Hannibal and Price each picked up two boxes while Jack kept his gun ready. Stammets carried a paper grocery bag which he had filled with two jam jars of some kind of dried substance. Apparently, there was nothing else in the office he wanted to keep.

They went back upstairs and then out the window and back into the RV.

“What’s wrong with your friend?” Stammets asked as they were driving back. “The one you’re getting medicine for?”

“It’s his omega,” Price announced before Hannibal could stop him. “Meningitis.”

“He has a fever?” Stammets said looking like he suddenly wasn’t sure if he should get up and ask to be let off or not.

“It’s definitely meningitis. We tested him.” Price reassured him.

“Do you want me to take a look at him? I’m just a pharmacist but seeing as how you’ve saved my life, I’d be happy to do anything I can to help.”

“That’s very kind of you but unnecessary,” Hannibal replied. “A number of us have medical training.”

Stammets was quiet for another block or two, considering something. Finally he said, “If you really want to know how I survived, it’s this.”

He reached into the paper bag and pulled out a jar of dried mushrooms. “They’re reishi mushrooms. I grow them myself. They boost the immune system. I drink a tea made from them every morning. I’d be happy to make some for your omega. Or you can just have some. I don’t have a lot left though, as you can see.”

Stammets cautiously handed the jar to Hannibal who inspected it more closely. As far as he could tell, they were just dried slices of ordinary mushroom.

“You grow your own mushrooms?” Hannibal asked handing the jar back. Almost immediately he regretted the question as Stammets launched into a lengthy discussion of the merits of various kinds of compost.

After what felt like an eternity, they finally made it back to the compound. Jack took Stammets to his house where they agreed he would be quarantined until they had time to interview him. Stammets didn’t object as soon as he heard Price was going to bring him a hot meal with something other than sugar or carbs in it.

Hannibal headed downstairs with the boxes of medicine. Alana helped him set up the IV antibiotics for Will and to portion out his medications in a pill box. Will was still semi-conscious, burning up and his breathing was laboured. Alana told him he’d had another seizure while they were away.

He sat with the pup for several hours with no real change in his condition. Will had several brief convulsions where his eyes rolled back and Hannibal had to stop him from choking. Not even an ice bath would bring his temperature down for very long.

Finally, in desperation, he headed over to Jack’s to ask Stammets for some of his tea.

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Will’s brain felt spongy, like a trampoline. Things were bouncing on it all around him in the dark and
he could feel tremors but couldn’t see what was causing them.

He was in the back of the van with Randall but the floors and walls and ceiling were all made of foam and they just bounced off of them as they spun around and over until he was thrown out the sliding door.

He was lying on a carpet of mushrooms and the mycelium of his thoughts stretched all the way across the floor of the forest through, over and around all the buried bones and husks and rotting things.

Even through the snow, he could feel the heavy footsteps of an Alpha and an omega and two of their cubs running through the forest and then the heavy thud of the omega’s body as she fell. The desperate way she scrambled to her feet again and all but dragged the cubs after her. The footsteps pursuing them.

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Will woke up with a scream caught in his throat but Hannibal was sitting right next to him to help reassure him.

“It’s just a bad dream, Will,” he told him. “And it’s a good sign that your fever is breaking. I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you back with us.”

The IV in his arm pinched and itched and he wanted to take it out but Hannibal told him he needed to just ignore it for the time being.

When Will was a little more settled, Hannibal excused himself for a few minutes and then returned carrying a steaming bowl.

“Silkie chicken in a broth. A black-boned bird prized in China for its medicinal values since the seventh century. Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise,” the Alpha explained as he set up a tray over Will’s lap.

“Is it chicken soup?” Will asked sniffing at it.

“Yes,” Hannibal admitted after a pause.
A few days later, once Will was finally out of the woods and clearly starting to recover, Hannibal agreed to sit on the interview panel for Eldon Stammets.

The pharmacist had, from Jack’s account, been polite and helpful - willing to stay in a locked suite of rooms at Jack’s house under guard. He spent most days reading, drinking tea and enjoying meals that did not consist entirely of Cheetos.

They couldn’t spare a guard much longer though. Between regular watch shifts, Zeller being in traction and the daily supply runs Jack had been leading, the Alphas and betas were all exhausted and on edge. They had visited the homes of Katz’s, Price’s and Zeller’s families and, where they were lucky, had found no one alive. Price in particular was uncharacteristically silent and subdued after the visit to his twin brother’s family’s house.

They needed to make a decision about whether to put Stammets on the watch rotation or send him on his way, assuming they could trust him enough not to turn around and cause problems for them later.

So Hannibal, Bedelia and Alana sat on one side of Jack’s dining room table while Stammets sat on the other.

He seemed nervous but determined not to show it – fiddling with the edge of the table cloth but looking them steadily in the eyes.

“Is your pup feeling better?” he asked Hannibal, trying to ingratiate himself with his opening gambit.

“Yes, thank you,” Hannibal replied without elaborating to test his reaction.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do with me?” he asked finally, growing impatient with their silence.

“I’m sure you can understand, we need to be sure about your intentions before we can agree to any kind of longer-term arrangement,” Bedelia replied.

“Likewise,” Stammets replied. “For example, are you planning to stay here? We would all be a lot safer if we got out of the city. My mother’s farm is up near Sykesville. It might be harder to defend but there would probably be a lot fewer of those things out there too.”

“We’re not planning to leave, at least not in the immediate future,” Hannibal replied. “But we won’t stop you if that’s where you would prefer to go.”

“Yes,” Stammets responded almost immediately. “With all due respect and appreciation for your hospitality, it’s obviously unsafe here and I would prefer to check on my family. If you can give me a ride out there though, I would be happy to try to pay you back with whatever you want, within reason. My mother keeps some livestock which may or may not still be alive and, if not, I have my mushroom patch out there if you want some more.”

After a nod from the others, Alana went to find Jack and a map.

“How far away is Sykesville?” Hannibal asked when they returned.

“About thirty miles,” Jack replied. “The problem is Highway 70 is just about the only way to get there and Clark told us it’s swarming.”
“Assuming we can trust him,” Alana added.

“And the information is a few weeks old,” Jack conceded. “But I can’t see any benefit to him in lying about it. Where’s the farm exactly?”

“By the river, here,” Stammetts told him pointing it out.

“Is that the Patapsco? Is it navigable that far up?” Jack asked. “We might be better off going by boat.”

Looking up to see them all staring at him questioningly he added, “There’s a boat repair yard a few blocks south from here. It might be easier to get a boat from there and sail it up the river than to try to get the RV through on the road.”

“Most of those boats will be for deep sea fishing or ocean cruising and won’t have a shallow enough draft for the river. If we get stranded on a shoal somewhere, it’s not going to be easy to get back. My family used to sail...” Bedelia explained when she realised they were all looking at her.

“Can you read navigation charts?” Jack asked her. “There must be a map somewhere that shows whether the river can be navigated that far and where the dangerous areas are.”

“Yes, probably,” Bedelia replied. “We mostly sailed in the bay and on the open ocean though, not up the rivers.”

“OK,” Jack said settling into the plan in his mind. “Dr DuMaurier can come with me this afternoon to the boat yard. We’ll try to find some navigation charts and a boat with a shallow enough draft. If we can find something, we’ll take you up to the farm Eldon and you can decide if you want to risk staying there or not. From memory, there’s a shooting range up in Sykesville anyway. It would be worth checking to see if anyone has scavenged there already or not. And we can try to get some of the gardening supplies off Bella’s list.”

Since his services were no longer required, Hannibal decided to head home and check on his omegas.

For a change, Will was resting quietly in one of the guest bedrooms reading a book just where Hannibal had left him and Randall was nowhere to be seen. He had given them the run of the house again as long as they didn’t go outside but searching through all of the upstairs rooms without finding his mate, Hannibal was beginning to feel a clenching in his chest.

Standing in the dining room he could hear very faint popping sounds beneath his feet. Abigail had asked for permission to set up a target range in the basement because the soundproofing meant they could practice shooting without attracting the infected. She must be down there now.

She’d draped a red shirt over the trap door which was supposed to signal that the range was live and that nobody else should go down in the basement. The only way to get enough distance was to set the targets up on one end of the corridor and shoot from the other and Jack insisted that the whole basement be cleared before the range was used to avoid any accidents.

Hannibal decided to go down anyway to ask Abigail if she had seen Randall anywhere.

In turned out he didn’t have to. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he found that Abigail was teaching his omega how to shoot, her hands adjusting both of his shoulders and her forearms dropping across his shoulders while she praised him.

The wave of rage that crashed through him was so strong it blurred his vision and it took him several
moments to steady himself. He couldn’t even have said who he was angrier with.

It took them about the same amount of time to notice he was there. Randall got a bullseye, Abigail was shaking his shoulders in congratulations, the omega looked up smiling at Hannibal as if expecting approval, saw the look on his Alpha’s face and then ducked his head.

Hannibal just managed to avoid clearing his throat before saying, “Randall, go upstairs and wait in my study.”

The omega turned bright red and seemed to have tears welling up in his eyes as he mumbled, “You didn’t say not to” into the floor.

“He’s just trying to help,” Abigail said at the same time not quite managing to look Hannibal in the eye but managing a fairly defiant stare at his tie.

“Upstairs,” Hannibal repeated and the omega immediately folded and went, handing the gun back to Abigail.

When he was sure Randall was out of earshot, he turned back to address the beta who was looking a little less sure of herself now that she was on her own. He would need to handle this carefully to avoid undermining the work he’d managed to do with her so far.

“Put the gun down, please, Abigail,” he started and was gratified to see that she obeyed almost automatically.

“You obviously have some very valuable skills for our group and I appreciate that you are taking the time to share those skills with some of the others and to befriend my omegas but Randall…”

“He just wants to be able to protect himself and Will. We all know that we’re short on people to cover the watch posts. All we do is sit up there and ring the alarm if we see anything. It’s not that much more dangerous than sitting around and doing nothing two houses away.”

The full absurdity of what she was saying took a few moments to sink in.

“Abigail… you’re not an Alpha so perhaps this is difficult for you to understand... but there are no conceivable circumstances under which I would allow my bred omega mate to sit fifteen feet away from a zombie horde – gun or no gun, training or no training, barricades or no barricades. Quite apart from that Randall has an anxiety disorder and is under strict medical instructions to avoid exposure to stressful situations.”

“But don’t you think he would have less anxiety if he knew how to defend himself?”

Discarding his first three or four harsher responses, Hannibal settled on gathering the beta in his arms and saying, “I appreciate the concern, Abigail, I do, but I am responsible for my omegas’ wellbeing, not you. In the future, if you want to teach them something or if they ask you to teach them something that might put them in harm’s way I expect you to come and ask my permission first. Understand?”

“Yes, Alpha” she replied looking down to the floor.

He risked a “Good girl,” and a brief kiss with closed lips which she responded to flawlessly.

In the study, Hannibal saw that Randall had put himself in a corner – probably to stay as far from the central desk as possible while still technically complying with instructions. He was pretending to examine a display case of butterflies on the wall.
Hannibal walked over and took his seat, signalling the omega to come over and sit in his lap. He smiled when Randall obeyed and gave his mate a hug and a kiss on the temple to reassure him when he felt how much the omega was trembling.

“Why do want to learn how to shoot?” Hannibal asked him. “Don’t you know your Alpha will always take care of you?”

“Yes,” Randall responded hesitantly, “but... sometimes you’re not here.”

Hannibal turned the omega’s head so he was looking directly into his eyes. Randall shifted uncomfortably, afraid to meet the Alpha’s intense expression.

“If you or your brother are ever in any danger, I will be there. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the pup said looking down again. He had relaxed a little but not completely.

“But...” Hannibal prompted him.

“I just wanted to do something useful.”

“You are doing something useful,” Hannibal told him wrapping both arms around the omega’s swelling stomach and kissing his mating mark. “Unquestionably more useful than any of the rest of us.”

“I just sleep all day and get in the way. I know we’d be better off if we could leave...”

“You don’t know that pup,” Hannibal told him with another kiss. “Nobody knows where we would be better off. But we’re working it out. Even if you were able to travel, we would likely still be staying here because all of our supplies are here and it’s the most secure place we know about.”

“Can’t I help with something though? I mean really help?”

“Yes. You can help by being where I expect you to be and obeying me at once when I ask you to do something. I’ve told you before that stalling and talking back when I tell you to do something is unacceptable behaviour.”

“Yes, Alpha,” the omega responded hanging his head again. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay, pup. Let’s take care of it. Bend over the desk please.”

Eldon Stammets joined them for dinner in the main house that evening for the first time. It was also the first time that week that Will was well enough to come downstairs and eat with the rest of them although Hannibal did allow him to slump against his leg and rest his chin on the Alpha’s thigh in a way that he would not otherwise be allowed in front of company.

Hannibal did regret indulging him a little because as soon as Randall saw his brother getting away with being clingy and moping, he was inclined to try the same. But the Alpha was less sympathetic to Randall’s self-induced sore backside than he was to Will recovering his strength and told the older omega to sit up and behave himself.

He could swear he saw the pup starting to sulk but was distracted by Jack and Bedelia discussing the news from the trip to the repair yard that afternoon. Bedelia had examined the charts and considered that it was possible to navigate up the river as far as the Stammets farm. Unfortunately, there was
only one boat at the yard with a shallow enough draft and it was there for engine repairs.

“The records say the engine has a cracked cylinder head which they hadn’t gotten around to repairing yet,” Bedelia explained showing them the file. “Unfortunately, I don’t know enough to say how serious that is or how to fix it.”

“I can probably fix it,” Randall said standing up so he could look over her shoulder at the file. “If the crack’s not that big you just need epoxy and a stitching kit.”

That’s as far as he got before Hannibal snapped twice at him to signal him to kneel back down again. The pup went wide-eyed in surprise but sank down immediately. Then he realised that he was kneeling for Bedelia by mistake and shifted over until he was back in position next to Hannibal again.

“How do you know about engines, sweetheart?” Bedelia asked to cut through the tension.

Will answered because his brother was blinking back tears. “Our sire used to repair boat engines for a living and he taught Randall how to do it. He would take him along on jobs all the time.” Then, looking up at their Alpha, “Randall can fix anything.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Hannibal said reaching down to pet both of them for reassurance. He could see how embarrassed and frustrated the older omega was at being reprimanded in front of the others. “I suppose if there’s some way to bring the engine here and to check that none of the chemicals needed are potentially harmful for the cub...”

“I don’t think there’s any way to bring the engine here,” Bedelia said. “It’s three times the size of a car engine and bolted into the boat. Even if we had a truck big enough to haul it and a winch to move it, I wouldn’t know where to start detaching it. If all you need to do is essentially glue up some cracks, it must be a lot easier to just bring Randall there...”

“Absolutely not,” Hannibal cut her off. “I’m sorry but no. Not under any circumstances.”

“Well, does anyone else know anything about engines?”

Looking around the table, they all shook their heads no.

“Can you just explain to us how to fix it, Randall?” Bedelia asked.

He shook his head no and then Hannibal lifted him up so he was sitting in his lap and could look at the rest of the group directly.

“How you do it depends on how big the crack is and on what part of the cylinder head. And you have to check the rest of the engine to see what caused the crack in the first place.” The pup was a bit shy now.

“This yard can’t be the only place to get a boat in Baltimore,” Hannibal offered.

“It’s the only one four blocks away that we already know is clear of infected,” Jack responded. “The next closest marina is thirty or forty blocks past God knows what and we’d have to clear the marina itself. Who knows how many people were staying on their boats when the quarantine started? And we’d have to find a way to barricade the marina while the boatyard is already fenced off. It’s not impossible, it’s just a lot more work.”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s what we’re going to have to do,” Hannibal said finally lifting Randall up until he was kneeling back beside him again. He could see from the resentful set of the omega’s
shoulders and the way he paused for long periods before accepting more food that they were going
to be having another talk in the study, sooner rather than later.

He was going to have to find more things to keep the pups occupied with when he was sleeping or
on watch. It was a shame they weren’t better equipped to entertain themselves appropriately like
Bella was but he supposed that was the job he had taken on by choosing untrained omegas in the
first place.

Like Bedelia said, their energy, enthusiasm and curiosity were evolutionary strategies intended to
help them adapt and assimilate successfully into their Alpha’s home. He just needed to make sure he
was doing his job - steering it all in the right direction.
One month in to the Jägerbomb hangover that never ended, Bev dragged her exhausted ass out of bed. She’d had three hours sleep after standing watch all night but it’s not like she could complain to Jack, who’d had none.

As pointless as it was to take a shower, wash her hair, put on moisturiser, and dress in something other than sweatpants, she did it anyway. It was all just going to get covered in zombie-goo anyway but her mother and two sisters, whom she had decapitated with a sword only last week, could take some comfort in the fact that at least she was keeping herself presentable.

And it felt like as long as she could hold this one thing together, she could hold everything else together too. It just took one little motion after another after another until it was finally time to sleep again. Brush teeth, spit, pee, deodorant, find Jack.

Today Jack wanted to storm a marina, steal a boat, learn how to sail it and escort Opie the pharmacist upriver to Nowhere, Zombieland. So that’s what they were going to do. Because the alternative - sitting around and thinking about things - was a lot worse.

She went downstairs and grabbed some croissants and coffee. Force of habit brought her into the TV room even though nothing had been on for weeks. For some reason, she couldn’t kick the feeling that if she turned it on, the morning news would just be there. Traffic and weather at the top of the hour.

Instead, she found Jack showing Randall how to boost the signal for the police scanner. They weren’t sure about the range but it was better than nothing. Best case scenario they’d still be able to call for help if they ran into trouble at the marina. Not that there was much of a cavalry left to call.

Tuned to the right channel, they could hear Price singing “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” into the CB radio in the RV.

Jack and Randall grinned at each other and Jack tousled the omega’s hair as he stood up again. Hannibal, also standing in the doorway watching them, looked like he would happily fillet someone.

Heading off the first knot-measuring contest of the morning, Bev asked if anyone had seen Bedelia or Stammets. According to Jack, they were both already waiting in the RV.

Downing the last of her coffee and grabbing her shotgun from the closet, Bev was ready to face the day or at least start plowing her way through it.

She followed Jack back to his house where he said goodbye to Bella and then they crawled over the ladder, through the sunroof and into the RV. It was Bev, Jack, Stammets, Bedelia and Abigail along for the trip. She would have rather had Price at her back but he insisted he got violently seasick so they’d substituted the serial killer’s daughter instead.

Not that Bev thought the parent’s crimes should be held against their kids. And at least she was a good shot and didn’t try to cover up her nerves with bad puns or show tunes. But something about an eighteen year old being so completely self-possessed set off Bev’s spidey senses.

It was a bright and sunny winter’s morning but it had snowed a few inches the night before and, with no one to plow the roads, Jack drove even more like a grandma than usual.

The closer they got to the water, the larger the groups of infected grew – from a few stragglers,
occasional small groups to groups large enough to make them turn around and try a different street. Bev suspected that the explosion at the port had attracted a number of them and they hadn’t found either a reason or means to disperse. A number were also wearing fatigues and had probably been part of the relief effort before they turned.

It took about an hour and a half to drive thirty blocks to the marina. The highway was absolutely crawling but there was no way around it. They had to wait for a thinner gap between groups and then plow through to the other side.

Bev still winced as she heard and felt bodies being crushed under the wheels of the RV. She knew that they weren’t really alive but she found it hard to switch off the part of her brain that still recognised them as people.

Then they lurched again as Jack jumped the curb onto the brick pavers and started winding around the apartments blocks to get to the marina.

There was a long trail of infected following them now, diverted from the highway by the noise and motion. It would be difficult to double back and they would probably have to wait for the crowd to disperse before they could get the RV out again.

Fortunately, most of the marina could only be accessed from a central pier and the RV was wide enough to block the pier if they drove up to it sideways. That at least meant they didn’t have to worry about the infected on shore while they took out anything living on the boats.

They jumped out of the door of the RV and onto the pier. There were about two hundred boats moored there but most were small recreational fishing boats and they wanted something a little bigger so they could haul things back. The larger boats were moored to floating decks at the end of the pier.

And it looked like the thirty or so people who had been living on their boats when the quarantine hit had taken shelter in the bar at the end of the pier. It was tiki themed with a wooden railing around the open second floor where they could see a crowd of the infected starting to shamble down the ramp towards them.

Jack shouted for them to stay together as he started to jog towards the bottom of the ramp. If they could get there quickly enough they could cut them off and only have to deal with a few at a time. And hopefully more wouldn’t also start coming at them from the various floating piers attached to the fixed one.

Unfortunately, the pier was too long to get to the base of the ramp before infected started pouring off it and spreading across the width of it to surround them.

Bev and Jack slashed with the katanas in their right hands and then started shooting with the shotguns in their left when it was clear that the numbers were overwhelming. They could hear Abigail, Stammets and Bedelia starting to shoot as well.

The stench was appalling and gore flew in every direction. At one point Bev could barely see between the reflection of the sun on the water, the sweat and who knew what else dripping into her eyes and the stress-induced tunnel vision.

One thing at a time, she told herself. This one’s neck is exposed. Slash. That one’s about to grab Jack. Pull trigger. Duck. Thrust into stomach. Pull the blade free. Wipe crap out of eyes. Don’t trip over that body. Shoot that little one before he can flank Abigail.

She wasn’t even aiming but somehow they seemed to be dropping... like all she had to do was point
her fingers at them and they would fall over. Some kept reaching up and trying to bite or trip her but they still after head or heart shots.

Several times they were almost overwhelmed but Jack refused to order them to fall back and until he did, Bev was going to keep hacking and blasting away.

Finally, there didn’t seem to be any more coming at them. Looking around she could see that the noise had attracted a few more infected out onto the decks of the boats but they didn’t seem to be able to get themselves over and onto the piers. She could also hear the pounding on the side of the RV from landside infected and there was a very faint rocking motion but nothing to suggest that they might be able to tip it over.

They split up to inspect the boats and take out any of the remaining infected on them. It took the better part of an hour for Bedelia to settle on the one she wanted and for them to clear the rest of the marina.

Meanwhile Bev raided the bar and loaded cases of liquor into the RV. She used some of the cleaner looking snow to make something approximating margaritas and brought them out for everyone except Bedelia, their designated driver.

When the therapist was finally satisfied that there was enough fuel, she knew how to use the controls and she had the right charts, she signalled that they were ready to go.

Bev’s low grade sleep deprivation headache was turning into a full scale migraine so as soon as the boat left the dock and they’d had a quick lunch, she went down to the cabin to sleep on the pleather cushions.

The water was a little choppy at first but gradually she drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

It was mid-afternoon when she woke up. Abigail and Jack had had the same idea and were sleeping on other parts of the same bench.

Back up on the deck, she could see that they were making steady progress up the river, which was only about three or four times as wide as the boat itself. There were railroad tracks along the north bank and they were surrounded by naked oak and hickory trees but there were no other signs of life (or un-life, thankfully).

Upstairs she found Stammets and Bedelia trying to work out how much further it was.

“How long have I been out?” Bev asked.

“About three hours,” Bedelia replied. “I think we’re almost there.”

“We should stop just after this oxbow,” Stammets told them pointing to the chart. That’s the closest that the river comes to our farm. From here, it’s just a ten minute walk through the woods to the nearest barn.”

At least with all the trees dead or dormant, the visibility would be decent but it also meant that anything out there would have a pretty good view of them too. Bev had never been a huge fan of the great outdoors and suspected that this trip wasn’t going to be the one to turn it all around.

She went back downstairs to wake up Jack and Abigail. She was starving again, even though it was only about three thirty. She ate the dinner she had packed hoping that they would be able to find something else edible at the farmhouse.
“We’re going to have to spend the night,” Jack decided. “Sunset’s in two hours and Bedelia won’t be able to navigate in the dark.”

They dropped anchor where Stammets had indicated. They couldn’t get close enough to the bank to use the ramp so they had to wade in waist deep water to get to land. The current was slow but the water was freezing cold. Despite how uninviting the woods looked, Bev couldn’t help wishing they would hurry up and get inside so she could change out of her wet jeans into anything else.

Bedelia stayed behind to guard the boat but the rest of them jogged through the woods following Stammets until they came to an open pasture in front of a barn. There were half a dozen infected clawing at the doors but they were able to take them out using only the katana.

Inside they could hear the pathetic bleating that had attracted them. A few grown goats and half a dozen kids had busted out of their pens and had been gorging themselves on the hay in the loft and anything else they could find.

They refilled the water troughs but let the goats keep the run of the barn, securing the door behind them and setting up some sharpened stakes to keep more infected away from it. At least the whole trip wouldn’t be a total bust if they could get some of them back to the boat with them.

A little further up the road was a piggery but the infected has busted into it and slaughtered everything.

And then at the top of the hill was the farmhouse itself. It looked creepy and haunted but also not exposed to the wind that had been eating through Bev’s lower legs for the last half hour and therefore it was the most beautiful structure she had ever seen.

She ran on numb feet up to the front door which was wide open and flapping. Stammets called for his mother but there was no reply. They searched every room in the house but there was no sign of the old broad.

Stammets got a fire started in the potbelly stove and they all crowded around it to dry off. He also started boiling some water in a kettle for his diabolical smelling fungus tea. That was Bev’s cue to start searching through the closets for some blankets they could wrap themselves in.

Once the pins and needles in her legs calmed down, Bev dug around a little and found a full pantry of food but no signs of where Mrs Stammets had disappeared to. There was an ancient truck with half a tank of gas in the driveway at least so they might be able to do some exploring in the morning before they had to come back.

Looking up from the driveway, she saw Stammets walking back to the house. In each hand he held a dead chicken by its recently wrung neck.

“There’s a dozen or so more left in the coop over there,” he told her pointing over behind the garage with his chin. “These were the scrawniest two so we might as well have them tonight.”

Their dinner of boiled chicken, canned green beans and peaches might not have been entirely up to Hannibal’s standards but it went a long way towards helping Bev recover her spirits. So far they hadn’t seen any infected except for the ones at the barn but that didn’t mean there weren’t more out there. They were a lot more exposed here than they were at Hannibal’s and it wouldn’t take a lot of infected to knock down a termite-infested wall in this shack.

When they had finished eating, Jack took Bev aside and explained that in the morning he wanted to take Abigail to find the shooting range and feed store while Katz should stay with Stammets and
pack up everything for them to bring back. Stammets had offered them half of whatever food was left at the farm in exchange for protection on the trip out so that netted them half a dozen chickens, a couple goats and a few boxes of canned veggies. Mostly, however, her instructions were to babysit Stammets until Jack could get back.

She wanted to object. The shooting range sounded like a lot more fun. But she understood why Jack didn’t trust Abigail alone with the pharmacist. He was easily twice her size and, while neither of them had specifically done anything to raise suspicions, neither of them were part of their BAU crew either.

Bev lucked out and drew the first watch which meant she got an uninterrupted six hours for the rest of the night. Not even crashing on a dusty granny sofa that smelled like cough drops could keep her from her date with oblivion.

And, miracle of miracles, it was a quiet night and she woke up to the smell of fresh biscuits filling the house. They were so amazing, Bev didn’t even think twice about chasing them down with goat’s milk and the juice from a can of mandarin oranges. If she squinted her taste buds, it was almost a normal-person breakfast.

After Jack and Abigail left, Bev and Stammets carried a stack of wire cages out to the chicken coop. There were twelve chickens left which meant Bev had to cage six of them. Stammets left her to it, saying that he would pack up the boxes of food in the house and anything else that might be useful for them and that he didn’t need. He slapped the side of the coop as he was leaving which woke all the chickens up and set them fluttering and squawking out into the run.

For a flock of half-starved poultry, they could still run pretty fast and kick up a hell of a fuss when she did manage to grab one of them. She wanted one of the two roosters because they didn’t have one in Petey’s flock and it was likely at some point they would want to grow it. But even the smaller rooster was evasive. At least until she cornered it and it decided it had had enough launching at her calf with its full force and furry.

“Die, motherfucker!” she screamed at it as it tore into her leg and then blew past her back into the coop.

Looking down she could see that its claws had torn through her jeans and its spurs had punctured her right calf in three different places. She slammed the door of the coop shut so that at least the little hellspawn was trapped inside and then limped back to the house so she could clean and bandage her wounds.

She called out for Stammets to ask him where the antibacterial cream was but there was no reply. Looking around she noticed a trail of footprints in the snow leading from the back porch to the woodline.

That’s not suspicious at all, she told herself, drawing her gun and following the trail.

She caught up with him about fifteen minutes later in a thicket where he was kneeling over a large field of amber coloured seashell shaped mushrooms poking up through the snow.

She let her gun drop slightly but then raised it again when she noticed the long row of human arms extending upwards from the field and held up by what looked like rebar and plastic tubing.

Stammets stood up smiling at her as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He had a basket half full of mushrooms in one hand and a small curved harvesting knife in the other.
“I was just getting a basket for you to take home... a kind of thank you,” he told her mildly without pausing and starting to step towards her.

“Don’t move,” Bev shouted out at him. “Take one more step and I’ll shoot.”

“You have no idea how valuable they really are. If you walk through a field of mycelium they know you are there. The spores reach for you as you walk by.”

“Well, let’s all keep our spores to ourselves and nobody will get hurt.”

Don’t make me shoot you, you wall-eyed creep, Bev said desperately to herself. Don’t make me pop my lethal force cherry with Opie.

“You haven’t understood at all,” he said. “Connection is the key to our survival. They’re reaching out for us now so that we can reach out to each other. They saved me so that I can save you.”

He took another step closer, dropping the basket but not the knife.

“Take one more step and you’re not going to like how we connect,” she said taking a step back in turn.

She spooked herself by backing into a tree trunk and then Stammets lunged and then she shot him in the head, not one little action following another but a huge mess of actions crammed into two second with no conscious thought.

His shoulder pinned her against the trunk and then he slumped down to the ground allowing her to step around him and free. His arm snagged her rooster cuts on the way down and she swore and kicked him until he turned over onto his back. She kicked the knife away to be safe and checked that he was definitely dead- the back of his skull blown across half the field.

Taking a deep breath, she headed back for the house. Jack would know what to do. She just needed to hang tight until he got back. Patch up her leg. Get a glass of water. Find another pair of pants. Wait for Jack.

It was almost lunchtime before she heard the rumble of the truck pulling back into the driveway. The bed was full of supplies – cases of ammo, assault rifles, animal feed, rolls of chicken wire. Jack and Abigail both had black goo splashes all over them but otherwise seemed unhurt.

She led them up to the mushroom patch where they found three infected feasting on what remained of Eldon Stammets. They decapitated them and then debated whether to bury Stammets or to finish burying his victims. In the end there was no time. They needed to be out of there well before three so that Bedelia wouldn’t have to navigate in the dark.

It took about an hour to load the boat up with the animals and the supplies they had scavenged. Bev brought the basket of mushrooms as well so that she could study them. Stammets may have been a few options short of a salad bar but she was 90% sure it wasn’t Good & Plenties that had been the source of his immunity.

Back at the farm, she was annoyed to watch Abigail just throw down a bunch of chicken feed and then calmly collect each of them into cages while they were distracted.

The only thing they left behind was the rooster that had maimed her. Bev did leave the coop door open for him though. They were all just trying to survive at the end of the day and she’d already killed her quota of assholes.
The trip downstream was much quicker. The docked at the marina just as it was beginning to get dark. They raced to load up the RV and then to drive it home. Meanwhile Bedelia took the boat back around to moor at the yacht repair yard so it would be easier to collect if they took it out again. They met her there and then returned to the house.

There weren’t too many infected on the south side of the barricades so they shifted them, drove in, shifted them back.

She helped unload the RV until she was nearing collapse. Then she all but inhaled the huge bowl of chowder Hannibal had made for them. Upstairs, shower, decide no stitches necessary, pyjamas, brush teeth, collapse on bed.

I killed someone today, she told herself, her eyes fluttering behind their lids.

You kill someone every day, she replied just before she dropped off.
Manifestation

Chapter Notes

Kind of spank- and angst-heavy (again, sorry!) and plot-light so if that isn't your thing feel free to give a miss.

Also thanks for all your patience and sorry for the slow updates - have been sick the past two months but determined to press on to the full Hannigram section. If you're wondering *spoilers*...

Everybody ages up after the cub is born - maybe tennish more chapters(?)

“This is such bullshit,” Randall said thumping down the socket wrench and trying to lean the half-assembled changing table frame against the wall in a way that wouldn’t cause the whole thing to collapse and shatter.

Sitting on the floor and addressing the fluttering in his stomach, he said, “Your sire could have grabbed stuff that was already assembled. He’s just trying to torture me.”

There was another little flicker under his belly button that Randall interpreted as laughter.

“Yeah, yeah, hilarious. Let’s see how funny you and your papa think it is when I’m changing you in the kitchen sink.”

“Are you talking to him again?” Will asked coming into the new nursery with the lunch tray their Alpha had assembled for them before going on watch. He sat down next to his brother with the tray in between them and picked up one of the sandwiches – some kind of fancy tuna fish.

“No,” Randall scowled grabbing the other one.

This was what he got for asking for something useful to do. To be fair, he suspected that Hannibal was mostly just humouring him and that if he wanted to stay in bed sleeping for the next four months until the cub came his Alpha would be just as happy if not more so.

But he hadn’t meant shifting all the contents of the plant nursery to Bella’s greenhouse and then repainting, and assembling all the baby furniture. Every day their Alpha had some new busy work for him. Randall had built all the chicken coops and rabbit hutches. He, Will and Peter (as he wanted to be called now) were in charge of feeding and taking care of all the animals.

They had a long list of other chores too – mostly food prep, keeping supply inventories, tidying, and training the dog to bark at infected and not at everything else. On a good day, they got to do some light demolition work as well. Hannibal wanted a system of escape routes through the townhouses just in case so sometimes they got smash through walls which was very therapeutic.

It was all indoors though, except for the hour or two they got to go to the garden next door to take care of the animals. And maybe another hour or so walking around the perimeter of their own garden if it was a nice day and there was someone to supervise them like they were little cubs.

It was a big house and there was always a lot to do but after two months Randall was crawling the
walls. He couldn’t remember a time in his life when they’d spent two months in the same town let alone in the same house.

The others all got to go out into the real world whenever they wanted, living real lives and doing real things. Even the other omegas got to go anywhere they wanted in the compound without someone hovering over them all the time. But he was stuck in the same house where he spent 99% of his time trying to decipher furniture assembly instructions that were written in Italian.

“Can I feel it?” Will asked for the four thousandth time that week.

Randall rolled his eyes and then led his brother’s hand over to rest under his shirt in approximately the location where the cub was gurgling away.

Hannibal was still teaching him how to read almost every night, usually using books about what to expect from the pregnancy. He knew that the cub was the size of a banana and was supposed to start kicking soon. He definitely had a bump now, even when he tried to suck his stomach in, but it was still small enough to hide if he wore baggy clothes.

Ever since he’d worked out that the occasional quivery feeling in the pit of his stomach was really the cub and had made the mistake of telling Will and his Alpha, every time they saw him they wanted to paw at him.

“I still can’t feel anything.” Will announced pulling his hand back and grabbing some pretzels instead. “What does it feel like?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on...”

“Like pop rocks in my belly button, I guess.”

“Ewww!”

“Well, you asked.”

“Can you still feel it now?”

Randall nodded and Will reached over to feel his stomach again. Randall moved to give him a friendly push away and Will leaned back knocking the table frame over with a loud crash.

They scrambled to their feet just as Bella came in to check on them.

“Everything OK, boys? Do you need any help?”

“No, thank you,” Will replied. “Sorry, we just dropped it.”

“That’s OK. Just try to keep it down a little. Alana and Abigail are sleeping down the hall.”

They promised to be quiet and then, once Bella had gone back downstairs, inspected the frame for damage. It seemed fine but there was a little scrape in the paint on the wall.

They’d just have to put a drawing or something on top of it, Randall decided - painting the room had been such a pain in the ass in the first place. He leaned the cardboard box over the scratch in the meantime. If Hannibal saw it, he would insist that they repaint the whole room. Everything always had to be absolutely spotlessly perfect with him all the time.
“Do you want me to hold it up for you?” Will asked as he handed the wrench back to his brother.

“No, let’s do something else.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. Something different.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we’ve been here two months and we’ve never even seen what one of the monsters looks like.”

“You mean go outside?”

“No, I just mean look out the windows in one of the street-facing houses. Just to see what they look like. We’d still be totally safe. Peter and Bella live in those houses and must get to see them any time they want and nobody cares.”

“Our Alpha would care. We’re not supposed to leave the house.”

“He’ll only care if we get caught. We can use the interior passage between the townhouses so nobody will see us. It will only take like ten minutes tops. And Alpha is on watch until after dinner.”

“I mean I guess if all the buildings are connected, it’s not really like leaving the house. It’s not like going outside, outside.”

“There you go!” Randall said.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea. He and Will used to watch monster movies all the time so how scary could the real thing possibly be. And it’s not like they were putting themselves in any actual danger. And even if they did get caught, they might get a spanking but then their Alpha would see that actually they weren’t that scared or upset and maybe he would reconsider letting them out of the house more and stop treating them like cubs.

They crept down to the dining room as quietly as they could. Bella was in the kitchen working on lunch and everyone else was either on watch, asleep or in one of the other houses. They snuck out the French doors, which thankfully didn’t creak and then slunk along the garden walls under the covered walkway to the back of the garage.

They’d put in a new passage between the inside of their garage and the neighbour’s garage to make it quicker to go over and feed the animals. From there it was easy to skirt along the neighbour’s garden wall and through their dining room doors into the house.

It still smelled like old lady a bit and all the furnishings were fussy and dusty. It had been so long since Randall had seen anything new and different though it was hard not to want to stop and look around a little.

But Will was on a mission now and dragged him upstairs to the beginning of the series of corridors they had knocked through the townhouse walls.

“Come on, we said ten minutes. Bella could come up looking for us any time.”

They wended their way through a series of rooms and corridors until they were almost to the corner site. The south facing windows would look out onto the open street but that house was also one of
the watch posts. They weren’t sure who was assigned to which house or where in the house they
would be.

Randall started to reconsider the entire stupid idea. He’d seen enough movies to know what zombies
looked like. And Hannibal was never going to be impressed by them having the guts to look at one
out a window. And the probability of them getting caught seemed to grow with each step they took.

He was just about to grab Will’s shoulder and suggest they go back when the younger omega darted
through the hole in the wall into the last house, crossed the bedroom and peeked out into the stair
landing to check for the guard. When he didn’t see anyone he signalled Randall to follow him and
then crept through the corridor to the back bedroom and then through into the next house.

Randall relaxed slightly once they made it through the corner house without getting busted. As long
as they were here, they might as well see what they came for very quickly and then head back.

They went to one of the street facing windows and peeked out. It was a bright sunny day and
everything was quiet. There was still some snow on the ground and they could see tracks through it
but the zombies themselves were nowhere in sight.

They waited a few minutes hoping some would pass by but they seemed to be out of luck.

As they were about to head back though, Will pointed out a scrawny little dog limping down the
middle of the road. It was a terrier mutt, probably mostly Jack Russell with a face like a little Boxer.

“He’s hurt,” Will whispered pointing to the red stains in the dog’s fur around his belly.

“Maybe a zombie bit him. Can dogs get it too?”

“I don’t think so,” Will replied. “Max is immune anyway.”

Will pulled a bag of dog treats out of his pocket, tilted one of the windows slightly out and threw half
a biscuit so it landed in the middle of the road. The dog hobbled over to it, sniffed it suspiciously and
then ate, looking around all the time to check he was still safe.

“See if you can get him to come closer to the door,” Will said handing the bag to his brother and
starting to head for the stairs.

“You can’t be serious,” Randall whispered at him. “Even if you don’t get caught, where are you
going to tell Alpha you got another dog?”

“We can just say he crawled in under the cars. There’s bound to be a hole somewhere,” Will said.
“Come on, before he runs away.”

Before he could respond, Will dashed out of the room and down the stairs. Randall turned, checked
that there were still no zombies in sight and then threw a little trail of biscuits leading from the dog to
the front porch.

The dog was hesitant to follow but, after the third biscuit, started to wag his tail slightly. Randall
heard a slight scraping noise downstairs as Will shifted some of the furniture blocking the front door.
In addition to the thousands of other reasons this was a colossally stupid idea, whoever was on watch
in the next house probably heard it too.

Randall leaned his head out of the window. Checking from side to side he didn’t see any zombies or
any obvious signs that someone in one of the other houses was on to them. Looking down he saw
Will extend his arm out so that the dog could sniff at it.
The dog hesitated again but eventually crawled closer to the arm on his belly. He was wearing a collar so he must have been someone’s pet. After a few shy sniffs he seemed happy to let Will scratch him behind the ears. Randall dropped another biscuit straight down, careful not to hit either of them and Will picked it up and fed it to the dog.

Will had his hand around the dog’s collar and was gently pulling him in when Randall heard a startled yelp and saw both arm and dog disappear through the door. There were some more scraping sounds as Randall pulled his head back in and latched the window shut.

He crept over to the top of the stairs where he could see the dog dash off barking into another room and then Jack dragging Will by the scruff of his neck and shaking him.

“Does Hannibal know you’re out here?” Jack demanded as he shook Will again with one hand and pulled his belt off with the other.

Randall froze. On the one hand, everything inside him was screaming to go help his brother but on the other hand he didn’t stand a chance against a pissed off Alpha three times his size. All going downstairs was going to accomplish was getting them both busted.

“No Alpha,” he could hear Will offering nervously in response. “I just wanted to help the dog and I didn’t really go outside – just leaned a little.”

With the belt free, Jack started whacking Will on the backside with it without further preamble. Will leapt around trying to avoid it, so Jack hauled him over the side of the banister and started belting him again in between scolding him.


Will stopped kicking and struggling about halfway through and just clung onto the railing crying. Randall started crying in sympathy, a giant ball of guilt settling in his gut, but he was too afraid to go downstairs and reveal himself.

“I’m sorry,” Will started wailing. “I’m sorry... just please don’t tell Alpha.”

Jack lifted him back onto his feet before responding, “He’s not your Alpha. He’s your foster-sire. And that’s not how things work around here pup. You break the rules and you face the consequences. We’re all 100% on the same page about that.”

Jack started pulling Will along by the upper arm, presumably back to their house. Randall got a brief glimpse of Will’s tearful and accusatory eyes before they were out of sight.

Released from his paralysis as soon as he heard the door slam, Randall raced back to the passageway through the townhouses. Through some of the windows, he could see Jack proceeding down the alley through the middle of the block with Will in tow. When they were about halfway back, he could also see Hannibal coming out of the corner townhouse on the far side. It was too far away to see his expression but Randall could guess.

He had to be careful timing his dash through the neighbours’ yard to their garage to avoid being seen by either Jack or Hannibal passing by the gate. He made it though, slipping into their garage past all the unhelpfully squawky chickens and bleating goats and then, as quietly as he could, down into the basement.

His first instinct was to race back upstairs again so he wouldn’t miss anything but he was sweating buckets and breathing hard so he ran into the bedroom instead, towelled himself off, splashed his face with cold water and changed into fresh clothes.
By the time his breath had calmed down and he wandered casually back up into the kitchen, everything had already kicked off.

“Where’s your brother?” Hannibal was demanding. He and Jack both had a grip on one of the omega’s shoulders. Meanwhile Bella was nervously cleaning up after lunch and Bedelia was hovering around the counter sipping her coffee.

Will shrugged staring at the floor so Randall piped up, “Here I am.”

He added in a few extra blinks and rubbed an eye to suggest he had just woken up.

“And where have you been?” Jack added.

“Downstairs,” Randall answered in his most innocent tone and flicking his eyes to the floor. It wasn’t technically untrue. “What happened?”

“Your brother decided to sneak into one of the other townhouses and then out into one of the open streets,” Jack said more to their Alpha than to Randall.

“I just wanted to save the dog,” Will explained hopelessly. “I didn’t really go outside.”

“No, you just moved the barricade on the door and leaned out into a street full of infected where anything could have happened to you.”

“There weren’t any monsters. I checked,” Will protested before looking up at their Alpha and realising he was just digging himself in deeper.

While Hannibal still looked neutral, Randall could see the nerve in his forehead pulsing in a way that made him want to crawl back into the basement as fast as he could and never come back up again.

Even Jack seemed to pick up on how furious he was. Unfortunately, he continued in the least helpful way possible.

“Well, we’ve taken care of it now, haven’t we Will?” Jack relaxed the hand that had been gripping his jacket and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Will looked around between the Alphas like he had just landed from outer space.

“What do you mean?” Hannibal asked the other Alpha steadily, releasing Will as well.

“He’s had a spanking and now I think he needs to apologise and spend a few days in his room reflecting on this foolishness. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Hannibal looked at Jack like his head had split open and Tweety birds had started pouring out.

“Would I agree that it’s acceptable for you to discipline my omega without talking to me about it first? I would not.”

“He’s not your omega,” Jack sighed with exasperation. It’s like he had a manual somewhere telling him how to throw gas on this particular fire to make it as bad as humanly possible. “He’s an orphan omega cub who lives in our community. You know, all the other people who live here too.”

Jack waved his arm around in emphasis at the mostly empty room peppered with people who were generally wishing it was entirely empty.

“I made a judgment call that his behaviour needed to be dealt with on the spot. As an Alpha in this
community, I have that right. And if you think you get to tell Bella off when she’s just trying to help but me calling out your pups on their constant disrespect and disobedience is crossing a line...”

“I’m sorry,” Will bawled suddenly with tears in his eyes and his hands clapped over both ears.

“The omegas should go upstairs,” Bedelia interjected. “They don’t need to be here for this.”

Hannibal managed to unclench his jaw long enough to order them up to their bedroom. Will sprinted as soon as he said it and Bella and Randall followed trying to linger at the bottom of the stairs to catch a few extra seconds until Jack pointed to them and then to the ceiling.

Up in the bedroom, Will had sprawled out face down on the covers. Bella went to sit next to him, rubbing his back. Randall curled up in one of the chairs by the fireplace and buried his face in his knees.

The whole thing was his fault and he’d let his little brother take the blame for it like the worst kind of... something. Now they all hated him, including their Alpha who, he was sure, hadn’t bought his little act for a second. And he deserved it.

“It will all be okay,” Bella assured them leaning over to kiss the back of Will’s head. “They’re only angry because they care about you pups so much and want to keep you safe. And they’re just having a little disagreement about the best way to do that.”

“But you get to live in one of the houses by the street,” Will said turning his head to face her. “And you and Peter get to go anywhere you want. It’s not fair that we have to stay in only one house.”

“Well, I suppose Hannibal is worried that, because you’re so much younger, you might exercise some poor judgement. For example, by opening one of the doors out into the street by yourself.”

So much for getting some sympathy or dynamic-solidarity, Randall thought.

“I wouldn’t have, except I checked and checked and the street was empty and we wanted to save the dog. He was injured and hungry. It wasn’t really dangerous, I promise!”

“But you still shouldn’t have snuck out without telling anyone where you were going. And if you wanted to open the door, you should have gotten someone to help you. Jack was right next door. It’s not because you’re an omega. It’s because our situation is so dangerous and you’re still a cub really even though you’re very smart and brave and capable too. We all have to learn how to ask for help and rely on each other and work as a team – even our bullheaded Alphas.”

Bella gave Will’s ribs a tickle and he rolled over a little more smiling.

“Do you think Buster will be alright?”

“Is that the dog?”

“Yes, that’s what his nametag says.”

“Is he still outside?”

“No, I brought him in. But he ran away.”

“Do you want me to see if I can find him and bring him back here?”

Will nodded and Bella smiled giving him another kiss on the forehead before heading back downstairs. With the door open, they could hear Jack bellowing but couldn’t make out any of the
As soon as she was gone, Randall came over and lay on the bed with his head on his brother’s stomach.

“Sorry,” he said. “It was all my fault.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Will sniffed stoically. “There’s no point in both of us getting in trouble for it.”

Randall felt another little flip-flop in his gut and reached Will’s hand over to cover the area.

“Can you feel that one?”

“No,” Will told him solemnly. “It’s probably just gas.”

“Shut up. It isn’t. Some uncle you’re turning out to be.”

“Just wait until he’s old enough to understand some of the stories I’m going to tell him about you...”

They lay on the bed together for half an hour talking together about other things until Hannibal came back in. As soon as they heard the door opening though, they jumped up to their feet with their heads hung.

While he was still in a terrible mood, he no longer seemed on the verge of snapping. Being forgiven by Will had unclenched the giant ball of guilt in Randall’s chest somewhat but seeing their Alpha so disappointed and angry brought it all crashing back again. He felt like he could barely catch his breath and was nearly in tears.

“Sorry Alpha,” they both said in unison as Hannibal sat on the bed and signalled for them to shift around so they were facing him.

“I’m not going to tell you pups again,” the Alpha started. “You do not leave this house without permission. Do you know why?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Will replied quickly. “It’s too dangerous. I’m really sorry. It was so stupid. I don’t know what I was thinking. It will never happen again. I promise.”

“If it does, you’re not going to sit down for a week and you’ll be lucky if you’re allowed to leave the basement. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Alpha. Completely. I’m really, really sorry. I feel sick just thinking about it.” Looking over, Will did look a little green around the gills. Randall’s giant ball of guilt compressed another few degrees.

“I can’t understand what you were thinking. You know the rules. You know the consequences. I certainly don’t enjoy punishing you and I can’t imagine that you enjoy it either.”

“I don’t. I just... I’ve never seen the monsters and I thought it wasn’t really that dangerous to just look at one of them out the window because Bella and Peter get that close all the time so how bad can it be? And I tried to be really, really careful.’”

“Is it your job to decide what’s too dangerous for you pups or not?”

“No, Alpha. It’s yours,” Will conceded staring at his feet.

“You’re grounded for the next two weeks, Will. That means you stay in the room I tell you to stay in
except for trips to the bathroom. Understood? After that we can reassess what’s an appropriate level of independence for you to have in light of the very poor judgement you’ve shown today.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good pup,” Hannibal told him with a light pat on the cheek. “Why don’t you go back to your other bedroom then and read until dinnertime?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Will replied visibly relieved not to be getting another spanking. He turned on his heel and all but ran out of the room.

When Randall turned back to look at Hannibal his eyes seemed to be boring straight through him. He knows, Randall thought. It’s so obvious. I might as well pin a note to my chest or shout it out the window. He tried to stop the tears welling up in his eyes but it was useless.

“Anything you want to say to me, pup?” Hannibal asked in his kindest tone – another form of torture.

Randall felt something caught in his throat and his shoulders hitching with a sob and his facing scrunching up compulsively like a stupid little kid having a tantrum. His heart was racing and he was so miserable he thought nothing could ever possibly feel worse.

“I went too,” he blurted out. “The whole stupid thing was my stupid idea. I’m so sorry. It was really... stupid.”

When he dared to look up again the Alpha was giving him a little smile – not exactly smug but not a million miles away either.

“Thank you for telling me,” Hannibal said. “I may have had a suspicion.”

“I’m really, really sorry. I feel terrible. And I lied about it too. And I almost let Will take all the blame. And everything was totally my fault.”

Left for a few more seconds, Randall suspected he would have started confessing to all his shoplifting and the time he dismantled the microwave in the break room at one of his sire’s jobs.

Fortunately, his Alpha stepped in. “The same things I said to Will go for you too. Except you’re older and I expect better. Your brother looks up to you and you have a responsibility to set a good example and keep him away from dangerous situations.”

Randall felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

“I don’t suppose you have a better excuse.”

“No Alpha. Sorry. I just didn’t want you to think I was afraid of them. The zombies.”

“You should be afraid of them,” Hannibal replied. “If you weren’t, you’d be an idiot. And I certainly don’t think you’re that. At least most of the time...”

Hannibal tilted his chin up so he could see the affection in his eyes. Somehow that just made him feel even worse though.

“You’re grounded for two weeks too. And you’re getting a spanking. With extra for lying when we first asked you about it.”

“Yes, Alpha.”
“But I’m proud of you for owning up to it.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Let’s go then,” Hannibal said standing up and leading the omega downstairs with a hand on his neck. His grip wasn’t very firm though and he gave him a friendly pat when they got to the study.

Randall leaned over the desk while Hannibal pulled his pants down and started belting him. It hurt like a son of a bitch but not as bad as the shame that had been collecting in his chest ever since Jack nabbed his little brother. About halfway through he could feel everything start to unclench and the tears that started flowing now were more for release than from pain.

Hannibal kept going until Randall could barely hold himself up on the edge of the desk anymore and then stopped, pulling his pants back up, rubbing his back and telling him what a good boy he was.

He didn’t exactly feel like a good boy but he didn’t feel like the worst one ever born anymore so it was a start.

His Alpha let him sit in his lap and scent him for a while until he was able to stop crying.

“Really sorry, Alpha.”

“I know pup. But I know you’re going to do better next time, right?”

Randall nodded into his chest. He felt so relaxed it was like he’d just woken up to a fresh day.

“How is everything coming along in the nursery?” Hannibal asked rubbing circles on his stomach. Normally Randall didn’t like having his belly pawed at, but this time felt kind of nice.

“The changing table is impossible. All the instructions are in Italian and you need eight hands to keep all the pieces from falling apart.”

“So leggere l’italiano,” Hannibal whispered in his ear and Randall found himself starting to slick up a little despite himself.

“And I have at least two more hands,” he added letting them drift down to the omega’s legs so they brushed over his cock. “Do you want to work on it together for a while? I can’t wait to see the whole room put together and to have the cub sleeping safely in there. Love what a good pup you are and how hard you’ve been working on our home.”

Randall hummed and shifted a little so he could kiss his Alpha and hold onto his broad shoulders.

“Maybe in a little bit,” Randall agreed.
When the ground started to thaw, Jack ran a scavenged rototiller over all of the back lawns that got decent sun and Bella started organising her big plant out sessions. Several of the houses had greenhouses or conservatories and all of them were packed to the gills with seedlings. The Alphas all took pains to assure her that the world wouldn’t end if they didn’t manage a totally self-sufficient crop that year but after four months of eating mostly canned or dried vegetables they were all excited to see some fresh produce.

Today the omegas and Bedelia were planting out the six hundred onion sets Jack had brought back from Sykesville and sowing rows of snap peas, lettuce, carrots, chard, beets and parsnips.

Since standing and kneeling over and over made Randall dizzy, Bella gave him the basket of sets to distribute while she, Will and Peter crawled along on their hands and knees planting in the furrows Bedelia dug with a hoe.

It was a bright spring morning and nobody was in a hurry. All of the omegas were excited to be outside in the fresh air and doing something productive. While Randall had finished the nursery and built more outdoor runs and pens for all the animals, Hannibal flatly refused to even discuss letting him train with weapons, learn self-defence or step five feet out of their house unsupervised.

The one job Randall had been allowed to help with which he’d kind of enjoyed was rigging up all the security cameras to a central monitoring system in their basement. That let them cut the number of people on watch shifts in half which meant Hannibal could spend more time at home and everyone wasn’t as exhausted and cranky all the time.

Bedelia had even insisted they set up the schedule so that everyone got at least one “off” day once a week. There were no signs of a cure or the reestablishment of civilisation any time soon. They hadn’t seen another living soul in two months. Which meant, as Bedelia put it, they needed pace themselves if they meant to be in it for the long haul.

It was currently her “off” day but she insisted that she enjoyed gardening as a hobby so helping them with the planting didn’t count as work. Most of the rest of them had similar “hobbies” that gave them excuses to keep busy even when they were supposed to be resting. Price had his beehives, Katz was studying epidemiology text books and Abigail spent hour after hour improving her archery skills and teaching Alana how to shoot.

Randall had wanted to help with installing the solar panels as well, but Hannibal had yet another irrational objection to him climbing ladders or being on the roofs “in his state” – easily the three most hateful words in the English language he was quickly discovering. If he was “in a state”, who’s fault was it?

In any case, they had enough panels now to power Hannibal’s and Jack’s houses without having to ration electricity anymore and they were planning to rig up Bedelia’s house once all the spring garden work was done.

Meanwhile, they’d gotten used to her and Peter crashing breakfast every morning and then hanging out during the day. The skinny omega had recovered quite a bit. He was still scrawny but no longer emaciated and was still hyperaware of everything going on but didn’t immediate flee into a corner every time a noise startled him.

He spent most of his time taking care of the animals and trying to humanely trap pigeons. At first,
Hannibal hadn’t been too keen on Will and Randall spending time with Peter but he seemed to accept at this point that he was more or less harmless.

He didn’t know that Bedelia still enlisted Will sometimes to help with therapy sessions when he was on watch. Will had had a few nightmares as a result to the point that Randall debated whether or not he should tell their Alpha but Will insisted he was fine and he would never speak to Randall again if he ratted them out. So he had more or less left it alone.

Peter still creeped him out a little bit though. He couldn’t put his finger on why. He felt sorry for him. It’s obvious his Alpha had been a nightmare. And Will told him he was messed up but harmless. But Randall also got shivers up his spine any time he had to sit close to him.

And now, for example. Why was Peter stealing creepy glances at his stomach instead of paying attention to what he was doing? Randall knew he looked like he’d swallowed a volleyball. He didn’t need to be reminded of it on the one enjoyable day they’d had for weeks.

“How would I know?” Randall replied before catching Bella and Bedelia smiling cryptically at each other.

“All the classic signs,” Bedelia said leaning on her hoe.

“Sleeping and eating all the time,” Bella listed.

“Alpha cubs are usually larger and take a bigger toll on your system,” Bedelia explained. “It could be twins, but an Alpha is more likely.”

“I don’t eat all the time,” Randall objected although, to be fair, his stomach was grumbling and if his hands weren’t covered in dirt he would have already dug into the bag of pretzels in his pocket.

“And, sorry to say it, but you have one of the worst cases of ‘hot pants’ I’ve ever seen,” Bella added with a knowing smile.

“What’s... oh.” Randall felt himself blushing bright red. He couldn’t believe they were discussing this with Will sitting right there.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Bella teased him. “We all think it’s sweet you can’t keep your hands off each other.”

“They don’t mean the cub’s an Alpha though? That just sounds like an old omega’s tale.”

“There’s some evidence,” Bedelia explained, “that Alpha cubs born from Alpha-omega pairs that are frequently intimate tend to have higher birth weights, to display dominance characteristics at an
earlier age, to find mates at a younger age and to have more offspring. Researchers have speculated that there’s a transfer of hormones that signals to the cub that their carrier is a favoured mate and that their parents’ relationship is secure. It could also be a way to ensure that first-born Alpha cubs have a head start over their younger siblings, who they are likely going to need to lead when they are older.”

Randall felt increasingly confused and a little annoyed that everyone seemed to know about this except him. He wondered if Hannibal had known this whole time and was only mounting him all day every day to get a bigger cub.

“So the cub wants them to get it on?” Will asked.

“Oh my god, can we please stop talking about this!” Randall thought about storming off to get away from them but the only place to go was back inside and he wasn’t ready to give up on the sunshine and fresh air yet.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Bella said with her musical laugh. “We’re not trying to embarrass you. Really. You’re just... lucky... and we don’t have enough of our own business to mind. So I hope you won’t take it personally if we mind yours for a bit.”

Randall shrugged and gave them each another handful of sets hoping that refocusing on the job would change the topic of conversation.

There were a few things he wanted to discuss with his Alpha though as soon as they were done.

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The omegas spent the whole morning planting out the garden and were exhausted but in high spirits at lunch. Abigail was coming off her watch shift and joined them, reflecting that they had never seemed so much like one big family as they did that morning.

Hannibal made them all goat cheese frittatas and was in his element serving them up and asking all of the omegas eagerly about their progress in the garden. He’d been working closely with Bella for the last few months on her garden plan and scavenging lists to ensure that, even in the midst of the zombie apocalypse, he still had access to a steady supply of Jerusalem artichokes and shiso and a million other plants Abigail had never heard of.

After lunch, Bella wanted to test the sprinkler system to water in the new plants. They all crowded out to the garden to watch since this was apparently what passed for entertainment now in the absence of television or internet.

They all clapped and jumped up and down when the water started spraying everywhere. Abigail chased Will under the spray threatening to tickle him until Bella made them stop – afraid that they might trample some of the new beds. Will pretended he hadn’t enjoyed it and that his dignity was mortally wounded. For such a young pup, he could be surprisingly curmudgeonly. Abigail loved prodding him into acting his age though.

Nothing she did was as effective as the dogs though. They had three now – Max and Buster and a long-haired Chihuahua cross named Zoe whom Jack had found on one of his expeditions. Her jaw had been dislocated and had healed back awkwardly giving her a strange overbite that exposed all of her bottom teeth. Will seemed to love her all the same though.

All three came tumbling through the garden gate now wanting to see what all the excitement was about and immediately ran into the newly sown garden patch trying to stick their heads in front of the sprinklers.
“No, no, no, no” Bella chanted as she ran to try to pull them away and put them back out into the alley before they dug up all their work. Abigail and Will ran to help, each grabbing one of the dogs out of the spray and carrying them away. Abigail got Buster who was by far the fastest and most determined not to be caught. She had to chase him up and down and across several rows before she could catch him.

After chucking the mutt out the gate and closing it firmly, she turned and caught Hannibal’s eyes lingering on her soaking wet shirt which was clinging in all the most awkward places. Like, “Hello, nipples!” She blushed and looked away awkwardly but out of the corner of her eye she had the satisfaction of watching him reluctantly looking away. He actually wants me, she thought, her heart starting to race a little. How can I make him look at me like that again?

Slow your roll, she told herself. He’s already mated. Although in the current circumstances what did that actually mean? There was no law against Alphas taking more than one mate. It was just so expensive that it almost never happened. Most Alphas had to save up for like ten years to afford their first omega. Each subsequent mate they bought from an Omega Institute or paid dowry for cost twice as much as the last one to ensure that there were enough to go around. So by the third or fourth omega it became astronomically expensive.

And some Alphas kept beta “mates” on the side without officially bonding with them - either while they were saving up for their “real” omega mate or to help out with the donkey work while their omega mate was indisposed. Most beta parents wouldn’t dream of letting their kids be kept under those terms. “Stick to your own,” was what her mom had told her when she was crushing on an Alpha boy in her class. “You deserve better than a man who is always going to put his omega before you.”

But how many other opportunities were likely to present themselves? And where were her parents to object? And just watching him cross the room gave her stupid butterflies in her stomach. It made her whole day just scenting his aftershave when he leaned around her to put a plate in front of her at the table. Every time he said something directly to her it felt like the whole room was melting around her. And even the stupidest little compliment made her feel like the world’s most random peasant girl being picked out of a crowd of thousands to come up and marry the Crown Prince.

She was about to risk another direct look at him when the sprinklers started sputtering, then shooting out brown water, then died down to nothing.

“Rats!” Bella exclaimed. “Did the hose get twisted somewhere?”

While the omegas checked the hoses, Abigail ran back to the main house to change into dry clothes. When she went to wash her hands though, she found that only brown water came out of the faucet and then it went dry as well.

They spent the next hour confirming that the municipal water supply was no longer working and then gathered in the dining room in a mild state of shock.

“There’s no need to panic,” Jack assured them. Nobody was panicking as far as Abigail could see but it didn’t seem like the time to be arguing. “We have plenty of bottled water for the next few days until we figure this out. And if we need to, we can organise a few runs to get some more.”

“We’re probably lucky that the water supply lasted as long as it did,” Bedelia added.

Bella looked distraught. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to use it all up like that just for the garden.”

“It’s not your fault,” Hannibal reassured her. “The public system was bound to fail eventually now
that there’s nobody left maintaining it.”

“So what do we do?” Jack asked. “Try to find the blockage or the leak? There could be thousands of miles of pipes. And we’re not exactly equipped to explore or repair them.”

“Or we try to find another water source,” Bedelia continued.

“Drinking water for twelve people plus three dogs plus all the other animals plus water to flush the toilets and take showers and wash the dishes... how many gallons a day is that? And that doesn’t even factor in trying to irrigate enough garden to feed everyone. I don’t even want to think how many runs a day that would be. Maybe this is a sign that we need to seriously re-evaluate our strategy here...” Jack paced along the side of the table as he outlined how hopeless their position seemed.

“What about the church?” Abigail suggested.

“While normally prayer doesn’t hurt, in these circumstances...” Bella replied gently.

“No, I mean the name of the church is ‘Sacred Well’. So maybe it was built on top of a well or something.”

They were all looking at her like she was from Mars.

“Don’t you think that’s more likely to be a figurative expression?” Bedelia suggested in her most condescending tone.

“It won’t hurt to check,” Hannibal said, coming to her rescue again. It was everything she could do to stop from flinging herself on him then and there. “Why don’t we see if we can find something?”

Hannibal walked out into the garden and Abigail followed sure that her cheeks were blazing. Don’t look back, she told herself. You’ll just look more suspicious. She did take a quick peek at the gate and was embarrassed again by how relieved she felt that nobody else was following them.

She ran up the alley after Hannibal who held the gate to the churchyard open for her. If he’d had a top hat, she suspected he would have doffed it for her.

They split up to search between all of the gravestones for anything that might be a wellhead. It wasn’t a very large yard and it didn’t take long to confirm there was nothing.

“The font is still bubbling,” Hannibal said with a relieved smile when they met up again inside the church. “That’s a good sign. It seems to be on its own system. Let’s check the catacombs.”

While Abigail had been in the church and yard almost every day on her way to and back from watch shifts, she hadn’t been down in the catacombs since the day they had first cleared the building. They were creepy, humid, covered in cobwebs and dark. They had only gone down there before long enough to conclude that there was no reason they ever needed to go down there again.

She stayed close behind Hannibal who held up their only gas lantern and tried not to think about all the decaying bodies in the caged alcoves on both sides of them. They were all more than a hundred years old, so they were probably just bones in boxes but that didn’t make it any less ghoulish.

They wound down a series of passages until Abigail was completely disorientated. There was really only one main passage spiralling around and around so she didn’t think she was exactly lost but she had no idea what direction they were facing or what part of the church they were under.
“Štai jis,” he said suddenly kneeling a little and directing the lantern at a low alcove on the side of the passage. There was a circular hole in the ground with a thick, round wooden cover. Pulling it aside by the handles and holding the lantern down into the shaft, they could see water five or six feet down.

“It’s spring-fed,” Hannibal told her pointing to the bubbles at the centre before pulling the lantern back up, setting it down and dragging the cover back in place.

He stood back up again, looking supremely satisfied, and then, clasping both sides of her jaw, kissed her full on the mouth.

“Clever girl,” he said pulling away again.

And with her brain completely short-circuiting again, Abigail leaned forward and kissed him like there was nothing else she knew how to do. He pushed her back, still connected, until her back thumped against the stone column and a shower of dust fell on them and she didn’t even care anymore. She was absolutely aching for him like the entire world was going to end when their kiss did.

It didn’t unfortunately. He pulled away saying, “Abigail, Abigail” and she felt such crushing embarrassment she wanted to dash away except she was in the dark and didn’t know how to get out and this was the part where he pointed out how absurd it was for her to think she had a chance with someone like him.

“I’m sorry,” she said looking down and trying to find the lantern so she could flee. He’d stopped kissing her but his body still had her half-pinned against the wall.

“What are you sorry about?” She couldn’t tell if he was mocking her or just feeling sorry for her. Oh god, this was stupidest thing she’d ever done.

“I’m sorry. This is so bad. Can we please, please forget this ever happened?”

“Do you want to bond with me? It’s okay if you do. I’d like to bond with you too. But we’d need to talk about some things first. And I’d need to discuss it with Randall. That’s the only reason I stopped.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I be?”

Abigail could think of about a hundred reasons off the top of her head but suspected that self-deprecation was not the way to get him in her pants and that was the *only* thing she knew for a certainty she wanted since the second he stood up.

He gave her another kiss that was much too short.

“Let’s go tell the others about the well. I’ll talk to Randall this afternoon. If you still want to bond, go to the bedroom in the basement after 10 and I’ll see you down there. I don’t want you to feel any obligation, Abigail, and if you do change your mind we can let everything go back to the way it was before. Or we can wait if you feel like you’re not ready.”

“No, I’m ready,” she responded with absolutely no chill. Seriously could she sound any more desperate?

“Good,” he said with another quick kiss before he picked up the lantern and led them out.
Hannibal was planning to have his discussion with Randall in the study after dinner but was surprised when the omega cornered him first.

“Can I ask something?” he said shyly from the door of the en suite.

“Of course, any time,” Hannibal replied, drying his hands and coming back into the bedroom.

He wasn’t sure where the best place to have the conversation was. With the omega on his knees, he’d be able to monitor his facial expressions better but that seemed a little cold and distant for what was potentially going to be a very difficult discussion. So instead, Hannibal decided to sit back on the bed and let the omega curl into his lap.

“What’s troubling you?” he asked once Randall was settled.

“Bella said she thinks the cub’s an Alpha.”

“Is that worrying you?” Hannibal tried to keep his amusement out of his voice. He’d been trying for months to encourage Randall to open up a bit more about his anxieties and sounding like he was making fun of him would just shut him down again.

“No, but do you think it is?”

“Yes.” Hannibal couldn’t help smiling.

“She said she could tell because we’re always, you know... and then Dr DuMaurier said it makes the cub like... bigger.”

Hannibal had to bite the inside of his cheeks to keep a neutral expression. He kept silent to let the omega get to his question.

“Is that what you think too?”

“It’s a theory I’ve heard. I don’t know if it’s true or not.”

“So is that why you want to all the time? I mean the main reason...”

“No, of course it isn’t.” Feeling the pup tense up with embarrassment and realising that had come out a bit more directly than he’d intended, Hannibal pulled him around so he could see his face better.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I quite enjoy mounting you. I enjoy all the time we spend together but I love the way you feel under me, when I’m inside you. Why wouldn’t I want to do that all the time?”

“I dunno. Nevermind. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. If it’s something you’re worried about, I’m very glad you asked me. And if you’re worried that my only concern is for the cub, that’s the furthest thing from the truth. Bringing you and your brother home has been the best thing I’ve ever done and the cub is just the frosting on the cake. It doesn’t make the cake any less delicious.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” Hannibal replied and then kissed him deeply until the omega was panting.
“Sorry,” he said again when they broke apart looking down.

“You don’t need to be sorry about how you feel,” Hannibal said. “I’m very proud of you for coming to talk to me about it. I know it’s difficult for you. And I hope you know you’ll never be in trouble for being honest with me.”

Randall just blushed in response and buried himself back in the Alpha’s chest.

“Can I ask you a question in return?”

The omega nodded and mumbled, “Okay.”

“You know I’ve given Will a choice, when he grows up, to mate with me if he wants to.”

“Yes, he said.”

“Would you feel upset if I had another bond with someone else? Knowing that it would never change or affect the way that I feel about you.”

“No. I don’t want Will to go live somewhere else.”

“And you know it was totally normal in the past for Alphas to have bonds with several omegas and betas. That that made their pack stronger and let them all take care of each other better.”

“Yes.” There was a little tension but he didn’t seem to be outright rejecting the idea.

“And I think, given the current situation, that an arrangement like that might make more sense for all of us. That our family will be stronger if I formalise those bonds. But I don’t want you to worry that it will take anything away from what we have.”

“Just more frosting?”

“Just more frosting,” Hannibal said leaning over to kiss him again.

“Who do you want to bond with?”

“With Abigail. She doesn’t have any other family left, she knows a lot of valuable survival skills and she gets along well with everyone. I think it would be good for her to have a stronger attachment to our pack. I think she gets lonely sometimes.”

“Okay,” Randall said turning around to face him again. “She’s okay.”

“Good pup,” Hannibal said giving him another kiss. “It makes me very happy to hear you say that.”

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While Randall seemed to have accepted the proposition in the abstract, Hannibal could tell he was a lot more reluctant to come down to the basement and talk to Abigail about it directly.

“We should begin as we mean to go on,” he explained to the omega. “No burying our heads in the sand and no pretending something doesn’t bother us when it does.”

Abigail was sitting bolt upright on the edge of the bed when they walked in. Her eyes followed Randall who went to sit in one of the chairs in the corner as far away from her as he could manage and without looking up.
Hannibal went to sit next to him and signalled Abigail to come join them. It would be less fraught if they were all sitting at the same level in comparatively neutral territory.

“I’ve spoken with Randall, Abigail, about the potential of you joining our family with a more formal bond and he’s agreed that would be a good idea.”

Hannibal paused to let Randall speak for himself.

“Yes,” the omega added after a brief hesitation. “If you want to.”

Abigail was blushing a deep crimson but nodded and replied, “Yes, I really want to. But I don’t want to get in the way of anything.”

“You won’t,” Hannibal responded. “But I think we should talk first about what we need and what we expect. So there’s no hurt feelings or misunderstandings later.”

They both nodded so he continued.

“For example, I expect if you’re bonded to me, you’re bonded only to me Abigail. You can end the relationship any time you want if you come and talk to me about it, but I won’t tolerate any form of romantic or sexual relationship with anyone else while we’re bonded.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I don’t want anyone else.”

“I also expect everyone in the family to treat each other with respect. If you feel jealous or upset about something, you come and talk to me about it. You don’t take things out on each other. And once I settle a dispute, I expect you to abide by my decision.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Randall responded and Abigail nodded after him.

“Is there anything you want to add or discuss?”

He could see both of them trying to think frantically.

“Not...” Randall started but then seemed unsure how to continue. “Can I have...”

“What’s that pup?”

“I don’t want to in the same bedroom. I mean I only want... or I mean I don’t want other people in my... your bedroom. For the sex part.”

“You don’t want me to have sex with anyone else in my bedroom?” Hannibal clarified. He supposed it wasn’t unusual for omegas to get a little territorial but it was potentially slightly inconvenient to have Randall staking a claim on his room. If he’d been planning things better from the beginning, he would have tried to get Randall to nest in a different room but he supposed there was no going back at this stage.

“I’m fine with that,” Abigail added quickly. “I want my own bedroom off limits too. And if I don’t feel like it, I don’t have to.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said starting to become slightly alarmed at the direction this was heading. “Nothing about this implies an obligation to have sex. You can always say no or that you don’t feel like it. Both of you. I won’t be offended and I would never punish you for not being in the mood.”

“So do we have a schedule or something?” Abigail asked.
“I’d rather not,” Hannibal replied. “Unless it’s something you feel like you need.” Randall shook his head no and Abigail shrugged. “If either of you feel like you’re not getting enough of what you need, I’d prefer you just come and talk to me about it.”

“The first time I bond with you, Abigail, I need to come in you for the bond to take hold. But until Randall whelps, I’m only going to come in him – for the cub’s health. After he gives birth, he’s going to need a few months to recover so I can spend more time with you during that period. I don’t think a schedule is necessary, but there are going to be times when it makes sense for me to focus more on one or the other of you. And you can decide, Abigail, if you want to wait to bond until after the cub in born, or we can bond once now and then wait.”

“Now,” Abigail said. “I want to, or I’d rather now. And then I can wait. I don’t mind. Obviously, the cub is the most important thing.”

“Okay, Randall?”

The pup nodded.

“Do you want to stay and help? You don’t have to. It’s up to you.”

The omega turned bright red but then asked, “Would it bother you?”

Abigail had to think for a moment before saying, “I guess not. We can try it. If it gets weird, can I change my mind?”

“Of course,” Hannibal reassured them. “We can stop or make adjustments any time you want.”

“Okay then, what do I do?”

“Take your clothes off and lie down on the bed,” Hannibal let a little command bleed into his voice now that the negotiations were over and was gratified to see the beta hop to it immediately.

“You too, pup,” he said standing and beginning to undress himself. Randall was a little more hesitant but eventually pulled his clothes off and then stood next to the bed as if unsure what to do.

Abigail was lying on her back. She’d taken everything off except the scarf around her neck. Hannibal took a moment to devise his plan of action. As a teenager in his room at boarding school late at night his number one go-to fantasy was having a stable full of omegas. He’d walk down the aisle and choose two or three to service him for the night, then line them up on the bed and mount them until they were begging for mercy. Their bellies would swell and round on the spot and as he led them back to their stalls for the night all the other boys would see them and know how satisfied and well-kept they were.

In reality, he suspected being made to wait their turn before being brutally taken would just feed Abigail and Randall’s insecurities and make them second guess the progress he’d made with them. So Plan B needed to keep everyone engaged.

He guided Randall over until he was lying on his side next to Abigail and then showed him how to lick at and then gently suck her breasts. Meanwhile he kissed her again, taking short breaks while she gasped to nuzzle at the scarf around her neck.

She was clearly still a little self-conscious about the scar but didn’t need to be. Hannibal gently tugged the scarf loose, poked a finger into it and then reached down to rub the silk into her cleft. He put just enough pressure on her hole to hold it in place and then withdrew his hand.
“Does that feel nice?” he asked her worrying her other nipple briefly while she arched and groaned. “Yes.”

“Do you want to help Randall feel nice too?”

She nodded enthusiastically with her eyes closed. Hannibal guided her hand down under the omega’s belly and wrapped it around his pseudocock. “Just pull gently or he’ll get too excited. Can you wait until I say so, pup?” “Yes, Alpha.”

“Good boy.” Hannibal reached around and gave the omega’s hole a firm rub using the slick to coat his cock. He could feel with his other hand that Abigail was producing her own slick but he couldn’t be too careful since it was her first time.

He started to rub at her sensitive little button and slide his finger deeper and deeper into her hole. He would need to stretch her a bit more carefully. She wasn’t designed to take an Alpha cock the way the omega was and he wouldn’t be able to use a mating bite at the end to relieve any discomfort.

Abigail was impatient and kept hitching her hips up trying to get his fingers in deeper. He held her belly down and said, “All in good time, lamb. There’s no rush.”

He pulled his fingers back at the same time and licked her insistently. She tasted a bit like rabbit and her thighs quivered around his ears like bowstrings. She kept trying to bring her legs back together while she moaned and gripped at the sheets.

Hannibal tried three fingers and found that they slid in without resistance and brought a long trail of slick after them when he pulled them out. Spreading her legs further apart and settling more insistently between them he began to slide his cock into her.

She was tighter than an omega but wouldn’t be able to take him as deeply. He couldn’t knot her but should still be able to work up enough stimulation to come.

When he was in about as far as he thought he could go, he leaned forward to kiss her again and ask if she was still okay. She had scrunched her face up like she was concentrating on a difficult math problem and was breathing too shallowly for him to see. “Yes, yes. God. It’s just really big,” she said letting her breath go and then opening her eyes while she kissed him back.

As he started to thrust, he reached over to finger Randall’s hole in time, not wanting him to feel left out. The omega continued to suck at Abigail’s breasts while being stroked from both ends and seemed almost too blissed out to know where he was.

When his knot started to form, he reached Randall’s hand over to provide some pressure on it. The omega knew how much he liked from long practice.

Abigail gave a sudden squeal and started rolling back and forth with her passage clenching tight around him and the next thing he knew Hannibal’s claim was releasing into her. Her hand was also squeezing around Randall and Hannibal drove his fingers deeper against the omega’s sensitive channel until he was coming as well.

Hannibal lowered himself gently to give her another kiss while her release was still pulsing around
him. Randall rolled over onto his back with his eyes closed smiling and Hannibal could see a little footprint circling around under the skin of his belly. If he saw it a thousand times, it would never stop looking alien and bizarre and wonderful to him.

Without a full knot holding it in place, his cock started to soften after a minute or so and he pulled out of her with a happy mumble and another series of kisses across her collar bones and neck.

“Welcome to the family,” he said as her bright blue eyes met his and she smiled up at him.
Reunification

“Dr Lecter!” the familiar voice crawled up his spine. “I knew you’d find me!”

Just when he thought the expedition couldn’t be more of a disaster, of course it got worse. All Hannibal wanted was an ultrasound machine, a fetal heart monitor and some other equipment for the delivery and here he was boxed in to the hospital cafeteria, surrounded by infected, with Franklyn Froideveaux waving frantically at him through the service hatch into the kitchen.

“Franklyn,” he responded while Alana, Katz and Price continued shifting tables to block the doors. “Whatever are you doing here?”

“Well,” Franklyn replied. “After our little ‘misunderstanding’, I started seeing Dr. Vogel upstairs and, I know she’s an omega specialist but I had to schedule an emergency session with her because the pills she was prescribing weren’t anywhere near as effective as what you gave me and I wanted to switch back so I tried taking both but the side effects were making me really sleepy and craving just bonkers stuff like string cheese dipped in peanut butter and then when I got here everyone just started going crazy and then the quarantine started so the cops wouldn’t let me leave and I swear they were all eating each other out there and there was no other way out, so I hid in the kitchen storeroom and hoped they’d all just go away but there must be thousands of them out there now and they can’t get out but I knew if I just managed to hang in there a little longer, someone would come and find me. And here you are!”

“I wouldn’t get too excited,” Katz told him. “We still have to get out of here ourselves.”

Franklyn came around and opened the door from the kitchen into the cafeteria. The pudgy omega started crying and wrapped himself around Hannibal’s chest as soon as he was through the door. “I’m just so happy to see you’re alive! You can’t imagine what these past months have been like for me. All on my own... the wolf at the door.”

“Have you seen anyone else alive, Franklyn?” Alana asked.

“The transplant surgeon, Dr Gideon. He fought his way in and killed the rest of those things in the cafeteria and the kitchen. He was in here for a few days while his injuries healed – one of them almost tore his leg off - and then he took a bunch of food and left to go find his omega and their cubs. He wanted me to go with him but I thought it would be safer here. That was months ago though. He must not have made it out. I’m sure if he did, he would have tried to send help. Oh, I can’t tell you how relieved I am to finally have an Alpha again!”

“I’m not your Alpha, Franklyn, I’m your ex-therapist.”

“So how are we getting out of here?” Price interrupted. Hannibal could have kissed the pushy beta for changing the subject.

“I hate hospitals,” Katz added. “All the corridors look the same.”

“We’re still on level 2 though,” Alana said. “We didn’t go up or down any stairs. We just need to get back to the sky bridge somehow.”

“What level is obstetrics?” Hannibal asked.

“10,” Alana snapped. “And all the elevators are out. And with all these things everywhere there’s no chance we get an ultrasound machine and all the other equipment down eight flights of stairs. Which
is why I said we should have tried the Omega Institute in the first place.”

“Okay, okay,” Katz replied. “Let’s just focus on getting out of here in one piece.”

“Well, the corridor we came down is blocked,” Hannibal offered. Katz wanted to try out her new flamethrower but probably should have tested it in a confined space first. The flames slowed the infected down but didn’t kill them and meanwhile they set everything else around them on fire.

“Jumping out the window probably wouldn’t outright kill us,” Price added. “But I don’t fancy trying to outrun all those zombies down there on the street for three blocks on broken legs.”

“So we keep going down the corridor and hope it loops back around at some point...” Katz concluded.

Having made up their minds, Hannibal, Price and Katz cleared all the zombies reaching in the broken hallway window they had climbed through while Alana helped Franklyn pack up his things and the last of the edible food in the storeroom.

When they were done, they shifted the tables away from the doors and ran out swinging. There were dozens of infected lurching around in the corridor and they could hear more rattling behind every door they passed.

At the end of the passageway it widened out into a waiting room, also full of infected. While Hannibal and Katz beheaded them left and right, Alana and Price shifted the couches to block the corridor so more couldn’t follow. Franklyn stood bewildered in the center of the room screaming and attracting more of them until Price clamped a hand over his mouth.

The next corridor was a little less crowded but they could still see infected clawing at the windows of all the patient rooms as they ran past.

“The hell...” Katz said coming to a halt in front of one of the windows. Stopping next to her Hannibal could see that the zombie staring back at them had a mop of corkscrewing red hair mostly covering her face.

“Is that Freddie Lounds?” Katz asked as the zombie ripped at the curtain and scraped her filthy, cracked nails along the glass to get at them.

“We should leave her,” Hannibal said mindful that Franklyn’s continuous high-pitched whining was going to start bringing more infected down on them any second.

“Just a second,” Katz said before throwing open the door and thrusting her katana straight into the former journalist’s chest. The sword also severed the strap of the messenger bag she had slung over one shoulder.

The zombie lurched forward at Katz but went still before she could reach her. Katz let her fall to the floor and then grabbed the bag.

“She was a pain in the ass but she didn’t deserve this... and who knows what she was working on,” Katz explained as she jumped over the body and then jogged back into the hall. “Maybe there’s something interesting.”

At the end of the corridor, they cut through the staff break room and showers and then some labs. Finally, they found a sign for the sky bridge and raced towards it. A large number of infected had been attracted by the fires further down the corridor so the entrance to the bridge itself was relatively clear.
They ran down the bridge to the midway point where they had climbed in through a broken window pane and then jumped down to the roof of the RV below it. Franklyn didn’t want to go but a firm push from Hannibal did the trick just before the crowds of pursing infected reached them.

Franklyn and Hannibal were still clinging to the roof as Price started to drive them away. He stopped when they were several blocks away and there was no more risk of the infected dropping onto the roof so that they could climb back in.

“Well,” Katz said as they strapped in and headed home, “let’s never try that again.”

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“So the whole trip was a bust?” Jack asked as they filed back into the dining room. “I guess it’s not the end of the world. But I was hoping it would be easier than trying to punch through all the way to the Omega Institute.” Avoiding the highways, it was well over an hour’s drive each way on dangerous roads they hadn’t scouted out before.

“Not a complete bust,” Bev replied holding up the bag. “Our friend Freddie Lounds was there, infected, with a bag full of lab notes she stole from our favorite gastrophysiologist. It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if she was Patient Zero.”

“Well, if the end of the world was going to have an upside, that’s probably not a bad one,” Zeller added.

“Fantastic Doctor, have a read through of them and let us know if you find anything new.” Hannibal smirked that even in the present circumstances, Jack couldn’t help snapping orders at the betas.

“And they rescued me,” Franklyn said coming around from behind Hannibal to offer his hand to Jack. He actually simpered when Jack shook it.

“Who’s this?” Jack asked looking around.

“This is Franklyn Froideveaux, an old acquaintance of mine we found trapped at the hospital.”

“Very old. We go way back. We both love opera... and cheese. I love all these little planters. Is that French or Russian tarragon?”

“Well, if you’re old acquaintances, maybe Franklyn should spend his quarantine period here?” Hannibal could have throttled Jack as the other Alpha turned to address the omega directly. “For health and security reasons, we usually have a three- or four- day quarantine period and then an interview process before new people join our group.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Franklyn replied. “I’m feeling fit as a fiddle now that I’m out of that hellhole. Well except for my plantar fasciitis. But you won’t even know I’m here. I swear.”

“I think it defeats the purpose of a quarantine if he stays in the main house though,” Hannibal countered. “It increases the risk, the more people he’s exposed to.”

“Bedelia’s house it is then,” Jack decided knowing that the other Alpha was on watch and wouldn’t be able to object. “Can you let her know, Price? And if you’ll just come along with me, Franklyn, we’ll get you all set up. You must be hungry.”

“But... yes. don’t you think...” Franklyn continued scrambling for an excuse not to leave. Jack took his upper arm and guided him firmly out of the room, in very small part making up for his earlier needling.
Once dinner was prepared, Hannibal went to find his omegas. They were in the gym with Alana who was starting Lamaze training with Randall.

Standing in the doorway, he was treated to the delicious sight of the backsides of the beta doctor and his mate on all fours next to each other. Randall was leaning his arms against a giant inflatable exercise ball and was supposed to be practicing deep inhales with sharp panting exhales along with Alana but he kept getting confused and coughing instead.

Meanwhile Will was sitting on top of the ball and bouncing happily, dangling a toy on a string for the dogs the chase at his feet.

“I know you can do this, Randall,” Alana encouraged. “Just don’t overthink it.”

“That won’t be the problem,” Will teased. A second later, he squawked as Randall shoved him off the ball and he crashed onto his backside on the floor with a resounding thud. The puppies scrambled and both Randall and Alana looked up alarmed until Will started laughing with his whole body.

Hannibal debated whether or not to intervene but decided to let it go. The pups did sometimes engage in mild teasing and roughhousing as a bonding mechanism and it rarely resulted in injury or even hurt feelings. Will was unharmed – to the contrary seemed happier and more relaxed than usual – and Alana seemed to have things under control.

And Hannibal was also aware that the earlier sight of the omega and beta essentially presenting for him had brought his cock up to attention in a way that made it awkward to charge into the scene and be taken seriously as he started laying down the law.

Alana told Will to go sit on the exercise bench and refrain from further comment unless he wanted to be sent to his room for the remainder of the lesson. Will went with only a show of sulking and then immediately immersed himself in training the dogs to fetch.

Meanwhile Alana guided Randall until he was leaning on the ball again and refocused on his breathing.

The little huffing noises he was making along with the swaying of his belly and the shimmying of his sumptuous ass had almost convinced Hannibal to send Alana and Will about their business when he realised that Franklyn was standing right next to him staring directly at the tent in his trousers.

“You should be resting at Dr DuMaurier’s,” Hannibal observed placidly, refusing to let an insignificant gnat like Franklyn Froideveaux cause him to lose his composure.

“I tried,” the chubby omega whined. “It’s just so quiet over there. Not that I mind after all the excitement. But surely isolation is the worst thing we can do for my PTSD.”

“The quarantine is not really intended as a form of therapy, Franklyn. It’s to protect the health of the people already living here.” For emphasis, Hannibal moved to partially block the door to the gym and to direct Franklyn down the hall with one arm.

“Is that Agent Crawford’s omega? Wow, not just a bun in the oven – that’s the whole loaf!”

Distracted by the conversation, Randall and Will were now standing next to each other watching them. Hostility poured off the older omega and he was all but snarling at the intruder. Hannibal felt a little flash of bemused pride at his usually easygoing omega getting possessive.
“Actually that’s my omega,” Hannibal told him. “But these are not the best circumstances for introductions.”

“Really!” Franklyn exclaimed gulping awkwardly. “Really! That’s great. I can’t believe you didn’t mention it in any of our sessions.” The omega gave a slightly hysterical laugh and then waved at the two brothers under Hannibal’s outstretched arm.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Hannibal told him, letting some Alpha into his voice. He usually refrained around Franklyn to avoid giving him mixed signals but it had been a long day and he wanted the omega out of his sight so he could eat and enjoy some time with his family. “I will take you back to Dr DuMaurier’s house and you will stay there until we are ready to interview you and make decisions about a permanent arrangement.”

Hannibal took Franklyn firmly by the elbow and led him towards the stairs.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Franklyn called back over his shoulder but the omegas, no longer in view, did not reply.
Negotiation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Force of habit drove Alana to park the RV in her old space outside the Omega Institute. Looking up at the grey edifice of the reception building now, it was hard to believe she’d spent most of the last ten years of her life there. The absence of any sign of infected in the front drive or garden made everything seem eerily normal as she walked with Hannibal and Jack up to the front door. Zeller stayed behind to guard the RV.

She was almost tempted to ring the doorbell but then remembered that the noise would only attract any of the infected inside. The thought made her start to regret her insistence on coming. It was only because she knew the layout of the Institute better than any of the rest of them, but Hannibal had been there several times and knew where the medical bay was and what equipment they would need for the delivery.

Alana realised that there were potentially hundreds of former omega patients of hers inside – pups she had treated for stomach-aches and sunburns and sore backsides, half grown cubs who would sometimes fake illnesses to get out of classes they didn’t like, or because they just wanted to chat or get an extra hug. They’d barely even started their lives and had never hurt anyone and definitely didn’t deserve whatever had happened to them on the other side of that door.

“Let’s just get this over with,” she told Hannibal who had come up beside her and had a hand hovering near her shoulder blade as if unsure whether to let it rest or not.

Jack turned the knob and gave a little push on the door but it met resistance almost immediately. It was unlocked but something had been piled up behind it.

“There must be survivors,” Jack whispered now drawing his gun. “Or there were at some point.”

They all stepped back a little from the door to take a closer look at the windows. There was no obvious movement but then suddenly a bewildered voice from one of the second story windows called out, “Dr Bloom?”

“Frederick?” Of course he was still alive. The man was a human cockroach. But Alana was so relieved to see another living being she couldn’t even hold onto her contempt.

There was a short almost hysterical laugh of relief and then the window slid open and director’s face came into view. He’d grown a beard which only partially covered some ugly scarring on his left cheek and neck and he was wearing white surgical scrubs instead of his usual suit and tie but otherwise he looked much the same as he had when he was her employer.

“Who’s that with you?”

“You know Dr Lecter, and this is Agent Crawford from the FBI.”

“Oh yes, of course. Agent Crawford and I met at the opening of the Evil Minds exhibit. You’ll recall we discussed possibly incorporating some findings from a paper I’d been working on... about omegan defense mechanisms in response to threat behaviour.”

“Yes, of course. Dr. Hinton.”
“Chilton.”

“Right, well perhaps we could reminisce about old times somewhere a little more comfortable…”

The beta started slightly at the suggestion, his eyes shifting to the ground and then to look behind him.

“Why don’t you come around to the staff entrance,” he called back finally. “I just need to have a quick discussion with my colleagues.”

“How many of you are in there?” Jack started to call but Frederick had already disappeared pulling the window shut behind him.

“This is a terrible idea,” Jack muttered to himself as they walked around to the side of the building. As they passed the RV again, he signalled Zeller to cover them at a distance with his rifle.

They stopped at the staff entrance and waited for at least ten minutes as a light drizzle dampened their hair and clothes. There were no sounds or movements from inside the building to indicate how many people were inside or what they doing.

Finally the door opened with a decisive clang and Tobias Budge stepped through it flanked on one side by Dr Chilton and on the other by the new guard – Matthew something – with his creepy bowl cut hair. The guard shut the door behind them once they were through so they couldn’t see any further into the Institute and stood beside it with one hand on the door knob and the other on a tranquilizer gun at his side.

“Dr Bloom, Dr Lecter, Agent Crawford,” Tobias greeted each of them with a slight nod but without raising his hand. “It’s very nice to see you.”

The music teacher smelled different – an obvious Alpha musk that had both Jack’s and Hannibal’s hackles all but visibly rising.

“You’re an Alpha now,” Alana observed flatly.

“Oh, I was always an Alpha. I just used scent blockers to get around some of the more discriminatory hiring practices in our industry. People assume that just because you’re an Alpha, you’re incapable of self-control. So few people can see past superficial characteristics or understand how what would seem like disadvantage can actually be a source of immense strength.” As he spoke, Tobias never broke eye contact with Hannibal talking right over Alana’s head. For all of Hannibal’s impassive expression, Alana couldn’t shake the impression that he was seconds away from lunging at the other Alpha.

“Well,” Dr Chilton jumped in nervously. “What can we do for you today?”

“Dr Bloom was hoping to retrieve some of her medical equipment,” Jack explained.

“That would be the Institute’s medical equipment,” Dr Chilton corrected smarmily.

“Well maybe we could trade it for something then,” Alana supplied.

“What exactly do you need?” Tobias asked cocking his head slightly and still looking directly at Hannibal.

“An ultrasound machine, fetal heart monitor and a delivery kit,” Hannibal replied meeting his gaze.
“Well, you obviously didn’t waste any time,” Frederick said with a sharp laugh and an aborted attempt to clap Hannibal on the back. He withered under Tobias’s stare and stepped back behind him.

“There are a number of us living in a secure location in the city together,” Jack explained. “We could consider letting you join us. Obviously at a time like this, there’s greater safety in numbers. I don’t know how many more of you are in there...”

“We’re quite safe here,” Tobias replied tilting his head to regard Jack now. “We have everything we need and no desire to move into the city.”

“Well, we’ve scavenged quite a bit,” Alana added. “Are you sure there isn’t anything you need? Even if we don’t have it, we can try to get it for you.”

Tobias considered for a few moments ignoring Dr Chilton flaring his eyes and tilting his head towards the door in an effort to get his attention.

“All right,” the teacher said finally. “The equipment you want is probably quite rare now and hard to acquire. I imagine that the hospitals are some of the hardest sites to scavenge in.”

After a long pause, Jack nodded.

“So I think a fair exchange would be the medical equipment for one of your omegas.”

“What’s that?” Jack asked raising one hand to his ear. Beside him Hannibal’s eyes had gone dark and shark-like.

“One of your omegas. You don’t need two. And obviously at least one of them is already productive. You can keep that one and we’ll take the other one.”

“Don’t you already have an entire basement full of omegas?” Hannibal asked. His tone was mild but he stepped a little further away from Jack to slightly flank Tobias and leave more clearance around his right arm.

“Sadly, none of them survived.” Dr Chilton replied almost wistfully. “And you’re the first hint of other survivors we’ve had since the FEMA trucks stopped coming.”

“I think you know what our response is going to be,” Hannibal said after a long pause.

“Perhaps,” Tobias replied. “But you should reconsider. There’s nothing else that we need or want and we’re well prepared to defend what we do have I assure you. These aren’t circumstances under which any of us can afford to be greedy... or sentimental.”

Smirking the Alpha teacher turned on his heels Chilton following close behind mouthing his apologies back at them. Matthew opened the door and then disappeared after them into the building.

Back in the RV, Jack let out an irritated growl while Hannibal grew even more silent.

“Are you sure we can’t just take them out?” Zeller offered. “There’s only three of them.”

“There could be more inside,” Jack rubbed his fingers through his hair in frustration. “And we can’t just massacre what are potentially some of the few remaining humans just because they have something we want and won’t give it to us.”

“We’ll just have to try another hospital,” Alana said bleakly resting a hand on Hannibal’s knee. “Or
make do. I know it’s not ideal, but omegas were having cubs long before the advent of modern medicine.”

“It will be safer for both Randall and the cub if we have the right equipment particularly if there are any complications,” Hannibal responded. “It’s not a risk I want to take if there is any opportunity to reduce it. Obviously Tobias is not prepared to be reasonable so we will simply have to come up with another plan.”

With that he moved to the bench seat on the other side of the RV and stared out the window for the rest of the trip home. Alana gave him his space, silently cursing her former colleagues and frustrated that there didn’t seem to be anything she could do to help. Of all the people to survive at the Institute, it had to be the three least deserving ones.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shortish update - lots of stuff that was going to be in this chapter all decided it wanted to be in the next chapter instead. Hope you enjoy anyway.
“It’s just not fair!” Franklyn wailed before copiously blowing his nose into a crinkled-up tissue.

“Franklyn,” Hannibal began patiently holding up the box again. “I don’t want you to take this personally.”

“How can I not take it personally!” Franklyn threw his hands in the air and the tissue went flying to the herb rack already forgotten by everyone but Hannibal. “It’s the end of the world. I’m literally one of the only omegas left on earth and I still can’t find anyone to claim me. The entire human species would rather go extinct...”

“I don’t think catastrophising is going to help,” Bedelia offered, rubbing Franklyn’s shoulder.

“I mean another omega... fine. But you’re choosing that beta girl over me as well! What can you two possibly have in common?”

“What beta girl is that?” Alana jumped in before Hannibal could change the subject.

“The one with the scar on her neck! I saw them making out in his office this morning!”

“And how did you see that Franklyn, when we asked you to respect the quarantine and stay at Bedelia’s house until your interview?” Hannibal ignored the daggers that Alana was now staring at him. He’d have to face her wrath once the interview was over.

“So I got a little bored and curious...”

“That’s a perfect example, Franklyn, of why we can’t invite you to join our group. We need to be able to trust that everyone who lives here will put the best interests of the community first and will do what we ask them to do.” Bedelia spoke softly but firmly to the overwrought omega.

“But you can trust me! I promise! I’ll do anything. Just give me a chance to prove it!”

Hannibal considered Franklyn while Alana responded.

“We’re not throwing you out on the street, Franklyn. We can help you find somewhere safe to stay.”

“On my own!” he exclaimed throwing his hands into the air, shuddering and sobbing again. “I wouldn’t last a day. I wouldn’t want to. I’d rather you just kill me now.”

“Or we could take you to the Omega Institute,” Hannibal suggested. “There are some other survivors there, even an Alpha. I’m sure they would be happy to have you.”

“But I don’t want some random Alpha. What if he winds up being a psychopath? Please just give me one more chance to prove what a great addition I could be. What do you need? I’d do anything to help.”

There was a long pause as Hannibal considered their options.

“There is something you might be able to help us with, Franklyn. But it would be dangerous.”

“It doesn’t matter. Danger is my middle name. Or, you know, whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

“You might want to hear what it is first,” Bedelia advised giving Hannibal a searching look.
“The Alpha at the Omega Institute has some equipment that we need. But he will only trade it to us in exchange for an omega.”

“Okay but then wouldn’t I just end up living there?”

“Not necessarily. The other Alpha doesn’t know where we live. So once we drove away with the equipment, you could escape. We could leave a cache of supplies for you and a radio so you could contact us once you were free and we would come and pick you up again.”

Franklyn had gone wider eyed with each sentence until he looked like he was about to pop a vein.

“And that’s the only way you would reconsider?”

“That’s the only way I can think of that you could prove that you’ll put our community ahead of your own needs. You would be contributing significantly by helping us get some urgently needed equipment, scouting out how many people are still alive at the Omega Institute and showing what a valuable member of the group you would be.”

“And none of the rest of you have any other ideas?”

Jack, Bedelia and Alana shook their heads no.

Franklyn gulped, his eyes shifting along the edge of the dining room table. “And you absolutely promise that you would come and find me again afterwards?”

“I give you my word,” Hannibal told him holding him a steady gaze.

“Okay,” Franklyn moaned. “If it’s the only way, okay, I’ll do it.”

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It took the better part of a week to coach Franklyn on how he should behave, teach him the layout of the Institute, show him the best escape route and deposit a cache of supplies for him without being detected by anyone. Franklyn was supposed to stay at Bedelia’s in the meantime but was constantly getting underfoot at the main house.

Alana had thrown a fit about Abigail – her usual mix of overprotectiveness with just a hint of jealousy - and was barely speaking to either of them. Franklyn took every opportunity to aggravate both Abigail and Randall, who was going berserk with nesting hormones and started snarling just from the sound of Franklyn’s voice in another room.

By the end of it, Hannibal was exhausted and tempted to just carve the pudgy omega up and call it a day. But Randall’s due date was only a few weeks off. There wasn’t time to plan an expedition to another hospital and Hannibal was determined that the delivery of his first cub was going to be flawless and as low stress as possible for everyone involved.

As much as he loved seeing his omega round and blooming, well-fed, hair shining, just a little bit lazy but content, he really couldn’t wait to meet his cub and get started on their life together. Every time he thought about it, all his other worries melted away.

They were meant to leave for the Omega Institute in an hour or so and Franklyn’s nerves meant he was clinging limpet-like to Hannibal’s side. The Alpha had only managed to lose him by pretending he needed to use the bathroom and then texting Abigail and Jack to distract the omega by going over the plans again so he could have some time to compose himself. He was going to need to be at the top of his game to convince Tobias to accept Franklyn when it was obvious he really wanted Will.
Speaking of which, Hannibal flicked on the surveillance app on his phone to check on the younger omega. He was feeling somewhat guilty for not spending enough time with the pup lately but it was hard to find enough hours in the day with everything else going on. Once the cub was whelped and they’d settled into a routine, he would have to try to find some more things they could do together. Will was always talking about how much he missed fishing. Maybe, with enough of them for protection, and as a very special, almost never to be repeated treat, Hannibal might be able to take him out for a few hours on one of the boats in the bay. He missed fish (other than tuna) himself and wanted to make sure to incorporate lots of omega 3s into the cub’s diet.

At the moment, Will was in the lab with Katz sitting on one of the stools swinging his legs on one side of the bench while the beta read Dr Bevier’s papers and scratched her own notes in a separate book.

They both started and went silent when they heard a noise in the corridor.

“Is that Franklyn?” Will whispered looking seconds away from diving into one of the cabinets to hide.

“I don’t think so kiddo,” Katz whispered back.

They both heaved a sigh of relief when Max wandered in and settled under Will’s chair.

“How do you think he survived?” Will asked, reaching down to scratch the dog’s head. “I mean... you know... He’s not exactly Bear Grylls.”

“Still not sure,” Katz told him. “See... over here I’m testing some of the pills he’s been taking to find out what’s in them. I should have the results in a bit. Dr Bevier’s notes suggest he was researching some kind of antidote to a new disease. I don’t think he caused the disease itself. He was testing how human gastric enzymes interact with other substances to synthesize different compounds that could block the prions. He came up with this compound – GJH-63.”

Katz reached over to show some of the papers to Will who looked a little confused but fascinated.

“I tested some of Stammets’ mushrooms and they have the same compound. And maybe Franklyn’s pills as well? But I can’t figure out what substance Dr Bevier was using to create it in the first place. He doesn’t seem to have recorded it in any of the notes we have here... I guess I’ll have to try to talk Jack into taking us back to the lab again to see if we can find anything else.”

“Is GJH like Abigail’s dad?” Will offered squinting at the papers. “Garret Jacob Hobbs?”

“Holy shit!” Katz shouted before realising who she was talking to and clapping a hand over her mouth. “Sorry, kid. You didn’t hear that. But I bet it is. Can’t believe I didn’t catch that myself.” She raised her hand to give the omega a high five but his face was still buried in the notes.

“What kind of meat was he giving them?”

“Deer. But from the state parks. I wonder where he was hunting them. Maybe there’s something in the soil that transfers into the mushrooms and whatever the deer were eating...”

“Do you think Abigail would know?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask her. Why don’t you go see? Meanwhile I’ll try to figure out what’s in these pills...”

“Why don’t you just ask Hannibal? He prescribed them.”
“Because that’s not half as much fun as science,” Katz replied with a wink musing up the omega’s hair and then rolling over to look through her microscope.

Hannibal switched off the app and strode quickly downstairs to intercept the omega. He knew Abigail was on watch so Will wouldn’t be able to ask her anything for several hours but he wanted to get the pup away from the beta before he talked to her just to be safe. She hadn’t quite put two and two together but she wasn’t far off. He needed to get rid of some of the evidence before he was forced to get rid of her. That was likely to cause all kinds of unfortunate consequences.

He ran into Will in the kitchen. It was easy enough to convince the pup to drink some orange juice because he’d been coughing earlier in the day and to spike the juice with a mild hypnotic. When Will began to doze off, Hannibal caught him before he could fall off his stool and carried him up to the guest bedroom. Checking that Randall was also asleep and out of harm’s way, Hannibal headed back for the basement.

The plan was to distract Katz in the lab – perhaps saying that Jack was looking for her - and then try to find some way to destroy Franklyn’s pills and/or the lab notes before the results came back without looking too conspicuous.

At the bottom of the stairs, however, Hannibal felt the familiar chilly draft from the freezers. The doors were wide open. Stepping to the threshold, he could see Katz inside intently gathering samples from several shelves at the back.

“Hannibal,” Alana called from the top of the stairs. “We’re all waiting for you in the RV.”

Katz’s face shot up at the sound and her eyes went wide the second she saw him. She knew. It was a nuisance. He actually liked her and she was generally useful. He had even considered bonding with her but of course it was impossible now. She would be heading straight for Jack with the news that they had caught the Chesapeake Ripper after all.

Hannibal slammed the freezer door shut as she dove for it, just managing to get the latches in place before she reached him. She would have slammed into the door with all her weight at the rate she was going but with all the soundproofing he couldn’t hear anything.

“Coming,” he called up to Alana as he pulled out his phone to adjust the temperature.
Reciprocation

Hannibal clipped Franklyn’s lead in place and stepped down from the RV. He lifted one hand over his eyes to shield them from the bright sun, but the reflection off the asphalt was nearly as bad. There was no movement that he could see in any of the windows of the Institute and no other signs of how many people might be inside. It was enough to keep the perimeter clear of infected and keep the lawns in the front garden mowed in any case.

Franklyn followed him out, gazing around in all directions but still generally managing to maintain his pacing. Alana and Price came behind him and Zeller stayed in the RV to cover them.

They were met at the staff entrance again by Tobias and Matthew. They could see Chilton through the door and he gave a little wave before Matthew closed it behind him.

Hannibal signalled Franklyn to get in the display position and the omega managed to drop to his knees with a reasonable amount of grace. It wasn’t the best position for him – emphasising his gut and making the trembling in his hands and legs more obvious – but at least the protocol would remind him to stay silent.

“That’s not your omega,” Tobias said, visibly peeved but not to the point of heading straight back through the door. It was a start anyway.

“He’s an omega. You agreed to trade the medical equipment for one.”

“The other one,” Tobias insisted with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“The other one is largely untrained and is too young to be claimed for four or five more years. Franklyn here graduated from the Georgetown Omega Institute. His family spared no expense for his education.”

“And how did you acquire him?”

“He’s a patient of mine. We had a session just before the quarantine was announced.” Franklyn gave a tiny start at that and Hannibal ran a hand through the omega’s curls to steady him and remind him to be quiet. It was everything he could do to avoid rolling his eyes at the happy little moan Franklyn let out.

“Oh course he was. We’re not trading for a defective omega. What’s wrong with him?”

“I’m afraid I must insist on doctor patient confidentiality.”

“Then I’m afraid we’re wasting our time here.” Tobias turned to go but Matthew whispered something in his ear just as Franklyn let out a little distress whine. Hannibal caught the sideways glance they both shot at the omega.

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” Hannibal said once Matthew finished and Tobias half turned back to them. “His parents were concerned that self-consciousness about his weight was making it harder for him to find an Alpha. He is twenty-three but still unclaimed. We were still working through some alternative coping behaviours for him but Franklyn has made remarkable progress under my care.”

Looking down, Hannibal was relieved to see the omega beaming up happily at both of them. He seemed almost on the verge of saying something but Hannibal gave his hair another stroke with a
“Can he do anything?” Matthew asked with equal parts curiosity and spite.

“He is a very accomplished cook and also enjoys music. His taste is excellent. I think if you give him a chance you will find that he is more than suitable for your requirements.”

“Say something,” Tobias ordered the omega.

Franklyn bent forward into “adoré” showing off his broad back admirably and said, “Please give me the opportunity to serve, Alpha. I’ll do anything you ask of me.”

As he sat back up into “display”, even Hannibal found it difficult to tell if he was acting or not. Franklyn grinned from ear to ear.

Tobias considered for a moment and then signalled Matthew to open up the door again. Hannibal readied himself to spring just in case – there was no chance he was leaving the equipment behind at this point if he had to gut every survivor in the Institute with his bare hands. He was relieved, however, when Tobias waved for Chilton to start pushing the bulky ultrasound machine through the door and down the wheelchair ramp.

Hannibal signalled for Zeller to come over and help move everything into the RV. He wanted to be well away before Franklyn was required to speak again or do anything else. Alana and Hannibal both checked over everything to ensure it was in good condition.

Once it was all loaded up, Hannibal handed the leash to Tobias, reminded Franklyn to be a good pup and then strode quickly back to the RV. As he sat in the front seat, he could see the omega being led through the door. He was looking forward into the Institute instead of searchingly back at them which Hannibal took as a good sign. The odds could be as high as 50/50 of the omega not even trying his escape route.

Now that the equipment was finally secured and Franklyn was out of his hair for the moment, he could turn his full attention back to the difficult problem of what to do about Beverly Katz.

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Will was lying on the dingy floor of the cabin watching the stubs of the last of the candles burn out one by one. It was freezing everywhere except the embers under the big cast iron pot on the fireplace but Will wasn’t going anywhere near that thing. Just looking in its direction filled him with dread and loathing.

And there was something wrapped around his arms and legs. He couldn’t quite see what it was. Maybe a heavy blanket. It didn’t quite stop him from moving but all of his motions from the neck down felt like he was underwater.

Ahead of him he could see the back of a blue jacket, cut like part of a military uniform with big yellow patches on the shoulders, slung over a chair. With intense concentration he managed to free one hand enough to reach out and touch the bullet holes but pulled his finger back when he noticed the bloodstains around them.

He could hear a pounding sound, like frantic knocking on a heavy door but when he looked up at the windows all he could see was the thick lining of frost around the panes and the darkness beyond them. All of the doors were still.

There was a rustling under the chair and lifting up the back of the jacket, he saw a large grey teddy
bear with a big red bow around its neck crawling towards him. He cried out and tried to pull himself back but his legs would barely move and looking around again it seemed like the bear was even more frightened of him.

It pulled itself to its feet using the seat of the chair and then reached out a boxy paw to Will. There was a “W” shaped smile stitched into its face and its black doll eyes were fixed on nothing, but somehow Will could sense it was terrified and wanted him to help it.

He managed to kick his way free of whatever was binding his legs. Looking down there was nothing but dusty floorboards. Standing up, the bear was nearly chest high to him. It took his hand and then waved for him to follow it.

His legs were all pins and needles and the bear kept walking in circles around the table and following the perimeter of the cabin. He had to keep reaching out to support himself on the side of the table or the wall and almost stumbled several times when he reached out to touch furniture that ended up being closer or further away than he thought it was or when the floor didn’t seem to be exactly where it had been a moment before.

He was about to drop the bear’s paw and refuse to do the next lap, when they broke away from their circuit and headed for the main door. The bear dropped his hand just as they reached it and then pointed up at the handle urgently. It was fine for the bear wanting to go outside. It was covered in fur. All Will had on were some weird felt pyjamas. And he was barefoot – the tops of his feet covered in orange and purple splotches from the bitter cold.

The pounding sound was back and some kind of faint panicked screaming. The bear started and pointed insistently at the door handle again. Will couldn’t tell where the sound was coming from. He just wanted to get away from it.

There were three or four very heavy latches and bolts that Will had to undo. He even had to pull a chair over to reach the highest ones, but after a few moments he was able to step back and yank the door open. It took all his strength to move it about a foot.

A blast of freezing cold air in his face made him shut his eyes and when he reopened them he was looking into the big meat freezer in the basement and then a second later Katz was scooping him up in a big hug, lifting him up so that his arms wrapped around her shoulders and his legs around her waist. She was all but running down the corridor and she was freezing cold but Will was afraid to pull too far away from her in case she dropped him.

Confused and still half asleep, he looked around on the floor for the bear but it was gone.

They were heading for the ramp that led up into the garage. Resting his head on Katz’s chest, he could almost hear her heart pounding.

“What’s happening?” he asked breathlessly, although she was the one doing all of the hard work. “Where are we going?”

“You’re going to visit Auntie Bella for a little while, sweetie. And I need to talk to Jack.”
Sorry for the delay. This was a bit of a beast to write but hopefully came out OK.

Semi-graphic, melodramatic but (I hope) not overly prolonged birth scene.

Hannibal went in ahead with one of the cardboard boxes of supplies while Price and Zeller unloaded the ultrasound machine and Alana carried the heart monitor. As he came through the French doors from the garden into the kitchen he saw Jack standing at the entrance from the hall looking back at the stairs.

As Jack started to whip around, Hannibal caught a glimpse of the gun in his hands. He dropped the box and dove behind the island just as Jack brought the gun up and started firing. One bullet smashed the window in the door and several others sent splinters of floorboard flying.

Hannibal reached up into the drawers over his head and pulled out two chefs’ knives. The firing had stopped but he couldn’t hear Jack advancing.

“What the hell are you doing?” Alana asked from the door.

Hannibal used the distraction to stand up, hurl a knife at Jack and vault over the counter to face him directly. The knife skewered Jack’s hand, forcing him to drop the gun and pause to remove it.

They started to grapple, Jack swinging the knife, while Hannibal dodged around it. Jack caught him slightly off balance, drove a shoulder into his stomach and shoved him back into a glass cabinet.

He knew that Jack was strong and had forty or fifty pounds and a few inches of height on him but he hadn’t expected him to be so fast as well. Hannibal trained religiously to keep his advantage, sometimes hours a day before he’d brought the omegas home. But he rarely faced well-trained opponents and when he did he usually took care to get the drop on them so it was over before it really began. He preferred trapping to overpowering by brute force.

He wasn’t panicking, but the fight suddenly had his full attention. More people were coming to the garden door and to the hall entrance but he couldn’t spare a second to see who was there.

Jack threw him backwards over the island counter. His hand found one of the pan handles and he swung it as hard as he could at the other Alpha’s head getting a satisfying strike to the jaw.

Jack tossed him head first into the corner. People were crying for them to stop – Alana, maybe Bella and one of the omegas. Nobody was moving closer to separate them though. He couldn’t see who was there, what direction they were in or differentiate any of the voices.

Jack was swinging again. Hannibal captured one hand but the other grabbed his throat. He got it free and tried to throw the other Alpha but he was massive and managed to pull Hannibal back instead.

Hannibal trapped the hand with the knife again, punched Jack in the face and then slammed the freezer door into his head as he tried to stand up again.
Behind him or maybe inside his own head he could hear a feral growling sound. He might not be getting out of this alive against an entire pack of them, but he was taking a few of them out with him starting with Jack.

He went back for another knife and saw that Beverly and Randall were wrestling on the floor near the door to the hallway. At the other door, Alana, Price and Zeller were staring at them open-mouthed and in shock.

When he turned, Jack was punching at him again. He let Jack’s momentum push him over the counter, plunged the knife with both hands at his neck but Jack blocked it with a book. There was screaming coming from some of the others but there was no time to locate who or about what.

Jack shoved him off during the second of distraction, got him in a choke hold and threw him over his shoulder, slamming him into the floor which was covered in shattered glass. Hannibal felt the wind knocked out of him and then Jack had a tie around his neck and was lifting him up and strangling him at the same time.

Randall was screaming “stop it” over and over again. The others were shouting their names. There was a powerful washing sound in Hannibal’s ears like waves crashing on the beach which made it hard to distinguish anything else.

He didn’t have much strength left so he decided to go limp and hope Jack would release him. He could feel the other Alpha panting from the exertion through his back.

Hannibal sank to his knees. Jack was literally curled over him breathing down his neck. Alana had come into the room with a pistol raised but her hands were shaking so badly he could barely tell who she was intending to point it at. Behind her he could see Katz lying on the floor. Randall was on all fours next to her, blood all over his face which was twisted up in agony.

Suddenly nothing else mattered except finding out what was wrong with his mate. His hand found a shard of glass and he shoved it behind him into Jack’s neck, not really caring where it went as long as Jack’s grip on him loosened. He started to stand, he heard a shot, then a searing pain in his shoulder. He crawled forward a few feet on one arm and then the room swam and went black.

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It was another dream about maple syrup glazed bacon. He’d been craving it insatiably for weeks. And while his Alpha had found an almost gallon sized jug of real maple syrup at the cruise ship terminal and let him have as much as he wanted on his crepes and waffles and slices of ham, actual bacon was elusive. The closest they had come was scrounged canned bacon and Hannibal had forbidden it on account of the nitrates.

His Alpha had promised that when he went back out to the Omega Institute again he was going to check if any of the surrounding farms still had pigs or if any had escaped into the forest. Even then it might take weeks to cure the bacon. Randall didn’t really know how they did it. But he smiled in his sleep thinking about Hannibal in his suit chasing wild piglets through the brush.

And then someone was shaking his shoulder and telling him to wake up and he tried to summon the energy to roll over and see who it was. That was a major production. The cub was awake too and somersaulting in the opposite direction with a defiant kick nailing him right in the bladder for good measure.

It was Katz trying to drag him out of bed by the upper arm now. And maybe his ten-minute power nap had turned into an all-afternoon power lay-about but there was no need to get pushy. He
couldn’t help it that the bed smelled amazing and that Hannibal’s sheets were like lying on...

“Come on, Randall...” she was whisper-ordering him.

“Oh my god, what?” the omega growled, finally swinging his legs around the side of the bed and letting Katz pull him to his feet.

“Just be quiet and come with me,” she hissed starting to drag him towards the door.

His brain started to register that possibly they were under attack and the beta was probably trying to help him and maybe he should stop being a pain in the ass.

“Where are we going? What’s going on?” He kept his voice low but he was starting to panic a little now. Maybe things had gone wrong at the Omega Institute? Or the zombies had breached the line somewhere? Where was Will?

“We’re going over to Jack’s for a little while. Will’s already there. Bella’s going to watch you guys for a bit.”

He started stumbling after her toward the stairs out of force of habit before stopping. “Where’s Hannibal? We’re not supposed to go out.”

“It’s fine,” Katz told him, pulling him along by the upper arm now. “Hannibal said it’s fine. He’ll see you over there later.”

It didn’t sound right, but Randall was still half asleep and couldn’t think of another argument.

Coming downstairs, he could see Jack standing in the doorway of the kitchen looking back at them and waving for them to hurry. The zombies must have breached the line somewhere. There was no other reason why he would have his gun drawn in the house.

Just as they reached the bottom of the stairs, Jack snapped around and started firing at something in the kitchen. He could hear from Alana’s voice she was in there too. Katz was trying to drag him towards the front door but that didn’t make any sense.

He caught a glimpse through the doorway as Jack stepped aside and saw Hannibal jumping over the kitchen counter. There must have been something in the kitchen that they were both fighting. He tried to run over to get a better look but Katz was trying to drag him in the opposite direction, first by the arm and then by grabbing him around the chest and trying to haul him bodily.

Glass was shattering and now he could see Jack knocking his Alpha back over the counter and Hannibal swinging a pan at Jack’s head. He twisted away out of Katz’s grip and tried to run to the doorway to get a better view.

It didn’t make any sense. It really looked like they were trying to kill each other. And while they were never exactly bestest buddies, Randall was sure that all the past friction had just been Alpha posturing. His Alpha was smarter and stronger but technically the other Alpha was his boss. That was bound to cause some tension.

This wasn’t posturing. It was a rage-driven and purposeful – the obvious intent that only one of them was still going to be breathing at the end of it.

Jack’s back was to him and Randall’s instinct was to try to capture his arms from behind, even for a few seconds so that he could really think about what he was doing and notice that everyone else was there and then stop. But before he could get two steps into the kitchen, Katz tackled him to the floor
with all her strength.

He landed straight on his stomach, too surprised to brace himself. There was an agonizing cramp and then a sensation like being tasered in the spine. And then something behind his eyes switching on or maybe switching off.

He felt like he was floating except he was flipping over and Katz was under him now and there was another massive cramp and then his teeth were at her throat and then in her throat and he could taste metal and her blood was hot on both of his cheeks and all over his mouth. He’d never thought about it being hot before.

He spat something rubbery out but the taste remained but he could hardly feel it because he was just cramping, cramping, cramping now and something that felt like power drills being driven into his hips and down into the tops of his thighs through the middle of the bones.

Someone was screaming and Hannibal was growling he was pretty sure but he couldn’t bear to open his eyes and look even though he was desperate to see if he was still alive.

There was a pinching in his upper arm. Someone was standing next to him giving him a shot in the arm but he still couldn’t open his eyes. It wasn’t Hannibal. It didn’t smell like him. But he was still in the room somewhere.

He was snarling again and twisting around to find their calf and bite it but it was like tossing around on a boat and he lost his balance and curled over on his side on the floor slipping away.

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He woke up in the bathtub in the basement room, another contraction wringing him out before he could even register embarrassment about being naked. Bella was leaning over the side wiping his forehead with a cool cloth and humming a little song.

“What’s happening?” he groaned through the muzzle someone had strapped to his face. It made his breath condense around his cheeks which were already flushed. He tried to pull himself up but the slightest effort to move made him dizzy and sent waves of pain up and down his sides.

“Hang in there, honey,” Bella told him gently shoving his shoulder back. “Your water broke while you were sleeping and we had to get you cleaned up.”

“Where’s everybody? Why are we down here?”

“Dr. Bloom is taking care of the Alphas down in the medical bay so she asked me to sit here with you until the cub is closer to coming.”

“Is it coming now? Is that why it hurts? It’s too early.”

“Shhh... everything is going to be fine.”

She was avoiding the question, which didn’t make him feel any better. But he had bigger things to worry about.

“Where’s Alpha? And Will?” The whole house felt deathly still except for his panting efforts to get his breath back under control.

“Dr. Bloom’s taking care of Hannibal. I’m sure he’ll be fine. They’re all in good hands. And Will’s waiting at our house. He wasn’t sure if you’d want him to see you like this.” Randall thought for a
second he saw tears in Bella’s eyes but just as quickly she was smiling and stroking his hair back again.

“Can I see him? Wait, can I have a blanket first? Can I take the muzzle off? I can’t breathe.” He fumbled helplessly at the straps at the back of his head but couldn’t seem to find where they started.

“Hang on a second there sweetie – one thing at a time.”

Bella helped him up until he was sitting on a towel draped over the toilet and then handed him another towel to dry off. She went to the other room to get him a blanket and as soon as she was gone, he was bent over with another contraction so severe he almost fell to the ground.

She raced back when she saw him struggling and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders.

Bella half-walked, half-carried him over to the bed. He asked to take the muzzle off again and she changed the subject. When he moved to take it off she distracted him again.

He started trying to fumble with the straps again and Bella pulled his arms back down to his sides telling him he needed to leave it on for now and if he kept trying to take it off she would have to restrain his arms as well.

“Why?” he whined, wincing at how babyish the words came out. He was almost too weak to sit up and suspected they were barely getting started. It was ridiculous that Bella thought he needed to be tied down or muzzled.

“Do you really not remember what happened?” she asked, sitting back and giving him a puzzled look.

“Alpha and Agent Crawford got in a fight.”

“Not with them, with Agent Katz.”

And then he did remember. Only not really – just fuzzy impressions through the pounding in his temples and the aches all over his body. He’d knocked her over. She’d made this gurgling sound. Something tasted funny. And then he was flooded with shame as powerful as a contraction.

“Is she OK?”

“I don’t know, honey. Dr Bloom is working on her too.”

“I didn’t mean to do anything. I don’t know what happened.” He tried to sit up but it was impossible. It was like he was being sucked down into the bed by the gigantic ache that was his midsection. So he settled for bursting into tears instead. He wished he’d just died in the van accident all those months back and none of this had ever happened and then everyone else would be alright.

“I know you didn’t sweetheart. But let’s just focus on getting this little one where he wants to be.” She rested a hand on his belly and the cub kicked at it triggering another massive contraction that had him genuinely screaming for the first time. It was a bit of a blessing that he couldn’t think about anything else but on the other hand he began to panic about being ripped apart and none of his family was even there.

Then Abigail came through the door to investigate the sound. He could see her eyes were red-rimmed and had big dark circles under them. She lingered at the door like she was uncertain whether to approach or not. It was stupid. It’s not like she hadn’t seen him naked before.
“Is he OK?” he tried to call to her, annoyed that he had to find the strength to raise his hoarse voice to reach her.

“Dr Bloom says he’s stable for now,” she called back. “He was asking about you too but he’s asleep now. She’s operating on Agent Crawford and then she’s going to do another operation on him to get the bullet out.”

“Did she say anything about him?” Bella asked trying to keep the worry out of her voice but Randall could see the shine of tears again.

Abigail shrugged and looked teary as well and Bella walked over to hug her as if Abigail was the one in need of comforting. Although he supposed she was as well. It was hard to remember that she was bonded to his Alpha too.

Bella brought her over to sit on the side of the bed and they took turns fetching him ice chips and juice boxes and wiping all the sweat that kept streaming down his face. It was unbearably hot with the blanket on and unbearable cold and embarrassing with it off. Also impossible to sit down and stand up and lie down on either his back or his side or to sit on all fours. After five or six hours he was crawling out of his skin and the need to feel his Alpha sitting around him was like a physical ache.

When the contractions were building into a constant blur of pain he lay on his side whimpering and crying over and over for his Alpha who never came. It’s like he suddenly had two brains. His little exhausted brain knew his Alpha would be there if he could and his big raging weepy brain alternated between “He’s not here because he’s dead” and “He’s not here because he doesn’t really care about me. If he really cared, he wouldn’t have been fighting.”

And then finally he was in so much constant pain that he couldn’t think about anything except making it all be over. Abigail went to fetch Dr Bloom but came back empty handed saying she couldn’t leave the surgery she was in the middle of. And apparently Dr Du Maurier was assisting and also couldn’t come.

So Abigail had to sit behind him, hugging him, propping him up and trying to steady his breathing while Bella peered between his legs and kept up a constant stream of nonsensical reassurances.

It wasn’t going to be OK. Nothing was alright. Even if, by some miracle, all three of them survived in one piece, Alpha was never going to get what he wanted – this once in a lifetime moment for all of them together. Randall was the worst omega ever – not even really an omega - and it was all so screwed...

And then he started sobbing hysterically while Abigail tried to remind him how to breathe and Bella told him to bear down sounding a little uncertain about what she was asking for.

He felt like he was going to throw up and asked them to take the muzzle off again and when they refused he snarled at them but managed to pass it off as another contraction. And, as if he didn’t feel guilty enough, he could see that his grip on Abigail’s hands were turning them bright white and she was gritting her teeth.

And it just went on and on and on until he thought his teeth would shatter from grinding and his eyes would burst from being squeezed shut and all his joints would break. He kept losing his voice from screaming and then finding it again when the pain ramped up to the next level.

A thousand miles away Bella was saying something about the head and it took a while to remember that that’s why he was even here and all of this was happening. He did try to pay more attention and
to push when she told him too and then it really did feel like he was being ripped apart and he couldn’t tell if he was cramping around something or nothing.

Bella was laughing, Abigail was leaning forward behind him to see something and then he heard something else screaming for a change – this totally new thing that hadn’t really been there before except that of course it had been with him already for ages.

He unscrewed his eyes to look, sudden relief washing through him, as Bella set the cub on his chest.

“It’s a boy,” she told him as if it wasn’t obvious. The cub didn’t stop screaming even when he wrapped his arms around it though. Wasn’t that supposed to soothe him?

“Hi, cub,” he tried. Alpha said that the cub could hear his voice even in his belly and would be able to recognise it but if he did, it didn’t seem to be working.

Bella took yet another clean towel and started wiping away the streaks of blood and waxy white gunk.

“Yes, sweetheart, it is a big mess,” she cooed at the cub.

“He’s definitely Hannibal’s,” Abigail said and they all laughed.

And he did look a little like his sire. He had his lips and very fine downy blonde hair. And maybe Randall’s bigger nose. He wouldn’t open his eyes though and all of his other features just looked like wizened old man cub features. Chubby purple cheeks. Wrinkles on his little fingers and arms and legs and forehead. Actual little fingernails already totally formed.

Bella took him away for a few minutes to weigh him and cut the cord and finish cleaning him up. Randall was still cramping a little but he could feel the intensity starting to die away and some of his muscles start to unclench a little. He was so exhausted it was like he’d never even suspected the meaning of the word before.

“He’s already nine pounds even a few weeks premature,” Bella told them as she brought the cub back over wrapped in a blanket and set him down in Randall’s arms. “You’re lucky – he might have been an eleven or twelve pounder otherwise.”

Randall leaned forward to try to kiss his forehead and then remembered that the muzzle was in the way.

“Can’t we take it off now?” he begged the other omega. “I promise I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

Bella seemed to be debating with herself for a moment and then finally leaned forward to remove it. As soon as it was gone, Randall was able to scent the cub, his cub, properly. He even smelled a little like his sire already. And as soon as Randall nuzzled his nose into the cub’s pudgy little neck, he stopped crying and opened bright copper coloured eyes onto the world.
Disrelation

Will could hear his footsteps echoing on the marble floors as he walked through the dimly lit gallery. The only light was directed at a painting at the end of the corridor, something with nymphs and apple trees. One of them was strewing flower petals on the ground and for a second Will thought he could smell something like dried flowers.

In front of the painting he could just make out the outline of a kid about his age sitting on a black leather bench and drawing something. Will couldn’t stop looking at his long back stretched under his blazer.

He sat down next to him and the other kid gave Will a sly smile for a second before turning back to his sketch pad. He had long dirty blonde hair that fell over his eyes and made them hard to see.

He was copying the blue, corpse-like figure on the right who was snatching one of the nymphs away. The drawing was flawless but Will was distracted by the veins in the other boy’s hands and the way his knuckles flexed.

Feeling his face flush slightly, he looked back up at the painting to try to distract himself. But he found himself reaching out the way he sometimes couldn’t help. He tried not to. He knew people didn’t like it and neither did he really.

He likes their fat bellies, Will realised. The curls in their hair. The way the gauzy dresses bunch up around their hips like fingers.

One of his legs was jogging up and down without him realising it which was making the bench shake a little. The motion knocked one of the other boy’s pencil strokes slightly out of place. He transferred the pencil to his other hand and turned slightly.

Will’s breath caught, thinking he would be angry but the boy only smiled at him a little sadly and said, “Will.”

His hand was on his knee then, some of the fingers pressing on his inner thigh and Will started awake almost banging his head on the bunk above him.

They were sleeping in the RV now. When they first moved to the Stammets farm, they’d tried sleeping in the cabin but then one night they’d been attacked by twenty zombies at once and after Zeller was almost killed so Jack decided it wasn’t safe enough for him and Bella to sleep there anymore.

It was a pain though. Will didn’t like the feeling of confinement in the little bunk, especially when the curtains were pulled around him. It felt airless - like being in a coffin.

He was soaked in sweat, his throat was raw with thirst and he had a boner.

And there was nothing he could do about it except try to think about something else. He could hear Jack snoring in the bedroom only a few feet away. If he tried touching himself, they would know about it. Jack always seemed to know and would give him that weird uncertain look like he didn’t know whether to punish him or sit him down for another long awkward talk. The only time he could ever get away with it was when Jack was exhausted after a long day working in the garden and Will snuck out to the river to check his lures.

He crept into the kitchen and poured a glass of water. The jug was almost empty but he wasn’t
allowed out of the RV after dark so he couldn’t go back to the pump to refill it. He was tempted to go anyway but he knew everyone was going to be on edge today and it wasn’t the time to push it.

Jack hadn’t been able to walk for almost a year because of the injury to his spine and he still couldn’t run and needed a cane most of the time. But he could still swing the shit out of it if Will gave him enough reason to.

Will heard coughing in the bedroom and then saw Bella sneaking out under the curtain in her nightgown. She didn’t want to wake her Alpha up if it was going to be a long fit. And just like that his boner was gone.

She was making a continuous chain of little huffing coughs almost under her breath to avoid them both hearing but when she saw Will was already awake she relaxed and let out some louder ones. He handed her what was left of the water in the glass and she took it gratefully.

When the coughing stilled she smiled and gave him a hug. “Thank you, sweetie. Did you sleep OK?”

Will just shrugged and looked at the floor. There was no point lying about it. He knew he had giant black bags under his eyes and no matter how much time he spent out in the sun helping Bella with the garden he still looked pale. He hadn’t had a really solid night’s sleep in more than five years. But there was nothing Bella could do about it, so there was no point getting into it.

And then she did her mind-reading thing while she messed up his hair even more. “I’m sorry, love. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

Just stop being sick, he wanted to tell her but of course that was impossible so instead he took the glass back and started washing it.

“You know you don’t have to go today if you don’t want to. Everyone will understand.”


He felt the familiar tumble of fear, remorse and curiosity in his gut. Jack and Bella wouldn’t let him see Hannibal before they left but they would have let him see Randall if he’d asked. He’d sat at their house and tried reaching out to his brother and what he got back was an explosion of anger and agony and actual loathing. Will had never felt anything like it in his life and certainly not from the other omega. So he hadn’t said goodbye because he didn’t want to make it worse. And it was almost a relief when Jack said he couldn’t see Hannibal either. What was he supposed to say to either of them? Sorry I ruined your lives? Let’s just pretend I didn’t almost get you both killed?

But it was his little nephew’s fifth birthday party today. And he’d never even seen him. He was dying to know what he looked like and his personality and how he got on with Randall. He knew his brother had worried all the time about it – that he didn’t really know what to do with a cub and that he would mess everything up.

For the first few years, while Jack recovered, Price and Zeller lived with them but went back and forth trading a lot. Bedelia and Alana had decided to go vegetarian which meant they needed a supply of the mushrooms from the farm to avoid getting the virus and they were happy to trade for canned goods and spare livestock.

Bella went back with them a few times and reported to him on the cub’s progress even when he pretended he wasn’t dying to know. They’d named the cub Hannibal too but called him Hans or Hansel. Bella said he looked more like Hannibal but acted a bit like Will sometimes. Whatever that
meant.

Will fell in easily next to Bella’s side while she prepared some breakfast. It was a special occasion so she used up some of their precious dwindling coffee supply while Will made mushroom omelettes and hash browns.

Jack came into the kitchen sniffing after the coffee and smiling. He kissed Bella full on the lips and then ruffled Will’s hair when he caught him blushing and looking away.

“How are my two favourite omegas this morning?” he asked settling at the dining table. Will almost expected him to shake out a newspaper and start reading it but of course that was stupid. It was strange how even after all this time the old world would still crash in on his thoughts sometimes.

“Much better today,” Bella told him smiling while she set the coffee and tray of food in front him. They both knelt down on either side of the Alpha’s knees.

“Did you get some sleep, Will?” And the concern in his voice was genuine which just made everything else more confusing.

“Yes,” he replied between bites. “Not too bad.”

“You know you don’t have to go today. Just say the word and we’ll cancel.”

“I know. I want to see everyone though.” Will surprised himself with how convinced he sounded.

“OK, then,” Jack decided for them. “A long overdue reunion it is.”

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They’d added a gate with a lot of spikes around it and there was a bit more rubbish blowing around on the outside streets, but otherwise the houses looked just the same as when they’d left. They were able to drive directly into the central alley and up to the back gate of the garden while Price shut the gates behind them.

As Will stepped out of the RV, Bedelia wrapped him in a powerful hug saying how good it was to see him again and how grown up he looked now. She kept one arm around his shoulders as she led him into the garden.

He knew she’d had a cub with Zeller a few years back and that’s why he and Price had decided, after much agonising, to move back to the compound. She looked exactly the same though - still wearing perfume and silk blouses and had her hair immaculately styled. At least some things never changed.

There were two tables set up in the back garden at different heights as well as streamers and flowers garlanding all the trees, the garden walls and the fountain. The kids table had seven chairs set around it and a large pack of little cubs jostling and talking over each other while they opened up the party favours.

It was easy to see which one was Hans. He was the tallest by five or six inches and looked exactly like his sire except he had Randall’s bigger nose. He was dressed in a little suit like it was the most natural thing in the world for a five year old. Standing at the head of the kids table, what he did seem bothered by was the complete anarchy all around him and the threat that it posed to what looked like a very expensive tea set. He was distracting himself, though, by helping his little beta sister open her present.
Will was just about to introduce himself to his nephew when Hannibal came out of the kitchen carrying a giant tray of petits fours. Despite himself, Will felt his breath catch in his throat and he immediately dropped his eyes and felt his cheeks flush. He looked exactly the same as he remembered – like his whole face had been carved in granite.

“Hello Will,” the Alpha said and his voice was as warm as Will had ever heard it. He’s not even remotely angry Will realised risking a millisecond of eye contact that found nothing but affection, amusement and a little surprise. What did he have to be surprised about? He invited us and of course he knew we wouldn’t be able to stay away.

“Hello Dr Lecter”, he replied as soon as he could steady his voice.
“Hannibal,” Bella said with polite brightness sinking onto her knees next to him. Will started for a second and then knelt down as well. He was a little irritated with himself for forgetting but it’s not like they’d had millions of chances at the farm to practice manners.

“It’s so good to see you both again,” Hannibal said lifting Bella back up with a kiss to her hand and ruffling Will’s hair.

Jack came up behind them just at that moment and Hannibal pulled his hand away, his eyes flicking for a second to the cane. Will thought he saw the ghost of a smirk as he was getting back to his feet but then it was gone.

“Dr Lecter,” Jack said brusquely his eyes wandering across the party. Peter had brought out a few cages of animals and the cubs were massing around him to pet the bunnies and newly hatched chicks. Will almost didn’t recognise him he looked so normal and happy.

“I’m so glad you could make it Jack. It’s been far too long.”

There was an awkward pause and then Will couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Where’s Randall?”

“He’s in the garage,” Hannibal replied and Will could see a little shadow cross his face. He’s annoyed with Randall about something, he thought, but not quite enough to just order him to do what he wants.

“Can I go see him?” Will asked Hannibal without thinking.

“Yes, of course,” Hannibal and Jack said at the same time.

“You don’t need to ask,” Hannibal told him placing a friendly hand on his shoulder.

Will gave a little gulp and a half turn and then back before deciding to just walk off. He couldn’t think of anything else to say and he was dying to see his brother again. He could still feel the weight of the hand on his shoulder though halfway across the yard. He didn’t know why everything had to be so weird and embarrassing. When he was a cub he’d slept in Hannibal’s bed all the time in just his underwear and never thought twice about it and now just knowing that Hannibal was looking at him across the garden was enough to make him want to sink into the ground.

Randall didn’t notice the door opening so Will had a few seconds to watch him first. He’d grown maybe another inch but he looked smaller to Will who, of course, had grown more than a foot. His hair had gotten a lot darker, closer to the same shade as Will’s, and he had a five o’clock shadow which stood out against his pale skin. One of the rare unlucky omegas who had to shave.

He was working on a huge truck that Will had never seen before. It was lifted up on monster truck wheels with grilles protecting them and a number of spikes sticking out from the front. It was high enough up that he had to stand on a ladder to work on the engine. He was coming down to switch to a different size socket wrench when he noticed Will at the door. Instead of saying anything though he just continued to the workbench and tossed the wrench down on it.

Still pissed then, Will thought. He walked forward a little more into the light but couldn’t think of anything to say.
“You look like shit,” Randall told him finally, grabbing another wrench and heading back to the engine. “Aren’t they feeding you out there?”

Will huffed out a laugh. He latched on to the tiny kernel of concern at the heart of his brother’s hostility. Pissed, but he hasn’t written me off.

“Yes, they feed me. Probably not what you get here though.”

Randall glared at him before burying his head under the hood again. He hadn’t meant it that way and now he was just making this worse.

“I just meant... I’m okay.” Will traced his finger along the design on the casing of a chainsaw that was leaning against one side of the truck. “Are you?”

“Yeah, great,” Randall said without looking up.

I’m sorry, Will thought over and over but the words choked up at the top of his throat so he said, “What is all this?” instead.

After a few more seconds, Randall came down the ladder again, wiping more grease on his grey henley and stood next to him.

“It’s to make it easier to clear the streets of infected,” he said. “So you don’t have to be so exposed when you do it. You drive down the street, the zombies get caught on the spikes but then this bar moves up and down along the bottom to push them off so you don’t have to keep stopping when the spikes are full. And then I was going to add something like wings with the chainsaws on them that can pivot out from under the chassis and take them down from the sides as well.”

“Holy shit,” Will said genuinely impressed. “Did you actually build all this?”

Randall just shrugged but Will could tell he was pleased. “The tires are still the weak point. I put the grilles on so they’d be harder to puncture but now they’re more likely to catch on things and they make it harder to drive over stuff. And I guess they can still puncture if you drive over something sharp enough.”

“And Hannibal’s actually going to let you drive it?”

Randall shrugged again. “He doesn’t care what I’m working on out here.”

Before Will could ask any more though, he was interrupted by a little sobbing pastel blue clad streak which shot past him and then glommed onto Randall’s leg crying, “Daddy, daddy!”

“Hey, bug. Watch out for your clothes.” Randall was holding his grease covered hands clear but there were still stains all over his shirt and the dirty rags hanging through his belt loops.

“When are you coming to my party?” Hans stepped back a little so Will got a better view of his huge welling puppy dog eyes. It was everything he could do to stop himself from laughing at the little cub’s dramatics.

“In a second,” Randall told him reaching for another rag to wipe his hands. “Why don’t you say hello to your uncle? This is my brother Will.”

“Hello,” the cub told him perfunctorily before returning to the business at hand faster than Will could respond. “Christopher’s ruining everything!”
“Well, he’s only two...” Randall told him rolling his eyes over the cub’s head at Will.

“But he keeps trying to sing the birthday song now and even his mommy told him he had to wait for the big cake. And I told him over and over he has to use the teaspoon if he wants to stir in his glass and now he’s using the wrong spoon on purpose.”

As much as Will wanted to laugh he could see that the cub was also starting to work himself into a genuine state of distress, stomping his foot with his fists balled and tears streaking down his face.

“Okay, get a grip kiddo,” Randall told him putting the last of his tools away. This was not the right response. The cub’s sobs started welling over and snot was pouring down his face.

“Okay, okay,” Randall said grabbing his cleanest rag and wiping the cub’s nose with it. “Go tell Papa and he’ll sort everything out.”

“But aren’t you coming to my party?”

“Yes, I’m coming now.”

“Papa said you have to come now.”

“I know. I just need to take a shower and change first.”

“Why don’t you come with me and tell me all about what you guys have planned?” Will jumped in holding out his hand for the cub.

Hans hesitated for a second, looking to Randall, who gestured for him to go with his uncle. Then he wrapped all of his fingers around two of Will’s and led him back out into the garden.

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“The roads weren’t too bad,” Jack was saying as he cleared his throat. “Better than they used to be.”

“You’ve gotten lucky with the weather,” Bella added.

Hannibal almost but didn’t quite refrain from smirking at their awkward small talk. He was watching Will walk into the garage. Almost full-grown now, the pup was smaller than Hannibal had expected and much too thin. Big bags under his eyes as well. Dressed one step up from a tramp in what were likely the best clothes he owned. Like serving Domaine de le Romanée-Conti chilled in a plastic cup.

When he’d woken up from his surgery and found that the Crawfords had absconded with his omega, his first impulse had been to hunt them down. Alana had to dial the morphine up to the maximum repeatedly and strap him to the surgical bed to keep him from sneaking out. The bullet shattered his collarbone, sending fragments all over his chest and even now he had limited range of motion in his left shoulder.

Even if he had caught up with them, leaving his mate and newborn cub unguarded, and managed to kill four of them one-handed and drag Will back by the hair like his instincts were screaming at him to do, it would have demolished the very tentative pact he’d managed to preserve with Bedelia, Alana and Abigail. They would pretend his Ripper days were all in the past and stay to help care for the cub and he would pretend his Ripper days were all in the past and not rub in their faces how unsatisfying he found killing zombies as a substitute for his pre-plague performance art.

Not to mention Will would never speak to him again. And he had promised the pup a choice. And sometimes it was helpful to see the obverse of something to understand what you were looking at in
the first place. Five years of living in squalor in a shack should certainly put the relative comforts of Hannibal’s home in stark relief.

In any case, they couldn’t get far. If they weren’t going to eat what he had to offer, the only alternative was the mushrooms and they only knew about one source of them. He’d guessed they were at the farm long before Price and Zeller first showed up waving a truce flag and wanting to talk trade.

After he’d healed, he’d gone out several times to ensure it was safe. He didn’t like that they let the omega wander unattended around the farm. If he’d wanted to there were a handful of times when he could have grabbed him himself. But again, Will needed to come to him under the impression that it was his own volition or the rest of it would never work out.

Knowing that didn’t make it any easier to see him in such poor shape now though.

“Are you keeping well?” Hannibal asked, suddenly aware that the Crawfords were desperately scanning the party for something to do other than continue talking with him.

Bella broke into a coughing fit as if on cue. Hannibal offered her his handkerchief and as he knelt to her level he caught a faint whiff of something like rosehips beginning to rot. It was much stronger than his schoolmaster’s stomach cancer. It must be more advanced, he concluded. Probably the lungs.

He waved over Alana who was crouched next to their little son Tomas listening patiently as he recounted his two-year old woes. Something about the miniature goat he was trying to pet snatching his model airplane and running off with it. When she stood up he felt a little spark of pride at her swelling belly. She was only about five months gone but it was her third cub so she was showing earlier.

It hadn’t been easy to talk her around, but he’d been able to leverage the copious guilt she’d felt at almost killing him when he was only trying to defend himself and his pup. And they’d managed to find a mutually satisfying balance where she got her independence, her own house and a progression of cubs to spoil and he got her stay in the pack. She was excellent with all the cubs and her medical training was frequently handy.

“It’s just a cough,” Bella said as she recovered and noticed Alana coming their way. “Probably just allergies. We don’t have so many flowers out on the farm.”

“As long as you’re here, though, why don’t you let Dr Bloom check it out?” Hannibal suggested. “And if it’s just allergies, you’re welcome to whatever we have for them.”

Bella looked to Jack and he gave her a kiss on the forehead to signal his permission.

Once they had disappeared inside, Hannibal continued. “You know you’re welcome to move back here any time you want. If Bella is unwell, perhaps it would be better for her to be closer to medical help.”

“We’re fine,” Jack responded a little too quickly. And then after a longer pause, “Thank you for the offer, but there is Will’s safety to consider.”

“He can’t possibly be safer with the two of you out in the middle of nowhere with no real defences.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, Doctor.”

“You know I would never do anything to harm Will.”
“Tell that to Beverly Katz. And the seventy-five case files sitting on my desk.” Jack dropped his voice as several of the cubs ran screeching past them to get to the ice cream Bedelia was carrying out.

“It was never my intention to harm Dr Katz. I simply locked her somewhere safe until there was time to have a rational discussion about the things she uncovered. And all the rest of it was a different lifetime ago. It might as well have been a different person. Will will always be part of my family. All of you are, really. And being split apart like this isn’t doing any of us any good.”

“So you’re honestly taking no responsibility at all for what happened to Bev? For any of it?”

Hannibal paused for a moment to signal to one of Abigail’s cubs that he was allowed one scoop, not two. The cub made a face but Bedelia was there to deal with it.

“What happened to Bev was a tragic accident. She was my friend and colleague as well as everyone else’s. And I am still mourning her loss after all these years. But she attacked a bred omega who was nesting and in distress. Randall didn’t mean to harm her either but the threat to his cub overwhelmed him. I think if we could take back the events of that day, we all would. But we can’t change the past. We can only face the reality of what we have in front of us and try to do the best we can for the people that depend on us.”

The other Alpha was speechless for a change and in any case here was Hannibal’s oldest cub stalking towards him still in tears because his efforts to govern his littler siblings were going unheeded. He was dragging Will along with him, the omega clearly already under his nephew’s spell. Hannibal took a deep breath and a moment to appreciate the sight of the curly haired pup hand in hand with his little cub.

“And think where we would be if everything had turned out differently. You may not like what I did or even who I was but you and your mate would not be alive otherwise.” Hannibal paused for a moment to let that sink in. Jack was grinding his teeth but not arguing. “In any case, please remember that you are all always welcome here.”

And, satisfied that he had made the point he intended, Hannibal went to put the rest of his family in order.

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