**From the Ashes**

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### Summary

Physically and emotionally devastated after his assault, Will is left trying to sort out his lingering feelings for Hannibal, while Hannibal tries to navigate life with Abigail without him, confronting his own emotional hurdles before their paths inevitably cross again.

### Notes

This directly follows the events of The Depth of Betrayal, and those events are discussed here but in much less graphic detail. You should be able to follow along without reading/rereading the (extremely graphic) original. The gist is that Hannibal meets Will the morning of Mizumono, shit goes sideways, and he ends up raping him in addition to gutting him. The other characters, including Abigail, are left unharmed.

The tags apply through about chapter 5, and more will likely be added after that. In addition to the tags, I want to caution that Will goes through a lot of common traumatic responses here, including self-blaming. There’s also some degree of victim blaming from other characters, and the whole thing is sure to be a big unhealthy mess, as per usual with these two.

Apologies for the short first chapter - it's heavy, so I wanted to break it up a bit. I’ve drafted a few more chapters in advance to hopefully avoid excessively long breaks between updates, since this is going to be a long ride by my standards, somewhere over 30k.
Thanks again to Anonny for the generous donation to charity for FTH. I hope you'll like what I've done here, and so sorry for the delay!
When the investigators asked him to recount what had happened, Will realized he couldn’t quite sort the timeline. The doctors had told him the extent of his injuries, and he had a blur of memories from that day, but his knowledge was disconcertingly inexact for someone who was used to having a particularly good memory. Having to talk about it provoked enough anxiety, but being aware of the holes in his memory made it even worse.

He couldn’t remember, for instance, when Hannibal bit him—whether it was before, during, or after the sexual assault. He used those same words, as if he was in the classroom describing crimes to his students, except he repeated “assault” through his teeth, jaw clenched against the reality of it. Using those words, he could almost pretend he was talking about someone else, except he was always so much clearer on the exact sequence of events when it was someone else, when his angle was only a reconstruction. As it was, he spent half of the conversation gritting his teeth and staring at the places on his hands where his nails dug crescents into his skin.

It didn’t help his anxiety to know he couldn’t be entirely honest with the investigators about what had been going on in his head at the time. He had to continue to act as if he was firmly on Jack’s side, carrying out an elaborate trap for the sake of law, vengeance, and morality—and that was not entirely true by the time he entered the office that day, uncertain that he knew how to proceed and torn in two directions. He knew his moral obligations, but the reassurance of being on the side of good was small comfort when he was alone, sleep-deprived, burdened by nightmares and guilt and the sense that no matter how far he crawled toward goodness and light, he would never change what was rotten at his core. It was painfully tempting to give in, to simply accept Hannibal’s assurances that those terrible parts of himself weren’t so terrible after all. To go with this man who had drawn him out of his shell, seen him, and allowed Will to glimpse his true self in return. Those conflicted emotions were a large part of the tremendous pile of stress he’d accumulated recently—a constant simmer of anxiety from putting his life on the line, acting as a double agent, and consequently losing friends who no longer trusted him.

He still remembered clearly how it had felt to carry that burden into the office that day, but even that was unpleasant. Just skirting along the edge of the memory made his stomach twist with nausea, bile in his throat. The agents who interviewed him were patient, but it didn’t help much when Will was constantly aware of how much of his narrative he could never bring himself to admit.

He was as vague as he could be when he explained how Hannibal had begun his line of questioning about the nature of their relationship. At the time, he had tried to deflect, not yet ready to broach the subject. Now he avoided it because he couldn’t stand to put that interaction under scrutiny. It would mean formulating new lies, pretending Hannibal was deluded in perceiving something more than platonic in their interactions. Pretending Will hadn’t noticed the warmth between them, the way Hannibal looked at him like he was a wonder, as beautiful as any work of art. He had still been trying to understand his own emotions toward Hannibal as they became ever more intense—his anger was still fiery and bright, but so too was fondness. There was a spark of curiosity when he noted the longing in Hannibal’s eyes, an itch to scratch at this new layer of their relationship and see what emerged. The thought of killing Hannibal had taken on a new tone—not just the burning righteousness that had once filled him, but something slinking hungry through his veins, coiling in his stomach, wanting to strike. Justifications as to why he should or shouldn’t kill Hannibal turned into something else: why he shouldn’t at least push him against the wall, crowd him, lick at the vein that pulsed in his throat. Because that was the most slippery slope, and Will didn’t think he could ever pull himself back from that.
And being confronted about it gave him the queasy feeling of speeding too quickly around a sudden bend. He couldn’t sort out any of that until he’d at least figured out his main loyalties. He needed Hannibal to wait until then, until whatever would happen, happened. If they killed Jack together… well, he would have been lost then, irredeemable, and no longer obligated to restrain himself. He might have let Hannibal do anything, then. But not yet. Not by the time Hannibal had decided to question him about it.

But Hannibal was persistent. Angry. And then it was too late to pick a side—Hannibal took that choice from him, leaving him at the mercy of the doctors and investigators to lie in the bed he had made for himself. There was nothing left now but to say what he was obligated to say and pretend he was just doing his job, working on an assignment that had gone terribly awry.

So when he gave his statement, he focused on the anger. None of his own feelings, none of the mess and confusion. Just the fact that Hannibal was angry, and at some point he realized Hannibal knew he’d been lying. About Jack, or about Freddie, it didn’t matter. He’d figured it out before Will had even stepped into the room. And his slow-simmering anxiety flared, blinded him.

He could honestly tell them he thought Hannibal was going to kill him, then. Unspoken, but no less true, was that some part of him had hoped Hannibal was going to kill him. It could be some kind of comfort, a clear and definite resolution when everything was so hopelessly tangled. And Hannibal truly had seemed murderous in the moment, aggressive toward Will in a way he never had been before, the cold distance of his violence transformed into something sharper and even more dangerous.

He remembered Hannibal’s hand on his collar, and his disparate fight or flight instincts warring with the desire to just break the barrier between them and prove to him that there was some feeling there. He thought perhaps, when Hannibal’s eyes drifted down to his lips, that a physical reassurance was what was needed to placate him. Or perhaps it was what Will needed—to demonstrate that even if there had been deception, that attraction was true, and he was willing to act on it. To assure himself of that fact.

So Will had kissed him. He certainly didn’t tell that part to the investigators, but he remembered it, and it was his last cogent memory—frightened, desperate, naively searching for footing. He had kissed Hannibal, and everything came tumbling down, the kind of landslide that in some way seemed inevitable. When he was still foggy from post-surgical painkillers, it had taken him a while to realize how Hannibal had gotten to that point and believed Will was still being false, just trying to appease the beast rather than acting on any desire of his own, and that there was really little Will could have done at that point to fix the situation.

That was when his narrative fell to pieces. A lot of shrugging, a lot of vague words, uncertainties, and “I think.” A lot of answering questions with just “I don’t know.” A lot of fading out when he tried to sort things out in his mind, only to realize that those memories felt an awful lot like drowning, no clue which side was up.

He remembered Hannibal’s anger intensifying, his fear spiking. A struggle. Dull pains, then bright, searing, shameful. Tears down his cheek, and he couldn’t do a fucking thing about it; helplessness like his limbs were leaden. Lying on the floor. He didn’t tell anyone about the clutch at Hannibal’s ankle as he began to depart, the sudden terror at the thought of being left alone then, the fact that in the end, he had begged Hannibal not to go—but those details remained crystal clear, and they sent ice splintering through his veins.

Even after he ended his narrative and was finally left alone, his own words stayed with him, a persistent echo.
It felt like his own tongue had betrayed him. He had been out of his mind at the time, just a goddamned mess of agony, but he’d had enough in him for those words to slip out. And it crushed him, made him feel physically ill to remember. When he first remembered, while he lay in a hospital bed, he tried to disown the words. Clearly they were nothing more than delirium. Clearly there had been nothing left in him that was cognizant of what had just happened, of who this man was who left him there so callously—there was simply an innate fear of dying alone. Clearly he would never have asked him to stay, if he had understood what he had done.

His worst fear was that he had fully understood, and truly meant what he said. That part of him still wanted Hannibal then, and it wasn’t a fear of being alone, it was a fear of Hannibal choosing to leave him; that even after everything Hannibal had put him through, part of him still clung to the idea of Hannibal being a lifeline, a comfort. It was a thought he couldn’t tolerate for long, and he was convinced that whatever feelings he had for Hannibal before the attack, he couldn’t let it continue. He had to leave it as a final goodbye, something that would enable the clean break he had been unable to make himself.

But nothing felt clear anymore. No clean lines, no clean breaks, nothing. It all blurred into aches and stains.

Time passed strangely in a hospital bed. Doctors and nurses passed through regularly, explaining his injuries and the expectations for his recovery, but the rotations weren’t frequent enough to make it feel like the clock was ticking away at anything more than a crawl. A fever struck and made everything even hazier, and all he could do was take the antibiotics and do his best to ignore the colostomy bag that served as an ever-present reminder that he wasn’t even in charge of his own bodily functions anymore. He tried not to let his gaze linger too long at the bandages covering his stomach, not to press at them and feel the ache that the painkillers couldn’t quite deaden. He didn’t ask questions. When nurses came by to check on him, gentle but matter-of-fact, they tried to pull some words out of him, even if it was nothing more than his preferred flavor of jello. But for the most part, he stayed silent, struggling to even speak past the bitter echoes of what he’d said to Hannibal.

To some extent, he was used to injuries. He’d suffered wounds as a cop, both large and small. The stab wound in his shoulder had been a hell of a thing, interfering in his daily life, making him feel weak and useless. Being shot by Jack and imprisoned during his recovery wasn’t the best experience either. But this was worse. No matter what the FBI said on the matter, he wasn’t injured in the line of duty, and it hadn’t been enough for Hannibal to just gut him. And although he thought he’d lost all dignity when he’d “very publicly lost his mind,” as Kade Prurnell so eloquently put it, and was caged and interrogated by Chilton of all people—he was wrong. He’d still had enough dignity left in him to feel its loss now like he had been bled dry, a sensation that grew even more acute when Freddie Lounds snuck in when he was sleeping, took a picture of his bandages and colostomy bag, and posted it on her blog. It was enough to make him wish he really had killed her, but he found he couldn’t even summon the energy to be angry about the intrusion. He was just tired.

During the long stretches of silence as he recovered in his hospital bed, he heard Hannibal’s words echoing in the vast, empty halls of his mind: *I will make a place for myself in you just as you did in me, and you will feel what it felt like when that place became an abscess of pain.*

He’d succeeded. Will had only just begun to consider the concept of physical intimacy between
them when it was so quickly corrupted. He could still feel where Hannibal’s hand had been, where it had split him open. He could still remember the sickly shame of being left broken open and filled with his release, the feeling he could never clean himself of what he had left inside him. In another world, it could have meant something. But this could only fester and spread its filth like an infection, and he was left recuperating like an invalid.

An unprompted visit from a counselor wasn’t any more effective at getting him to talk than the nurses, and he was even less cooperative with this new attempt to dig around in his mind.

Even if he could have gotten past his knee-jerk distaste for therapy, it didn’t feel right to accept it in this situation. He knew what this shrink would say, assuring him that what happened wasn’t his fault, but unless he knew Hannibal as well as Will did, he wouldn’t find it remotely reassuring. And he knew, he knew rape was never the fault of the victim, it was only the fault of the perpetrator—psychological issues that would have found an outlet some way or another eventually, regardless of who or when. But that didn’t mean it felt that way. This wasn’t normal circumstances. He couldn’t help spiraling around the bitter, stinging reality that rape had never been a part of Hannibal’s pathology—it was something that had only and would only happen to Will, something that Will had drawn out of him after months of ill-destined manipulations.

He could replay that day a hundred times. He could agonize over all the decisions he had made that had led up to it. He could picture himself telling Hannibal the truth, the night he had served Will lamb and offered to leave that night—he imagined laying himself down on that table as his own sacrifice and letting Hannibal open his arteries cleanly to bleed him dry, an honorable sort of demise.

Maybe those other paths would have had better endings. But the way things ended, he could never imagine it not being his own fault. He had known precisely what kind of monster he was dealing with. He had acted rashly, arrogantly. He had gotten behind Hannibal’s boundaries and touched something inside of him that shouldn’t have been roused, and it had lashed back horribly. Hannibal was a sadist, a cannibal, a serial murderer, but he had never been a rapist, not until Will. That was on him, surely, and he wasn’t willing to hear otherwise at the moment.

He sent the counselor away. Whatever he had to deal with, he’d deal with alone.

Alana came next, and Will found it nearly as hard to talk to her as with the counselor. It was clear she was angry—at Hannibal, at Jack for enabling the whole thing—and stewing in regrets, if not actively apologetic. She thought she should have seen it, should have believed him, should have put her foot down and refused to let Jack move forward with their crazy plan. It was a spiral of what-ifs and suppositions of guilt, and Will had enough on his hands just managing his own spiral of blame.

Will found he spent most of her visit fixing his gaze on his feet, nodding or shaking his head while his throat felt choked with vague emotion and disgust. She was gentle with him, understanding of his silence, and that itself was upsetting—the way she never demanded a response, never got angry when he didn’t make the effort to respond; the way her tone of voice and her approach had the specific kind of caution that came from professional experience. He’d seen this side of Alana before, when he was institutionalized and she believed him to be the victim of delusions, and he couldn’t help but resent how Alana was always the savior and he was always the victim. Caged or hospitalized; always by Hannibal’s hand, whether or not anyone else knew it. He wondered if Abigail had felt the same way when Alana had approached her after her own trauma, if those careful gentle words had just made her feel sickly inside, knowing that she had officially become a
trauma victim in need of counseling.

She promised to take care of his dogs again, until he was well enough to do so, and he thanked her, as grateful as he had been the first time she had made that offer. A pack of dogs was no small responsibility and he knew she would keep her word.

Still, it was a relief when he was alone again, and free of that pity.

He refused further visitors, but Jack still found his way into his hospital room with something that wasn’t quite an apology. Will wouldn’t make eye contact, and Jack at least had the courtesy of not forcing it like he had in the past. He kept things professional, offering few supportive words and not bothering to disguise his real reason for visiting: he had questions, and he wasn’t satisfied with what the cops taking his statement had managed to pry out of him.

“I know you’ve already gone on record and said you didn’t know what Hannibal’s next move was going to be. I also know there’s bad blood between you and the bureau, and I don’t think you’d necessarily trust them with everything you might have to say. I’ve been the only person who chose to stick with you even when all the evidence was pointing away from Hannibal. So I’m asking you personally, off the record, if you have any idea at all where Hannibal might go next.”

It didn’t surprise Will in the least that Jack would be so relentless. He had to catch the monster that had evaded them both, and he expected Will to be filled with a righteous fury that would make him just as determined to catch him. He wouldn’t have been able to understand any of the reasons Will didn’t want to do that, so Will didn’t give them.

If not for the nagging sense that silence would only make Jack think he was holding back, Will would have considered not speaking at all.

“My answer’s the same. No idea.”

“He never discussed possible next steps with you?”

Will wanted to snap at him to leave and let the whole thing go, but he just grit his teeth.

“Even if he had, he wouldn’t be dumb enough to follow the same steps now. I assumed his plans involved Europe, but he kept everything very vague.” Vague enough that he hadn’t even mentioned Abigail until it was too late.

“I need you to think, Will. Any kind of detail could help us. We have to catch this bastard, and right now we have nothing.”

He was silent for a moment. If he told Jack about Abigail, they could look for any evidence that she was alive like Hannibal claimed, and if she was they could be looking for a man traveling with a young woman, not a man traveling alone. It would help, and it would rescue Will from having that information ricochet through his mind, even when he tried to ignore it. It was too painful to think about her, and Hannibal’s final words about her—wondering if they were true and knowing there was no reason for him to lie at that point. Thinking about it meant thinking about the life they could have had, realizing how blind he had been, knowing that everything he wanted was so close to grasping before he let it all crash to the ground. No matter how much he hoped Abigail was still living, it made him feel like his entire body was an agitated sore, swelling red and hot and blistering each time he considered it.

He was reluctant to give the hope a tangible form in fear of it crashing, but he had to lance that wound.
“He said Abigail was alive.”

“He said Abigail was alive.” He took a moment to process that. “You think he’s been keeping her somewhere like Miriam this whole time? Or were they corroborating? She went missing when we planned to arrest her, the timing works out.”

“I don’t know, Jack,” Will said, though in truth he suspected it was somewhere between the two. Abigail could easily have accepted his protection, and her disappearance made it easy to frame Will. “That’s all he told me, when he… when I last saw him. She was alive and we were supposed to go together. I don’t even know if she still is, he might have killed her when he decided I wasn’t coming with them.”

Jack nodded slowly. “And you were keeping that from the agents who took your statement.”

His teeth ground. “Like you said. Bad blood.”

“Alright.” He leaned back and sighed. He looked tired. “I’ll tell the crew to keep an eye open for anything that could verify that. Forensics is ripping apart his house right now, and if he was keeping her somewhere on his property there might be some physical evidence. Let me know if you remember anything else.”

He left, and Will didn’t feel much better, but he took his pills and retreated into himself. He let the background noise of the hospital fade from his ears.

The vision of a stream that had once been his safe haven was now overflowing with blood, too badly tainted for comfort. But there was still darkness in the depths of his mind, the kind he could sink into until his body faded away along with the world around him. Until he could find some form of peace in the waking world, there could be some comfort in that darkness.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I’m following some beats of early season 3 here because I was curious how the Mizumono divergence could impact canon events, but I don't like to rehash canon when possible, so I promise things will be very different.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was raining when Hannibal left his office, now stained beyond repair with bad memories and bodily fluids. After the upheaval that had just transpired, he found it more difficult to collect himself than it should have been. His emotions had been vented through violence, and they were no longer so vivid that they blinded him—but his mind was decidedly not in its usual pristinely organized state. There were shadows and tremors that hinted at restless beasts traipsing its corridors. There were trip wires, trains of thought that he knew would derail him if he ventured their way. He needed far more clarity than he had now.

This hadn’t been how he wanted things to go, and it hadn’t been pleasant—not when the emotional turmoil took such a toll on him that had been nearly impossible to get hard. Not when he had the revelation, far too late, that it was some form of love that felt like it was shredding his organs, destroying his self-control, ensuring the betrayal left him with this scraped raw feeling. It wasn’t something he was proud of, even now. But it was, he felt, necessary—the only fair retribution for the emotional violation he had suffered.

He found himself quickly drenched in the downpour, an icy cascade that was far from comfortable, but it washed him clean. It helped scrub the pungent smell of fear and viscera from his nostrils, and at the same time he imagined it rinsing away the last of his restless, untamed emotions that had burst forth with such unseemly force. The details of the event flooded into a new room in his memory palace, and he did his best to lock it securely. He could return to it later, when he was ready.

He was aware that he was not entirely successful in locking it away—something sickly still clung to him, and Will’s voice crept out from the crack under the door in his mind, his final words reverberating with unsettling force. He would have to close more doors to isolate this haunting, until he was again alone in his mind, and there was no time to dwell on it now. The ambulance was en route, and once someone took notice of who Will was, and the connection to Hannibal, it would not take long for Jack to bring down the full force of the FBI to sniff him out. And with ample forensic evidence left at this particular crime scene, he should have no further difficulties obtaining a warrant for Hannibal’s arrest. It was crucial for him to move quickly and efficiently.

Abigail wasn’t expecting to leave until later that evening, but their important belongings were already relocated to a temporary safe house, so they could leave on a moment’s notice if need be. When he arrived home, he found Abigail already alert and somewhat anxious, as she had been in the past few days while anticipating the major changes to come. When she saw him, and he announced they would be leaving now, he heard the flatness of his own voice and saw her eyes widen. As intuitive as ever, she knew something had gone wrong, and her eyes scanned him, settling on his blood-stained sleeves.
“What…” She trailed off and swallowed, faltering under his stare.

“Just get your things. I’m going to take a shower, then I’ll meet you in the car.”

She looked nearly as frightened as she had months ago in her family’s kitchen when she finally realized who he was, but she did as he said. In recent months she had been anxious often, and sometimes fearful. But she had not pulled away from him, and nor did she now. She had accepted his place in her life in exchange for protection from the law, and with it all the horror of being picked apart in court for her participation in her father’s crimes.

It was in the car that he faced some decisions that were unavoidable, given the sudden change of plans. It had been vital to get Abigail immediately upon leaving the office, but the possibilities were now much wider. It was nagging at him that he would not have the opportunity to kill Jack as planned, and there was no easy way to get to him now, when he would be at work in the FBI headquarters.

A few days ago, he wouldn’t have particularly cared. If Will had agreed to leave without killing Jack, Hannibal would harbor no regrets at leaving that bit of business unfinished. But he knew that Jack was in large part responsible for Will’s betrayal, and his survival was now more irksome. Jack had taken Will away from him, while Hannibal had saved Bella for Jack, and in doing so had cemented their friendship. Now Jack was still alive and unharmed, and he still had Bella, while Hannibal had lost so much. That felt discordant, drawing a coil of bitterness and unappreciated resentment. He considered, just for a moment, paying Bella a visit. But delaying further held risks, and despite his vengeful instinct, he wasn’t sure hastening Bella’s death would ultimately cause Jack any more pain than her gradual decline would.

He was still agitated. Since he was a young man, he had endeavored to have full awareness and control of his own body, alert to any stress or strain, managing any reflexes or tics that might betray falsehoods or put him at a disadvantage in a fight. Consequently, he was aware now of the drumming of his fingers on the steering wheel and the tension in his chest and jaw that felt so constricting. He knew from Abigail’s utter silence that she was aware of it too, and trying to avoid agitating him further. It made for an uncomfortable drive.

Fortunately, the practicalities of fleeing and managing their false identities were an adequate distraction, and by the time they began their flight over the Atlantic, his tension had eased enough that he was able to enjoy his complimentary glass of champagne.

There was an empty seat that was meant to be Will’s, and Hannibal tried his best to pay it no mind, though he knew Abigail was just as aware of it. For her part, she seemed equally determined to avoid the elephant in the room, though she was less dedicated to silence. Instead, her initial dread had lifted to a certain fizzing uncertainty and anticipation, her fingers flexing restlessly and picking at her cuticles.

“I’ve never been to Europe,” she said. Her voice was quiet, falsely upbeat, as if trying to help take his mind off whatever unpleasantness had just occurred. “My family only ever took trips around the states. Mostly just to one hiking spot, not even out of Minnesota. Not very adventurous.”

“I think you’ll like it there. I’m your family now, Abigail, don’t forget. And we’ll have many adventures ahead of us.”

She nodded. Opened her mouth then closed it, pursing her lips, thinking twice. He wondered what exactly she was withholding—doubts, fears, questions? He hadn’t explained what happened to Will, except to state that he wouldn’t be joining them. She knew better than to pry when he offered nothing more. Her instincts were good, sharpened by being raised by a predator who looked too
longingly at her flesh as a possible meal; she knew when danger was floating close to the surface, and when it was better to retreat rather than risk stirring it.

She tried, instead, to distract him with more idle chatter that was carefully polite and complimentary—the plane seats in first class were so much more comfortable than the economy seats she was used to, she was excited to have an opportunity to use the French he’d been teaching her. She was not usually quite so cooperative, and as he had many times since engineering her faked death, he admired her cleverness. He would have missed her, if he had killed her as he had initially planned, but he had known that even when he made that plan.

It made no difference now. It was better to look to the future and whatever it may hold, although for now it was full of unknowns. The possibilities seemed to sprawl before him like hopelessly tangled threads, none of them offering a clear path to follow to a satisfying conclusion. Too much still depended on Will and whether he decided to follow Hannibal. He would remain a maddeningly unpredictable variable, and even the most basic of information regarding his initial recovery would take time to reach Hannibal, particularly if the FBI wanted to shield the matter from the press.

With his extensive surgical knowledge, it was easy enough for Hannibal to imagine his physical convalescence, though he didn’t linger on it—despite the awareness in the back of his mind that if enough things went wrong during surgery or recovery, Will might not survive as planned. It was, however, much harder for him to imagine how Will would recover emotionally. Hannibal could imagine him emerging from his bandaged cocoon radiant with anger and desire for vengeance, and he could imagine him collapsing, veering off course into self-destruction.

Regardless of the vindictiveness that had struck him and the ire that still clung to the memories like soot, he found the thought of Will imploding now to be deeply distasteful. Too much of his beauty lay in his fiery nature and that spark of unpredictability, as untamed as raw flame devouring brittle woods—even though it had led to the very betrayal that had parted them. It was better to have him free to approach once more, to rise from the ashes and become what he may, regardless of what pain it may bring. Because if Hannibal had learned anything this past year, it was that neither Will’s absence nor his presence could be guaranteed to come without some degree of pain, some needling discomfort or dull ache—whether from loneliness or the frustrations of mutual distrust. He could not imagine a scenario that would free him from that pain entirely, when even this attempt to cut ties ended with such a bitter taste in his mouth. He would try to find the best possible path, but part of him feared that ultimately it would be impossible for them to exist without causing each other pain, whether physical or emotional.

All he could do now was steel himself for the inevitability of that ache, and learn how to live with it.

Abigail remained relatively quiet for their first day in Paris. They took a quick trip around the city, purchasing some extra clothing and conveniences, things that would have been impractical to bring when they tried to pack lightly. The overnight plane trip had given Hannibal enough time to bundle up his more unwieldy emotions for later perusal. He wanted to be able to enjoy Paris and deal with more immediate concerns without interference, though he was aware that the barrier he had drawn was imperfect. Though Abigail was surely still wary, she seemed calmed by his steadier demeanor as the evening progressed. To some extent, she had come to terms with Hannibal’s proclivity for violence, just as she had adapted to that of her father.

The next day still held the tension of questions left unasked and unanswered. The Louvre offered a
pleasant reprieve for much of the day, though he could tell Abigail was growing unfocused near the end, not so easily appeased by aesthetics as Hannibal was. She didn’t ask to leave, even though he could tell she was considering it, and he appreciated that. Afterwards, he treated her to some colorful macarons from a boutique patisserie, and they took a detour for some groceries before returning to their apartment.

He busied himself with putting away the fresh produce and ensuring the kitchen was in order, and Abigail lingered nearby. She wasn’t one to go too long without asking questions, and Hannibal wasn’t surprised when those questions now bubbled to the surface, and she suddenly asked, “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

He paused where he was, pursing his lips for the span of a breath. “Is it important that you know the details?”

“I dunno. Depends what you did. I just know I can handle things better when I have some idea of what’s going on. And I still only know a little about you, and it’s only what you let me see.” He could discern frustration in her voice, but she was clearly making an effort to keep her voice level and polite. She took a deep breath. “We have a deal, right? We’re both getting things we want out of this. You’re protecting me from the law, and I… I really appreciate that. Not having to go through everything in a court. Easier talking to you about what happened with my dad than trying to explain it all to a judge.”

“Understandably. You’d likely be convicted as an accessory.”

“I know. But… you can’t protect me from that if you get caught. Doing something impulsive, or… I don’t know, going on random killing sprees or something.”

He raised his eyebrows slightly. “Is that what you think happened? An impulsive killing spree?”

She shrugged. “Maybe not a spree, but… did you kill him? Will, I mean.”

“No.”

She waited for another response, but there was none forthcoming. She chewed her lip, then said, “You said we had to wait for him. That you wanted me and him to be together again, and we’d all be a family. So I know something had to happen to change your mind. You don’t have to tell me what it was, I just… thought I should ask.”

It had been naïve to think they could so easily leave together and be a family, and it hurt to hear those words repeated back to him now. He had believed it when he told her, as honest as he could be. He hadn’t expected that it would be Will who would give them false hope. And he hadn’t realized the memory of that hope had gouged him so deeply until it began to throb now.

He didn’t answer for a moment, occupying his hands with unpacking the rest of the groceries while he considered how much of the truth he was willing to tell. He decided to keep things simple, for now. “It became clear I couldn’t trust him.”

“You already didn’t trust him,” Abigail said, eyebrows raised. “Or else you would have told him about me. You said you wanted to be clear where his loyalties were, make sure he had other reasons to stay with you. That’s why you were saving the big reveal.”

“And it turned out those other reasons were insufficient. He lied to me.”

She was quiet for a moment. “So you think you misjudged him? You seemed so sure you knew who he was.”
“Even for a psychiatrist, the psyche remains infinitely unknowable, with too many variables for an outsider to fully understand. And Will’s mind has always remained remarkably difficult to define. So yes, it would seem I misjudged him.”

“Well, I can’t speak for him. But you didn’t misjudge me, at least,” she said quietly. Her smile didn’t quite manage to seem genuine, but he appreciated the effort.

“Does that mean you’re no longer clinging to the concept of victimhood that has been defining who you are?”

“I’m not sure how much it matters who I was before you. It’s like you said—adapt now, mutate later. Evolve or die.” She said it crisply, with as much humor as one could be expected to muster when alluding to one’s own death. “I don’t know what happened between you and Will, but I’m guessing I need to do better than him in this world if I’m going to make it through.”

He nodded slightly in acknowledgment. “If it’s true I haven’t misjudged you, perhaps you’ll be willing to indulge me for our next step. It’s time for us to acquire new aliases.”

“What’s wrong with the ones we have?”

In truth, not enough that acquiring more specific aliases was an absolute necessity. But initially he had set them up so that Abigail was Will’s daughter, taking advantage of the natural resemblance in their dark hair and blue eyes, and making a gesture of goodwill toward him—and that was no longer convenient, nor did he appreciate the reminder of his original plan.

“They’re out of date. Will’s alias is no use to us now, so we should find an option that allows us to set ourselves up as a family independently. I’m investigating some potential targets. I’d like to acquire a comfortable position, perhaps at the Studio Ol in Florence. That requires background—education, references.”

“So you’re going to kill someone for their identities? That sounds… risky.”

“Perhaps in some ways.”

This was frankly an understatement. Scouting out his targets shortly before killing them made it easier to link him to their deaths, which is why he usually did his research months in advance. And the modern world presented many possible concerns that would make it harder to pass themselves off as strangers—social media profiles and the like. But he had made up his mind on how he wanted to proceed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of all the details. You’ll hunt with me now, as you did with your father.”

Abigail swallowed and dropped eye contact, but nodded, and forced a smile. “Just tell me what to do.”

It took a few weeks for him to narrow down their targets, properly research them, and put together a plan. In that time, despite expecting to hear nothing more about Will for quite a while, the first bit of news reached his ears. Evidently he had not accounted for Freddie Lounds’ persistence and lack of journalistic ethics. In addition to her “back from the dead” post explaining how she collaborated with law enforcement to fake her death, she had a “scoop” on the story of Will Graham. She gave no official sources and god only knew where she had gotten her information, but she was not entirely incorrect, no matter the sensationalistic tilt of her brand of so-called
journalism. And she had pictures.

She had somehow gotten into Will’s hospital room, peeled back the covers, and taken a photo of his bandaged abdominal wound and colostomy bag, with Will’s genitals simply covered by a large black censor box. This was hardly unexpected given Lounds’ past behavior, nor was it likely the most unethical behavior she had ever indulged in, but regardless, when he saw the images Hannibal felt fury snap in his chest, hot and sharp.

She had no right. No right to witness up close what Hannibal had done to Will, the mark he had left. It was only meant for their own eyes, leaving aside any necessary medical personnel. She had no right to uncover him and broadcast the image to the world for the sake of a more titillating story.

But as suddenly as the fury rose, it fled, leaving only a cold vacuous sensation that he observed distantly, uncertain—as if the emotion had been unsure which direction to point, where to point the blame, and had simply imploded. He couldn't entirely avoid awareness of the part he had played, and he couldn't tolerate that strength of emotion without dredging up everything else he was trying to mentally isolate. He stared at the impersonally labelled image until closing the browser window entirely. He did not return.

Abigail didn’t read the news by habit, but Hannibal hadn’t explicitly forbidden it. He did, however, consider doing so now. He realized he found something discomfiting about the thought of her finding the news about Will, particularly from Freddie Lounds, and he had to meditate on that shade of discomfort to understand why. He did not regret his actions as such, but he couldn’t deny the matter was unpleasant. When he had realized what he had to do, he had some degree of self-disgust, a reflexive revulsion at committing such a banal act as rape, something that was usually carried out by people for whom he had no respect. He could acknowledge the unsavory character of it, as well as the potential for misinterpretation and distortion. For all the emotions that had sped out of his control at the time, for all the venom and misery that had leaked from his broken heart, he had acted in a way that felt almost pragmatic—if not pragmatic, then at least personally justifiable. But he couldn’t deny it had been vindictive. And regardless of his own perception, the world at large—and Will himself, and Abigail—would see it as a particularly crude and invasive act.

For the moment, he had no desire to deal with Abigail’s judgement. But as she had no means to easily access American news unless he gave her the passcode to his new tablet, he stopped short of mentioning it, and resolved to put it out of mind for the moment. Establishing their new lives was the priority, and Will was going to remain where he was.

He told Abigail about their new targets: a professor and his daughter, who at 17 was slightly younger than Abigail. When he mentioned that detail, she gave him a look—not as much accusatory as curious.

"Same age Marissa was," she remarked.

"Old enough to have accumulated her fair share of rude acts. Or at least an absence of sufficient virtues to warrant her survival."

"Is that how you justified killing her? Or were you just curious, and didn’t care about who she was beyond that?" There was a slight bite to her words, but they weren’t angry. Not anymore.

"I saw no reason not to. She was more valuable in death than she would have been in life."

"Well, you didn’t know her growing up. I did." She sighed and looked away before he could
answer—she had to know she wouldn’t get anything from arguing this. “What do you expect me to do, exactly? With my dad it was… hands off. Except for deer.”

“The butchering process can be similar, though the hide of humans is considerably less dense. But for now, you’ll merely assist in capturing our prey—not much different from your previous role.” Quietly, he kept open the possibility of changing his mind about how involved he’d ask her to be. She had proven herself capable of killing before when she was cornered, and he had confidence she could pull through again if properly motivated. Ideally he would save that test of cooperation for later, after further therapy sessions together and the luxury of time, but circumstances had changed. He would want to test her soon.

She nodded, unaware. “I guess I can do that.”

He could tell she had more questions, but she didn’t ask them yet, just as she had dropped the subject of Will once it became clear he was not open to discussing it further. She was cautious, still —by now she was familiar enough with him to know there was still something off about his behavior. He was aware of this himself, of course—he could see clearly the points where his behavior was diverging from the paths he might once have taken, such as more risk taking, but it did nothing to sway him. His past self had no bearing on the present; there was only what was left of him now, and he would proceed as his present self felt was right.

When he stalked his prey earlier on the night of the kill, he was alone. He felt less of the patience he had once practiced, less satisfaction in biding his time for the perfect moment to strike. He had a fierce desire for the thrill of the hunt itself, and every step among ordinary people heightened it, making his skin crawl with anticipation. He had told Abigail to meet him near the residence of the Fells, but found himself wishing he had the freedom of a solitary hunt.

The kill itself would require careful execution so there was no trace of blood or a struggle to attract police attention, so despite his earlier contemplation, he decided against pushing Abigail to carry it out herself, and merely asked her to provide backup. Armed with a hunting knife, she would stay behind the victim as they were lured toward the sitting room with the sound of music, and if they then decided to turn and run upon seeing Hannibal, she could provide, at the very least, a barrier to cause hesitation and make it easier for Hannibal to apprehend them.

It went smoothly. Abigail witnessed the deaths of both the father and the daughter, and to her credit, she did not panic, though she looked slightly shaken by the efficacy of his violence—how quickly and easily he was able to seize them and break their necks, a simple snap before they crumpled to the ground.

He chose to cook in the Fells’ house rather than go through the hassle of trying to transport the meat as well as the parts to be discarded. They couldn’t harvest everything, since it would be an inordinate amount of meat for the two of them, particularly when they intended to leave for Florence soon.

Abigail tried to excuse herself when the time came to butcher the remains, but Hannibal insisted she stay. His voice was firm—it would do no good for her to flinch away now. There was more at stake here than a casual excursion.

“You should be used to the sights and smells of death now, Abigail. You spent so much time hunting with your father, then gutting Nicholas Boyle all by yourself. You already know the exact resistance of human flesh to a sharp blade, and how it feels when that skin parts and their blood soaks your hands.”
“It was different, then,” she said, voice barely daring to go above a whisper. “I didn’t even realize I’d stabbed him, at first. It was instinct. And the deer were just deer, they weren’t human.”

“And yet you said your father instilled a great respect in you for the deer, and explained how they were not dissimilar to humans. Not such a tremendous difference, according to him.”

She nodded, but did not speak—her eyes focused on the body that was now laid on a tarp, and on the glint of the knife in his hands.

“I’ve been more courteous than your father by informing you what I’ve brought to our table, and it’s been quite a while since that information has made you falter before taking a bite. You have little reason to hesitate now, and I expect you to act accordingly.” Impatient and not in the mood to find her failing this test, he said flatly, “This is part of our terms. You can take them or leave them, but if you intend to stay with me you must abide by my rules. Do you understand?”

She nodded again, and stayed in place, muscles rigid, as he knelt over the body. He could smell her fear, more bitter than the acrid tinge of adrenaline from earlier, and the unpleasant sourness of nausea as he began extracting organs. He looked up after removing the girl’s liver and saw the color drained from Abigail’s face. His point had been made, so he chose to dismiss her, requesting she locate certain items in the kitchen. He was unsurprised when she took longer than was likely necessary, but at that point he didn’t mind. She had remained long enough to assure him she would be cooperative when necessary.

By the time dinner was prepared, the worst of her nausea seemed to have passed, but she was quiet, not quite meeting his eyes. She complimented the flavor of the seasoning and agreed the girl’s flesh was tender, but offered little else for conversation, apparently lost in thought.

Eventually she asked, “Is there any limit to who you’d eat? You don’t hesitate to kill teenagers like this one, or Marissa, but most people have some kind of limit. What about kids, actual kids—have you eaten them? Do you see a difference?”

“I don’t seek out anyone younger. Some level of rudeness in children is to be expected, and it’s the fault of their parents if they haven’t yet learned proper manners.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Would you somehow feel more comforted if you believed I have more sympathy for children? Some degree of sentimentality that you could exploit in this new life of yours, playing the role of my daughter?”

“You say that like there’s anything on this topic that could comfort me. And…” She raised her eyebrows, but dropped her gaze down as she prodded at the meat on her plate. “You still didn’t answer, so I’m guessing that’s a yes.”

He contemplated the merits of honesty, but at this juncture, falsehoods held little appeal. “Only once.”

“Special occasion?” she asked dryly, although her voice seemed strained.

“Of sorts. It was a farewell.” His throat felt more taut than usual, and he took a deep breath before exhaling, willing away the subject’s uncomfortable grip on him. He was reluctant to speak of this, but while the memories had been taboo for a long time, he no longer allowed them to be so thoroughly locked away, hermetically sealed in an assigned room of his memory palace with no movement in or out. He preferred to maintain such an action as a temporary measure, as with more
recent memories of Will—permanently quarantining memories allowed them to hold too much power over him if anything ever brought them to the surface.

She didn’t ask the question immediately, and he waited her out, refocusing his attentions on the texture of the meat and the savory flavor imparted by its sear.

“Who was it?”

His jaw clenched despite himself, but he ensured his voice was steady when he replied. “My younger sister, Mischa.”

She searched his expression rapidly, eyes wide, as if desperate for an emotional tell of some kind. Perhaps, despite her own unconventional family, she had not expected this kind of revelation from him, something that could worsen her impression of his degree of monstrousness.

He was unable to resist volunteering the next piece of information as a strand of curiosity unraveled itself. “After the loss of our parents I took on a paternal role, acting as a father to her when neither of us had anyone else. I cared about her deeply. You remind me of her in many ways, even discounting physical resemblance.”

Her anxiety emerged in the shakiness of her fingers, until she set her fork down with an unsteady clink. “Why did you kill her?”

“I didn’t.”

Her eyebrows drew tightly together. “Then…”

He met her gaze directly, sharply enough to be clear that further questions were not welcome. Abigail broke off with a shiver, and stared at her plate.

“Guess I shouldn’t find it surprising, either way. Took me a while to be able to understand why my dad was… the way he was. How he could be that and still say he loved me. But he didn’t see it as a contradiction. I guess you wouldn’t, either. Loving someone, and killing or eating them. You’d…” She hesitated. “You’d eat me. No matter what you say about caring about me, you’d eat me just like you ate your own sister.”

“Under the right circumstances, yes.” He tilted his head, assessing her. “You’ve asked me about the possibility of your death before. Are you returning to the subject now because of the prospect of yet another life, perhaps wondering about how fragile it may be? Abigail Hobbs died months ago, and so has your life as it existed hidden away in Maryland. You’re to take over the life of the girl we now consume.”

“I have to hope I have a better go of it than she did.” The corner of her mouth tugged, but her shoulders slouched. It took a while for her to ask the question that seemed to be at the tip of her tongue. “Would you at least tell me before you did?”

He thought on that for a moment, not wishing to either lie outright nor alarm her unnecessarily. “I haven’t always been able to anticipate the circumstances that lead to certain meals. I can’t promise either of us would be prepared in advance for your death.”

She bit her lip and nodded, silent for the moment. Her anxiety was clearly not dispelled, but she said, “Guess that’s what my life has been for a long time. Crossing my fingers and hoping for the best, but never really knowing. Makes everything feel so temporary.”

Spending so long with her father had certainly acclimated her to a sense of uncertainty regarding
her survival. The similarity to their current arrangement was convenient for Hannibal, but that didn’t mean it was ideal. He thought of his previous, more optimistic attitude regarding the possibility of them being a family, and sighed. “It’s an unfortunate reality of the situation. Better to just focus on finding your footing in the present, and let the future come as it may.”

“Easy for you to say. You have all the control over your own life. I don’t.”

“You may be limited by the circumstances, but you might have more control than you believe you have. I had hoped that my interventions could ultimately help you achieve more certainty and confidence in yourself and your direction in life. Hence the exercise with your father, taking back control and shedding your outdated perceptions of helplessness. I didn’t wish to see you permanently adrift.”

Her brow furrowed. “You don’t want to, but you can’t promise I won’t be.”

“No. Circumstances changed. I’ll help you with your studies—you’ve been making wonderful progress in French and Italian, and both are vital to our life here. But I’m less inclined than I was previously to carefully guide your development.”

“Because you’re not sure anymore if you want me alive or not.” At his silence, she sighed and poked at her food. “Like I said. I’m used to it. My old dad could never decide, either.”

“I’ve enjoyed our time together. I would prefer not to kill you.”


He couldn’t help a small smile at her astute observation. “Then we should celebrate that life, while we both still have it.” He raised his glass. “May it change for the better, and not for the worse.”

It wasn’t without a certain grimness. For the moment, life seemed a more uncertain prospect than death. He could do his best to prepare the rooms in his memory palace that needed to be preserved, things that could comfort him even when life was out of his hands, but for the moment there was little else he could do. Simply preparation, and a sizable amount of patience.

When Abigail met his eyes, he could tell she was similarly resolved.

Chapter End Notes

This is my first time writing Abigail, and honestly I struggled a bit, so I'm hoping I got the characterization right in the end! This chapter had a major rewrite and I owe many thanks to my beta for shoving me in the right direction.

Hannibal is so adept at bottling up his emotions that it's hard to convey quite how unsettled he is by the whole experience. I know he's not going to get much sympathy at the moment (nor does he frankly deserve it), but this is one of those situations that makes me acutely aware of how far from normal his mental processes are. One of the primary reasons for things going so badly awry in the prequel was that Hannibal is used to operating with a concept of appropriate retributions (as the Ripper) but was unused to making emotional retributions because it was rare for anything to genuinely hurt him - in canon, he exchanged an emotional gutting for a literal one and repaid the grief Will had dealt him by killing Abigail and making him suffer grief in turn; in
Betrayal, Will's kiss shifted the perceived betrayal into something more intimate, and Hannibal felt like he was responding in kind.

I suspect, perhaps because his emotional processes are far from typical, he has some difficulty personally distinguishing equivalency between emotional/conceptual and physical consequences - e.g., he sees physical violence as a fair response to rudeness, or his attitude about killing Jack in canon: he'd come to see Jack as a friend, so he owed him the truth (which he would satisfy not by verbally confessing, but by revealing himself when he kills him). He knows other people perceive things differently, so that's clearly no excuse for his behavior, but it affects how he personally justifies his actions. I won't go full meta here, but it seemed relevant to note.

It's one of the things that makes his character incredibly interesting but also deeply frustrating. You want to slap him for not immediately admitting he went too far and regretting what he's done, but his moral compass is infinitely fucked to start with so it's not quite that simple for him. Still, there are definitely cracks starting to form here - he doesn't get to just walk away with no emotional consequences.
Chapter 3

Once Will got home, it was a while before he was well enough to take care of his dogs again. Reluctantly, he even opted against visiting them briefly, knowing how they would swarm him and worrying it might only get them wound up and disrupt whatever routine they’d settled into when he left them again so soon. The sight of their empty beds gave him a revolting sensation of hollowness in his chest; even though it was only temporary, his dogs were the only thing in his life that Hannibal hadn’t destroyed, and they couldn’t be with him now when he most needed the comfort. The house still smelled like them, comforting and warm, but the reality was cold and lonely. Will had no television to fill the room with idle noise, and the internet was an endless labyrinth that he couldn’t quite stomach—too much temptation to click through to news stories about the newly coined Hannibal the Cannibal, or fall into old habits and begin reading about someone else’s crimes. Inhabiting other mindsets presented enough problems even when his own mind was more orderly, and at the moment it was doubtless a terrible idea. He read, and spent some time with his lures, and resented the fact that he couldn’t go on a long, meandering walk without worrying about painful repercussions. He more time in bed than he was strictly prescribed. He listened to his hollow thumping heart and remembered things in flashes and small but vicious details.

The bite on his shoulder left a dip in his flesh, ugly and sore and puckered with stitches. He hadn’t been aware at the time that Hannibal had taken an actual chunk out of him, chewed and swallowed—he only knew the surging blinding pain and the wetness of blood oozing over his skin. But the doctor had explained the wound pattern, and it made a twisted kind of sense. It was different from the kind of bite marks he used to point to on a projector—nothing so benign as a suck bruise to mark it as a sexual behavior, nor did he suspect it fit neatly into the alternate category as a fighting pattern. He couldn’t help but vaguely wonder which was the bigger motivation, in this case, whether it was Hannibal’s anger or his desire that had fueled him. Not that it really made a difference, in the end; Hannibal would always evade the ease of traditional psychological profiles, and there was little appoint trying to apply such standards now. Categorizing his behavior wouldn’t make the wound any more tolerable.

Even when the bandage was off, Will didn’t want to touch or look at the thing as it aged into a broad crescent of leathery scar tissue. Seeing it made him feel like he was slipping, like he was being dragged back into the murk of memory when the bite was made. And it wasn’t the only thing to have that effect—it was like his whole body was suddenly a minefield. He found himself bathing robotically, inefficiently. He pretended that scalding water alone could wash away the memories of where and how viciously Hannibal had touched him. If not those, than at least whatever still clung to him that wouldn’t allow him to disconnect, once and for all, the part of himself that had once cared and wanted, the part that clashed perhaps morehorribly than anything with those memories Whatever wouldn’t let himself see Hannibal purely as a villain, wouldn’t allow himself the pure hate that would make all of this easier, wouldn’t spare him from the guilt of knowing he still couldn’t fully distance himself like he should.

When he was in the hospital he could focus on the indignity and pain, distracting him with the constant throb of his injuries. He could disconnect and merge into the white noise of the hospital, the flickering of his heart monitor. It was easier to resent Hannibal there and ignore any unresolved emotions. Now he had too much time, too few distractions, and too many memories. Randall Tier crashing through his window. Mason Verger mutilated on his chair, carving slices from his own
face. Hannibal’s expectant question—murder or mercy? With the past seeming so much closer, it was harder to ignore the reality of his shifting emotions and thumping heart. It was also impossible to ignore the fact even when he had been flooded with adrenaline and fears of crashing to the ground, he had a sense of power in those memories that was now entirely absent. Not so far in the back of his mind, he wished he could feel again like he felt when he killed Tier and Hobbs—the headiness of power, the roar of a predator escaping the cage of his ribs, the bliss after delivering the final blow. Not so far in the back of his mind, he hated himself for it.

Will dreamed of Hannibal repeatedly, whether reliving memories or piecing together fragments into an alternate world. He dreamed of black leather shoes on old stone streets, the same shoes that Hannibal had walked away in when he left Will in a puddle of blood. He dreamed of shadows that moved and whispered and bled. He dreamed of Abigail’s sliced-open neck gushing blood under his hands while her father lay dying just feet away; he imagined another version of that day when she might bleed out, going cold to the touch.

So often the dreams were slight variations on a theme, branches of Hannibal’s influence. But he didn’t dream about that final night as often as he would have expected—perhaps his waking mind had that covered well enough. Instead, he might dream he was simply standing by Hannibal’s side as usual, but feeling like insects were crawling all over his skin, a fluttering anxiety that would grow to eclipse all else and bury him in an icy avalanche of dread. It bled out over the warm beating of his heart as Hannibal washed and bandaged his hands; the tenderness, the desire, all overcome by that fear that was now so horribly magnified, that shrieking instinctive sense that something terrible was about to happen.

He thought the sane thing to do was to wish he’d stop dreaming about Hannibal altogether, to cross his fingers that each new night would bring something other than the man who haunted him so, that he could banish him altogether from the corridors of his mind. And he did, some nights—when he woke cold and alone and soaked in his own sweat, too exhausted to want anything more than a good night’s sleep. But sometimes he’d wake up just as cold and alone, and instead wished he could experience those memories the way he used to. He wished he could linger in the warmth of Hannibal’s adoration and not feel chilled, that he could remember those hands as tender instead of as instruments of pain. Hannibal had filled an emptiness in his life and made him feel understood and accepted for the first time in his adult life. He was dangerous, always dangerous. But that hadn’t stopped Will from caring, before. The light of fire can be comfort even when one knows how quickly it can destroy and devour; even when one has already felt the way it can scorch one’s skin.

Now he wondered if he could ever overcome what had happened enough to find that comfort again—but he wasn’t sure if that possibility made him feel better or worse.

Once he was healed enough to be able to wrangle his dogs without pain, Alana brought them back. He received them with a grateful smile and sank into the pile of them. He felt a prickle of anxiety as some of them bumped against his back while they swarmed and nosed around him, but he focused on the smell of them, their joy, their beating tails, the softness of their fur. It was a relief to have them here, a true comfort at last.

“This is what I always thought Hannibal would bring back,” he said.

“He brought back many things,” Alana corrected him.

He nodded, and tried to think of something to say that was neither bitter nor self-deprecating. The only thing he could land on was: “You look different.”
Because she did. Maybe it wouldn’t be visible everyone, but even without meeting her eyes, Will 
sensed the change in her. It was enough to see her guarded posture and hear the strain in her voice. 
Her guilt and concern had evolved. There was more of the anger now, perhaps, something like the 
betrayal Will had felt when he realized who Hannibal was and how thoroughly he had blinded him. 
She had been blinded too, very thoroughly—it was only natural for her to change in the wake of 
such revelations.

She nodded, and looked away. She knew he wasn’t referring to anything as superficial as a haircut. 
“I’ve had a lot to think about. Assumptions that needed to be reevaluated.”

“You had more history with him than I did. That’s a lot to reassess.”

“Years more. And for all that time, I thought he was a friend. Or more. I trusted him.”

“Must be embarrassing for a psychiatrist to overlook something as drastic as serial murder,” Will 
said before he could stop himself, then winced. He didn’t mean to be so insulting; he recognized 
the emotions of betrayal and shame, he was intimately familiar with them, but he still couldn’t 
summon the strength to care for her side of things. Alana, after all, had shared the bed of the 
monster, and his betrayal of her had looked no different than his seduction, all soft edges and 
obfuscation. That violation had been one of trust. He had not marked her, clawed her, left her 
physically ruined and verging on death. And Will could understand that he had borne the worst of 
it because he had ultimately meant more to Hannibal than Alana had, who was simply used as a 
pleasant smoke screen—but there was little comfort in knowing that he had been dealt more pain 
simply because he had caused more pain himself.

He tried to shake the thought that he was, perhaps, envious. Whether it was because Alana had 
missed being on the receiving end of Hannibal’s cruelty, or because she had been privy to a side of 
him that Will hadn’t, he didn’t know, and he didn’t want to linger on it. He just knew that it made 
him a bit nauseated to see her now.

Alana tilted her head at him, face not betraying offense. He could imagine the wheels clicking in 
his head, noting irritability as a symptom of trauma. She didn’t comment on it, though, and he was 
grateful.

“It’s certainly made me reconsider how I view the people around me.”

“Does that include me?”

“Yes.”

“Reconsidering how much I deserve the pity party from last time?”

She didn’t answer immediately, and he frowned and scratched Winston behind the ears, fingers 
easily finding his favorite spot and causing some enthusiastic tail wagging.

“Forensics finished its investigation into Hannibal’s property,” she finally said, voice flat. “They 
found traces of Abigail’s DNA in his house.”

That made him look up sharply.

“What kind of traces?”

“Hair. Fingerprints. No traces of blood.”

She was alive. Hannibal hadn’t been lying.
Will’s mouth was dry, hope and fear rising simultaneously. He knew he couldn’t take it for granted that Abigail would still be alive now. If Hannibal had rejected him with such force, his plans for Abigail could have soured, and Will’s intuition told him that situation was barely tenable. Hannibal had saved Abigail for Will, at least partially. He had imagined their life together. They would have been a family of sorts. Will had ruined that, and now Abigail’s future was at risk.

He realized he had been silent for several seconds too long. He swallowed. “I hadn’t heard anything about that.”

“That’s because you’ve been refusing Jack’s calls. He’s been wondering about you. He even came over in person one day, said you never answered the door.”

“I’m done with Jack and the FBI.”

“Can’t say I blame you. But it doesn’t look very good for you, Will. Your whole operation with Jack, with too many things off the books, casualties—it’s muddled, there’s a cloud of suspicion. Jack might have gotten away with it alright, but he’s still been under scrutiny, and it never looked like he was guilty of anything but bad judgement, questionable shortcuts, and risk taking. People are wondering how much you already knew about Hannibal, and what you might have told him. Hannibal had a way of inspiring loyalty.”

He snorted. “What, do they think I conspired with Hannibal to rip out my guts, too? Or did you miss that part?”

“I saw what he did. I also saw the way he talked about you, Will. And he had never…” She broke off suddenly, as if thinking twice.

Will gritted his teeth. “He broke pattern with me. Is that what you wanted to say?”

“The Chesapeake Ripper was a sadist, and his kills were vicious, quite possibly vindictive. But he always relied on the precise application of pain. There were never any sexual overtones.”

“Guess I’m just lucky like that,” Will said bitterly. “What do you expect me to say, Alana?”

“I’m just saying it’s making some people question the nature of your relationship. Not that you were at all responsible for what happened to you, but… Will, we can’t help if we don’t know.”

“You just want to get out your goddamn psych manual and figure out whether you should be treating me like a victim of intimate partner violence. Or maybe you’re just too nosy to help yourself.” He knew his temper was flaring, but it didn’t stop him from snapping, “Fine. Our relationship was never physical, and he’d never touched me like that before. You were the only one who was fucking him. Congratulations.”

He stood up and whistled for his dogs to follow him.

“Goodbye, Alana,” he said, and didn’t look back.

When he got inside and the door closed behind him, his eyes itched and his gut clenched, suddenly feeling on the verge of tears. He stared at the ceiling and thought about anything other than the conversation he had just had. He didn’t know what exactly had provoked this response, and he didn’t want to know—the amorphous emotional weight was bad enough.

Alana didn’t come calling again.
The presence of his dogs helped him feel less alone in his daily life, but he still dreamed of Hannibal. It sometimes felt like he had made no progress, stuck in those same loops, drawn back again and again in search of the warmth he used to feel in their relationship, now elusive and hidden behind anxieties. He thought that was the reason his brain kept taking him back to the memory of burning pages in Hannibal’s office, or perhaps because that was the last memory he had of things feeling normal and comfortable between them—at least as much as things could feel “normal” in such a boundlessly unconventional relationship.

But one night, perhaps because his dream-self had dissociated enough to view the scene as if from a distance, so that he was no longer so overcome with the unsettlement and chills, he understood what his brain was really trying to point out to him. As they stood by the fire, Hannibal mentioned the foyer of his memory palace—the Norman chapel in Palermo. “Severe, beautiful, and timeless, with a single reminder of mortality: a skull graven in the floor.”

And he realized Hannibal was right when he said Will would know where to find him. He hadn’t wanted to scour his memories for clues, because conducting that mental scavenger hunt would feel too much like admitting he cared about the answer. But this memory came to him naturally. It made sense that he would have to start at the very beginning to find him, the very entrance to the vaulted halls of his memory palace, striding through its front doors.

He didn’t know what to do with that information when he woke up. He couldn’t bring himself to make a plan, even now, and acknowledge he wanted to find Hannibal. But he also wasn’t about to give law enforcement even a hint of what he’d figured out. If anything, it strengthened his resolve. The thought of random cops sniffing around his majestic palace halls in search of him, just so they could chain him forever, made Will feel sick. No. If he ever went in search of him, he would have to do it himself, and make sure it was hard for Jack to follow his footsteps.

He decided, for now, to find something to better occupy his time, while determinedly ignoring the question of the future. He liked the process of fixing things, and boats and motors were an old friend—they had been since he was a curious child, tagging along on jobs and asking incessant questions about each step, until he was old enough to hone his skills under the patient, watchful eye of his father. His childhood hadn’t been easy, in many ways, but boats were a constant.

Fishing was, too. But he struggled with it now—the luring and gutting, parallels and metaphors that stank worse than the viscera. It was another thing that gave him too much thinking time for his mind to go places he’d prefer it not go. So instead of fishing, he got a new project to work on. He picked it out of a lineup of rusted old things on craigslist being sold for parts and pennies: a sailboat with the potential for seaworthiness, bigger than his usual projects that were meant for lakes or rivers. He could sink himself into the work: nuts and bolts and welding, sparks leaping into the air like shooting stars.

It wasn’t until the project was about halfway done that he was able to admit to himself that there was more to it than just giving himself something to do with his hands. A return to the sea wasn’t unappealing; much of the time, being out at sea was when he felt the safest. And with the likes of Freddie Lounds swarming around eager for scraps of a tragedy, there was something to be said for the sanctuary of true isolation. But it was more than that—he knew a casual cruise around the coast wouldn’t be sufficient, nor was it what he really wanted. He would set his sights further, and Palermo stood most clearly in his mind.

Much though he would have liked to treat Hannibal as a closed case, he couldn’t. He wouldn’t join Jack in trying to hunt him down with law enforcement, but he also couldn’t pretend he intended to live out the rest of his days with his dogs and his boats, never seeking Hannibal himself. If nothing else, the matter of Abigail haunted him. He had to know her fate. The thought
that Hannibal had been planning for them to be a family together, and Will had compromised that
through his recklessness—and that by doing so, might have compromised Abigail’s life—it made
all sorts of terrible things smolder inside him. He couldn’t bear to contemplate that his very attempt
to avenge Abigail might have ultimately led to her demise. He had to hope. He had to know. And if
he could, he had to find some way to fix it and ensure her safety. He just didn’t know how, yet—or
for that matter, how to avoid making things even worse. In that respect, it might be better to take
his time, and avoid the spirals of anxiety that would make him rush too quickly to reach her.

Instead, he let his mind go to logistics. How far, what route, what preparations would he need to
make. Before he had made any concrete plans whatsoever, he began stockpiling supplies, filling his
cabinets with non-perishables that could be eaten with minimal prep. He spent a lot of time staring
at maps. By the time the boat was finished, he wasn’t ready; he was pretty sure he would never be
ready. But he had unfinished business, and sooner or later he would need to take to the sea.

While he was still stuck on the precipice of leaving, struggling to make the final leap, Bella died.
Will went to the funeral and didn’t make eye contact with Jack, but he did remain until the swarm
of mourners had passed. He hadn’t known Bella well, but she had been kind, and though he had
been avoiding Jack like the plague, he didn’t bear him ill will. They had joined forces, and he’d
had Jack’s support and encouragement when he desperately needed an ally. It was an ill-fated
mission, but he owed him something more than his complete absence.

“Thank you for coming,” Jack said. His voice was flat, worn out. He held a card in his hand,
slightly crumpled. “I didn’t expect you. Thought you’d decided to cut ties altogether.”

“Bella deserved more than a no-show for her funeral.” He couldn’t deny that otherwise, cutting ties
was exactly what he’d done. “I don’t blame you for what happened. I just… didn’t have anything to
offer the investigation.”

The words rang false. Maybe he did blame Jack, to some extent, but it had been his own decision to
go after Hannibal in the first place.

“You don’t have to make your excuses, Will. You had the right to do whatever you felt you needed
to do. And if that was avoiding me, so be it. We were supposed to in it together, but you were the
one who took a bullet, so I can’t blame you for resenting me. But you know him better than
anyone, and you’re not going to convince me for a minute that you have nothing to offer the
investigation.”

“What I can offer is the promise that your crusade against Hannibal won’t end pretty.” He didn’t
say it with spite, but soft, earnest, befitting the funeral occasion. “You got lucky this time. Hannibal
went off-script, and he didn’t have time to get to you before fleeing. If you do find him, you won’t
be that lucky again.”

“I’ve just lost my wife. I’m not all that concerned about taking some damage for the greater good.”

“You’ve lost your wife. That doesn’t mean you have to lose yourself, too.”

Jack sighed, his fingers twitching around the letter in his hand. “Since Hannibal took off, I’ve been
inundated with work. Fighting my way back to getting some degree of respect again at the Bureau.
People didn’t have a lot of sympathy for a man who lost agents and never got in the thick of battle
himself. I have to make things right again.”

“There’s a reason pride is considered a deadly sin, Jack.”
“If that’s true, then Hannibal should be dead in the water. Prouder than a peacock, always has been. Even now, he can’t resist flaunting himself.” Jack raised the letter slightly, and lowered it. He set it on the pew by his side. “You know where to find me, Will. I’ll be following every lead and hoping to god we can find Abigail Hobbs while she’s still alive.”

Will raised his eyebrows. “You’re assuming she’s a victim now. Earlier you were speculating they were in on it together.”

“I can’t assume anything—I’ve learned that the hard way. I’ve also learned that Hannibal is a danger to anyone, collaborator or not. And she may not be innocent, but she doesn’t deserve to die by his hand. And if you’re not with me, it’s my job to stop it.”

He stood and walked out, leaving Will alone in the church.

He couldn’t resist checking the piece of paper that Jack left on the pew—it was intentional, he knew. Couldn’t bring himself to give it directly to Will, maybe, but wanted him to see it and read it.

It bore the excruciatingly elaborate penmanship of Hannibal himself.

“O wrangling schools, that search what fire
Shall burn this world, had none the wit
Unto this knowledge to aspire,
That this her fever might be it?”

*I’m so sorry about Bella, Jack.*

*Hannibal Lecter*

It looked not so different from the invitation to dinner that Hannibal had penned while Will watched. Unerringly polite. Hannibal had liked Bella, and had spoken about her with what seemed like genuine fondness. He had admired her spirit in the face of death. On one level, this was a condolence as it seemed.

But on closer examination—one that took Will a fair few minutes of pondering the archaic phrasing—the stanza was almost threatening. It posited that the terminal illness of a loved one could be akin to the fire that would end the world. A suggestion that for Jack, at least, this could be his undoing. And the delivery of the letter itself was taunting, bringing with it the knowledge that Hannibal could not only watch Jack’s life unfold, but so casually insinuate himself into it, even when Jack was having no luck finding Hannibal.

It struck him then, an emotion that he had no right to feel under the circumstances—the singe of resentment that Hannibal would write to Jack, but not to him. He wondered what poem Hannibal would have chosen if he had been the recipient, and immediately shoved that thought as far from his mind as possible.

He folded the letter neatly. It felt somehow wrong to simply drop it in a waste bin, when it was so carefully penned and delivered, but after a moment’s hesitation that’s what he did. He didn’t have room for any more of Hannibal’s tokens in his life—his scars were enough.

He left Alana with his dogs and his thanks. He didn’t do more than explain he was going to be away for a while, but she knew, anyway. She didn’t approve, but she didn’t do more than cross her
arms and say, “I should tell you not to go.”

Will responded quietly, “You know I wouldn’t listen if you did.”

Alana nodded and looked almost disappointed, but she didn’t make any further attempt to warn him away. She didn’t tell him he was being an idiot. He already knew he was, in an abstract sort of way. He knew it was insanity to pursue Hannibal after everything he’d done, and he could already sense that he was going to get entangled again, caught in a bramble that was intent upon catching its thorns beneath his skin. But he wouldn’t be able to rest easily until he found a resolution for the mess between them, even if that meant a bloody ending.

It was early spring when he left. Still early enough that the North Atlantic was sure to be frigid and stormy; not optimal, but it would keep him on his toes, give him something to do other than think about Hannibal and Abigail. Bad weather would mean the voyage could take him longer than the twenty days he estimated, but that was okay.

He left the shore, and for the first time since that night, he felt like he was doing something to take control of his own life.

The feeling of control wasn’t steady. It didn’t take Will long to realize that in the absence of any other human interaction, and in the absence of his dogs and their affection, his most powerful memories were of the way Hannibal had touched him. Every soft burst of breath on the back of his neck, every wretched drag inside him. He focused on the sensations that reminded him of where he was now and what he was doing: the saline air that burned his nostrils, the roar of wind ruffling the water and catching on the sails, the damp chill that made its way under his clothes. He could feel his scars twinge on those damp, cold nights in the middle of the Atlantic. Sometimes he felt like Hannibal was even there with him—a phantom that had sometimes chased him in his own home. But while the nights were even darker out in the ocean, he had no genuine fear that the shadows in the corner of his eye were the man himself. Unlike in his house, an actual ambush was impossible. Hannibal wouldn’t even know where to find him. Every night alone on the boat was a night he desperately needed to convince himself that he was still alone, and his phantoms were just phantoms.

The phantoms, in truth, were even stronger here, but at least it gave him a chance to acclimate. When Hannibal took shape in the fog when it rolled over the bow, Will tensed but did his best to pay him no mind, even when his voice followed. Hannibal had always been unnervingly insightful, and the version of him that lingered in Will’s psyche was even worse. It knew all his weak spots, gave voice to his fears.

“Do you believe you could mend all that was broken, just by finding me?” it asked. “Do you believe being punished means your betrayal will be entirely forgiven?”

It fed the broken voice at the back of his skull that doubted this, told him it would never be enough until he chose to make his own penance, some sacrifice to earn back Hannibal’s trust. But Will had been wronged, too, he knew that, no matter his fears of how much weight of blame might lie on his shoulders. It’s why he didn’t dignify the voices with a response, not yet.

“Your unwillingness to acknowledge my presence now bodes poorly for our interactions once you actually find me,” Hannibal said one day, perched on the rail as comfortably as if it were his
psychiatric chair.

Will sighed and cast his eyes to the sky, grey and fogged over. He tapped his tongue to his teeth, contemplating the merits of responding to a figment of his imagination. Without looking anywhere near the figure, he sighed again and said quietly, “I’ll acknowledge you when you’re really you. Not the ghost my mind has conjured up.”

“Is there such a great difference between this self and the other? You’ve always been exceptional at understanding me. In your own memory palace, I’m sure you could conjure an accurate version of me that feels just as alive.”

“And why would I want to?”

“Answers, perhaps. Closure.”

“I don’t need answers. I know why you did what you did, even if I couldn’t have predicted it.”

“Couldn’t you have?” A curious tilt of his head, still half-shrouded with fog. “You don’t really believe that.”

There were doubts, certainly. Accusations. A sinister cousin of guilt.

“I didn’t know until it was too late to stop it.”

“That’s difficult to ascertain when you didn’t attempt to stop it. Did you want to?”

Will thought back. He knew, in reality, he had made an attempt. He had struggled, at first—he just hadn’t verbally defended himself against Hannibal’s accusations. But he knew a verbal defense would have been the only possible way to deter him at that point.

“I wanted it to end,” he said. At the silence that was more probing than an actual question, he acknowledged: “Maybe I wanted you to go far enough to kill me.”

“I didn’t want to kill you.”

“I know. You called me an ambulance. You wanted me to live, and remember. And I’ll remember, at least.”

“We will both remember,” Hannibal said, voice soft in contrast to Will’s bitterness.

Will imagined it wouldn’t be a happy memory for him, either. He couldn’t remember another occasion when Hannibal’s emotions had been so evident. Anger and pain. Even when he couldn’t see his face, he had known. He had heard it, choking his voice.

“You cried,” he said, just short of a question. A question he wouldn’t have dared make to the corporeal Hannibal.

“Are you surprised?”

“I’m not surprised you’re capable of tears. But I know there were others like me. You sent Randall after me not long before then. I couldn’t be sure you didn’t ultimately see me as disposable.”

“Can you be sure of it now?”

Will watched the drift of fog over churning waves. “I know I was special. It’s just a matter of figuring out if I still am. Maybe you’ve decided I’m not worth it.”
“You’re making a very long journey for uncertainty.”

“I can be uncertain there, or I can be uncertain here. At least this way I’ll find out, one way or another.”

It was grim, to phrase it as such. But phantom-Hannibal must have respected the honesty, because he didn’t question him further.

By the final week of his journey, after many more conversations, he realized the phantom had probably helped. Giving name to Hannibal’s assumptions and accusations, giving a face with which he could argue or agree. It wasn’t comfortable, not when so many of its assumptions cut so close to the truth, or at least the truth he had perceived. But he had his defenses, though many of them seemed to boil down to simple confusion—when he was wrapped up in the guise of his lure, lines were blurred, agendas conflated, and the matter of his own nature and loyalties became helplessly bewildering. Maybe, given enough time and space, he could have laid down and seen what illusions evaporated and what truths remained, but there was no chance of accomplishing that when he was actively immersed in their shadow play. By that fateful morning, he was no more able to separate himself from who he pretended to be than he was able to separate salt from the ocean.

And for Hannibal to accuse it all of being fake, shallow, a mere façade—that wasn’t right.

No. It took him those extra weeks on the boat with his phantom and internal musings to gain enough clarity, but he was filled with a fresh certainty that when he got there, he wasn’t the one needing to make apologies. Hannibal hadn’t gotten it all right, he hadn’t seen what he thought he had when he decided Will was irredeemable. Will was able to convince himself, at last, that he’d done the best he could under the circumstances. In the end, with his last conscious decision to kiss Hannibal, he had been as honest as he knew how. And while there had been no part of that day that didn’t carry some kind of pain, the fact that Hannibal had utterly rejected and reviled that act of emotional honesty had carried a particular sting that became all the more bitter in the wake of the assault.

He had told himself to forget it—of all the shit that had happened between him and Hannibal, that should be the least of his concerns. But that didn’t stop it from dangling at the edge of his consciousness, a loose thread that had neither been entirely severed by the trauma nor given closure.

He thought perhaps that thread had been his lifeline for the entire journey across the Atlantic. Unfinished business, after all. He couldn’t sink into the frothing black sea until he had fixed that.

Will was determined to show him that he had been wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Remind me to never put in writing when I think I'll next be able to update a fic, because every time I do I seem to decide there's a big flaw in the next chapter that I need to fix, and it takes me way past my estimate. In this case I needed to have Will get out of his head a bit, so I gave him phantom Hannibal.
Anyway. We'll get back to Hannibal, who's about due to have some shit hit the fan, and then Will has plans.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Quick warning for some violence/cannibalism content in this chapter that’s similar to stuff in canon, but still potentially disturbing, and some very brief Anthony/Hannibal.

Hannibal looked forward to returning to Florence. That stage of his life had been so important that his memories of the city were now gilded like the Primavera itself, and perhaps even overly bright. He had spent countless days before that particular painting, entranced by its elegance, and countless more days wandering through the streets. He had left it with a great deal of nostalgia, holding more sentiment for the city than he did for most people.

He always knew he would return, and it pleased him to bring Abigail and share its history with her. She had been working hard studying Italian, and making good progress—not with Hannibal’s knack for language, but clearly wanting to please him and situate herself firmly in his future in Italy. Until recently, his future vision involved Will as well, but adjustments could be made for the time being. Even without him, Hannibal could bury himself in the sights and sounds of Florence, and distract himself from the uncertainties of the future with the wonders of the past. He would have little need of Will when he was surrounded with such beauty.

He set foot on its cobbled streets with the same eagerness he had expected. There was so much to show Abigail, and he enjoyed giving her a tour of the city and its many masterpieces. They set up in an ornate apartment that overlooked the magnificent Duomo. He found a position as a curator at the Studiolo and earned his place as a scholar of Dante. The first week was a busy one, as he made his introductions, attended dinners, and explored the archives that he was given access to. When he wasn’t involved in work or social obligations, he was wandering the city with Abigail. There were enough things to distract him that for the first week he almost managed to convince himself he could be content living there.

But it didn’t take long for him to realize that this time, something about Florence did not sit right with him. The bold flavors of the local produce, usually so vivid when grown beneath the warm Tuscan sun, turned sandy in his mouth. Bitter. He was reminded of Will every time he looked at Abigail, every time he cooked something that he wished he could share among the three of them. For the sake of lying low, human meat was excluded from his menu, and although he was somewhat excited about the ready availability of wild boar, which was considerably more difficult to acquire in the United States, it reminded him of the hearty stock from which Mason had bred his pigs—and then of how he and Will had used Mason in their games with each other—and the pleasure of the meat was somehow reduced.

The quaint streets seemed lonely when he considered who could have joined him here, and his walks became restless and unhappy. The buildings were still beautiful, the Primavera still divine. The Chianti still shone like rubies. But it didn’t enliven him like it should have—it didn’t bring to him the passion of his youth. And every imperfection weighed on him, like the thickened crowds and encroachment of tourist establishments.

As he collected manuscripts on Dante, finding naught but dust irritating his nostrils, he thought of the Inferno, where the punishment of the sinner mirrored the nature of their sin. He had often
pondered the poeticism of that arrangement, thinking that if such a hell existed, he might find himself among the murderers and tyrants immersed in Phlegethon, the roiling river of blood and fire. Then he would have been quite literally swimming in the blood he had shed during his life, feeling the scalding and broiling of his own skin as recompense for those he had killed and cooked, an excruciating flood of pain as his sadism was turned back upon him. Yet now he felt he must have already entered some circle of hell, to find Florence so spoiled—and it was not the fiery landscape he had imagined, but more akin to Cocytus, the innermost circle of the Inferno where those guilty of treachery were buried in ice. He was left without passion, without excitement or the rush of blood, cold and frozen in place. He wanted to protest this particular punishment—violence he had accepted as part of his nature, but he had not, by his account, committed treachery. It was Will who had betrayed him, Will who had lied again and again and twisted those terrible things inside him.

Will, who after all that had begged him not to leave.

The memory did not carry the same shock as when he first heard those words, but it was still not pleasant. It cast doubt on some of his assumptions, made him wonder if different actions may have brought a more satisfying conclusion, when what he had done had only resulted in pain. It was possible Will had simply found Hannibal’s presence to be preferable to being abandoned when he was severely wounded and distressed, but Will had previously tended to veer away from human contact when he was in distress, rather like a wounded animal, used to suffering in solitude and silence. And if he had been sincere in wanting Hannibal to remain, it would suggest there had been something genuine between them, some semblance of the emotion that Hannibal had felt for him. It was a troubling thought, and Hannibal was not entirely sure where that left him. He didn’t like the feeling of rerunning events and wondering if he had chosen the incorrect path, but here he was.

It was almost cruel—perhaps suitably cruel—that the particular statement that had so unsettled him was the very same one he had to cling to now, if he wished to see Will again. A discordant symphony of hope and unease, which were now inevitably linked.

He began to feel like wire winding around a spool, twisting in circles, building tension. Fraught. And just the knowledge that he was circling like this was uncomfortable. It should not be so all-encompassing, so challenging for him to compartmentalize.

Eventually he was driven to action. While he would not show Abigail any material as incendiary as what Freddie Lounds wrote, and he would not fill her in on any unnecessary details, avoiding the matter indefinitely struck him as an uncanny mimicry of guilt or shame, and he had no interest in acquiring either emotion. And he was making no progress simply turning circles in his mind, and increasingly wanted to know what her response would be to knowing exactly what had transpired between him and Will.

So one morning he opened an informative, yet tasteful news article on the matter on his new iPad, and left it at Abigail’s place at the table while he prepared breakfast. Abigail appeared before long, giving her morning greetings. Things had been quiet enough recently that she had gotten reasonably comfortable, no longer treading so warily around Hannibal, but when she took her seat at the table and looked at the iPad, she hesitated.

“Is that an invitation, or a trap?” she finally asked.

“It’s an opportunity for an answer to some of your questions, regarding the events the night we left.”

She looked wary. “That was weeks ago. Why now?”
“I didn’t want to distract you from more pressing matters until you had settled in better.”

He heard the click as she unlocked the screen, then silence. He continued with the preparation of their omelets, not allowing himself to entertain any concern as she remained silent.

When he brought the food to the table, she stared at him, and finally raised her eyebrows, though her voice was not entirely steady. “And I’m… supposed to believe you’re not looking for any kind of response here?”

He tilted his head slightly, attentive to the steely set of her jaw. “The fact that you think this is a challenge means you perceive the news as cause for a significant emotional response. I’m curious what that response is.”

She pursed her lips and dropped her gaze, purposefully cutting off a corner of omelet and eating it. “Abigail.”

She dropped her fork and crossed her arms. “So much for this not being a test.”

“It’s only as much a test as you make it.”

“Fine.” She swallowed and her eyes flickered back to the screen, now gone dark. “You said you realized you couldn’t trust him. Was this what you found out—that he’d been working with the FBI all along?”

“Yes. He led me to believe he killed Freddie Lounds and brought me her flesh. It was human, presumably from his last kill, but it was not Freddie. I smelled a trace of her scent on him much later.”

She nodded shortly, and her nails clicked as she fidgeted slightly. “I’m not surprised you gutted him. Didn’t expect the rest of it.”

“Are you angry?”

“Not angry.” She shrugged stiffly, not meeting his eyes. “It’s just… at least with my dad I knew what to expect. A clean kill, and he was always respectful. He always talked about being respectful to them, and that’s how he was. But you—you always talk about manners and respect, and I think I know you, and then… this. You raped him. You ate him alive. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that.” She sounded slightly breathless, as if partly between hysterics and disbelieving laughter.

He took a moment to breathe through the impulse of defensiveness. Bristling at the implicit accusation wouldn’t help anything. “You grasp for details that will guide you in this life you’ve chosen, a compass to weather the storm. You feel as though you’ve somehow been misled about my character, or you’re afraid you’ve made a tremendous miscalculation.”

“Have I?” she asked quietly.

“It would be naïve to believe you could so easily judge my character, but you have no reason to be unduly alarmed. I was honest when I said that if I had killed you, I would have slit your throat like your father did. A clean kill, as you said. The situation with Will was unique.”

She didn’t look much reassured by that statement, but she nodded again, slowly.

“Unique, how? Were you two… closer than you told me?”
He was inundated with a rush of emotion that rose and sank, leaving his throat feeling tight. He swallowed, and his forehead drew taut for a moment. They could have been. Should have been, had Will’s actions been entirely genuine rather than a mere siren song to lure him. “We were friends until he betrayed me. But his transgression was intimate, and it deserved an equivalent response.”

She watched as he took a sip of coffee. “Do you think he’d agree about it being equivalent?”

He pursed his lips. “I prefer not to occupy my time dwelling on those events from his perspective.”

There was a lengthy silence. Abigail, though she had initially been shocked into being confrontational, was not yet so bold as to pry at this statement, although Hannibal knew he would have if he had heard it from a patient of his—asking why, and if something about that person’s perspective disturbed them, and if they were afraid of what they might find.

Abigail simply let the silence rest for a minute, letting the chasm of what was unspoken widen until it was broad enough to swallow a person. She sighed, and finally said, “So that’s it, then? No more Will Graham in our lives?”

That was, he realized, a challenging concept to wrap his head around. The future without Will struck him as a shriveled husk, a wasteland where there may once have been fertile ground. “He may yet try to find us.”

“After all that?”

“Possibly. I told him he would know where to find me, if he truly wanted to. But all we can do for now is wait.”

She was quiet then, poking at her omelet without much enthusiasm. “How long are you going to wait?” When there was no immediate reply, she said, “It just… doesn’t seem like you to go so long without doing something. Just waiting, not trying to tilt the odds or use your influence.”

“We’ll wait as long as we need to. I spent many years in Baltimore lying low, so to speak. It’s even more important now to remain under the radar, and I know how to weather a storm. I would like to preserve this peace, for the moment.”

“Does that mean you’re happy the way things are now?” Her brows were raised, pinched.

He let the question rest for a few seconds, unable to deny her skepticism outright, but unwilling to concede that he wasn’t, really.

“Our experiences of aesthetics undeniably influence our state of mind, and the beauty here is as positive an influence as I could expect. Combined with the glow of nostalgia, there is enough here to fulfill my needs, as it were.”

“So you think you should be happy. That doesn’t mean that you are.”

“Has my behavior given you reason to believe I’m not?” His words were unintentionally brusque, poorly disguising his own doubts.

She frowned. “Your behavior, not really. You’re still doing all the things you want to do. Going to events. But you… you don’t seem like you’re enjoying yourself like you were before. I figured you were still upset about not having Will here. But maybe…” She stopped, mouth open, before shutting it with a sigh. Hannibal didn’t have to prompt her to finish—he sensed what was underneath this vague interrogation. Are you really happy with what you’ve done?
He wasn’t willing to entertain the question at the moment. “It would be preferable to have Will here,” he acknowledged instead. “His presence would help resolve several unknowns for us.”

“Like what?” She raised her eyebrows. “Is that why you weren’t sure if you’d end up killing me or not? You needed to know how things would end with Will?”

He mulled it over for a moment. He didn’t like to think his decision would hinge entirely on that one choice; it seemed too much to leave to chance, when predicting Will’s behavior was no easier than predicting the flip of a coin.

“It isn’t the exclusive criteria for my decision, but it may be a factor.”

She swallowed. “What if… what if he never tries to find us? You wouldn’t go back to the States to find him, would you?”

Though deciding not to follow Hannibal would likely be the smarter decision, it was a repulsive possibility, one he would not tolerate considering. “I told him you were alive. At the very least, I think he may be interested enough in your welfare to try to find you.”

“Guess that’s something,” she said, lips trying to stretch into a smile, but turning into a grimace. She clearly wasn’t optimistic.

“Do you not believe he will come?”

She shrugged, and didn’t meet his eyes as she said, “I wouldn’t, if I was in his shoes.”

“You don’t know him as well as I do. He’s very persistent.”

She shifted, visibly uncomfortable, but didn’t reply. He didn’t push her to voice her obvious doubts. He didn’t need her to believe that Will would come looking for them eventually, or to reassure him of the matter. He perhaps needed to exorcise the doubts in his own mind, but that was on him.

Hannibal reflected that perhaps this was one area where she couldn’t be especially helpful. When he had Bedelia as a therapist, he had found she did an excellent job at reflecting back his words spun with questions and interpretations in a way that proved useful—but Abigail was less interested in the nuances of his mind, and more invested in the practicalities of navigating their current circumstances and surviving. And so now rather than pressing, she let the topic drop.

Even without further discussion, however, he noticed a tightness in his ribs, something kept captive that ached to be vented.

Abigail’s question about his happiness lingered in his conscience. His doubts, if they could be called such, had predated their conversation, but were now strengthened. He had to remind himself that regrets didn’t mean terribly much in the end. He could consider the memories as they stood, examine them from different angles, meditate upon the facets that emerged—but he could not reverse time.

He had visited the topic often enough as a youth to be sure of that. He had wondered how he might bring Mischa back from death, turn back the clock and give her body back to her, find her again unblemished by famine and blood. He had wondered, when he drank the broth that had been gleaned from her bones, what of her he might absorb—if he would in some way carry her with him through his life, in his veins. He was not convinced he hadn’t.
But no matter his theorizing, a teacup once broken could never be remade in quite the same way. The only way to regain what was lost to him was through the natural cycles and repetitions of the universe. It had happened with Abigail, who began to blur with the life of his sister. Not just visually, with something of her wide blue eyes, but watching the gentle erosion of her innocence as she was slowly exposed to violence—trembling, but trusting, following. Something of her resilience and instinct for survival, attaching herself to the nearest father figure, even if that father figure was her brother and she had seen him with his hands covered in blood.

If the cup shattered again he found it unlikely he would be granted such a rare bounty a second time. He couldn’t waste energy reconsidering past actions or wishing for the impossible. He only had suppositions and the present moment. And although the wonders of Florence never quite began to glow, he hoped work would become a suitable distraction. It did not entirely relieve him, but it was enough to keep his mind somewhat occupied with more pleasant matters. He began to put together bits and pieces of the Studiolo’s archive in preparation for an exhibition. He had found many fascinating items therein—instruments of torture, relics of old Florentine families.

Professor Sogliato, one of his greater critics at the Studiolo, had begun to avoid him when possible—perhaps feeling somewhat foolish or resentful after so determinedly ridiculing Hannibal’s capabilities as a scholar of Dante, only to have all of his colleagues be tremendously impressed by Hannibal’s work. So it was with some surprise that Hannibal found himself interrupted by his voice while doing research in his office.

“Dr. Fell, I have one of your old teaching assistants from Cambridge here to visit. He’s had some tales to tell about you.”

The prospect of gossip would explain why he’d made the trip over, but anyone connected to the real Dr. Fell presented an obvious concern.

“I likely have the same to tell about him,” Hannibal replied smoothly, not allowing himself to visibly recoil. He took a moment to finish his transcription before raising his eyes to see who had entered the room. The man accompanying Sogliato was, unsurprisingly, not someone he recognized.

The stranger’s eyebrows raised upon seeing Hannibal in place of the real Dr. Fell, but his head tilted thoughtfully. “Anthony Dimmond, sir, if you’ll recall.”

“Anthony, of course. Please do come in.” He fixed a polite smile on his face as he looked back at Sogliato. “Thank you for helping him find his way to my office. I’d hate to take any more time away from your busy schedule.”

Sogliato returned a faltering smile, likely disappointed he was being shooed out of the room before he could gather more gossip. “But of course,” he said, and turned to leave.

Anthony gave Hannibal a very thorough look over. “I must say, Dr. Fell, you’re looking much better than I remembered. Florence seems to have taken years off you. If Sogliato hadn’t led me to you personally, I daresay I wouldn’t have even recognized you.”

Though he offered a challenge in alluding to the impersonation, Anthony’s response was notably playful, as if enjoying an inside joke.

“It does have a rather rejuvenating effect,” Hannibal replied lightly, not giving any ground.

“Clearly.” He took a moment to look around Hannibal’s office, and Hannibal watched carefully. He didn’t look at all like he was planning to bolt, but Hannibal braced himself nevertheless—now that
his deception had been spotted, something was bound to come of it. “Frankly, I’m impressed. I only came here to take the piss out of the old man, and now I’ve found something much more fascinating.”

Hannibal was attentive to the hawkish expression on his face. “And how do you intend to proceed? Will you inform the Studiolo?”

That earned a more dramatic raise of his eyebrows. “Inform them? Certainly not. If those old geezers couldn’t be bothered to do a thorough background check, they get what’s coming to them, I suppose. And at any rate, you’re certainly an improvement over the old Dr. Fell. Though I must admit I’m quite curious as to what, as one might say, befell him.”

“And you hope to satisfy that curiosity?”

“Ideally.” He strode closer to Hannibal’s desk, and though he was clearly radiating curiosity, there was something near-predatory in his approach, too—as if he had caught the scent of opportunity. “Perhaps we could have a nice chat at a local enoteca. Get to know one another a bit better over a glass of wine. I’d love to hear your side of the story.”

It was impossible to tell whether the opportunity Anthony had scented was akin to blackmail, or if he was a fellow wolf in sheep’s clothing who had a taste for something darker. Or perhaps, judging by the slow slide of his eyes over Hannibal’s figure, the matters of attraction and the lure of the illicit were not entirely irrelevant.

Hannibal weighed his options. Either way, Anthony was doubtless a threat, but he seemed genuinely disinterested in causing trouble until he got the answers he was looking for.

“Our curiosity is mutual,” he said. “But if we’re to satisfy that curiosity, my apartment might provide a more intimate ambiance. Some conversations require privacy.”

Anthony narrowed his eyes, a warranted caution on his face. Public meetings would of course be safer for him, knowing what he did. Finally, he said, “I was rather hoping for the thrill of the chase, but perhaps you have other thrills in mind?”

Hannibal’s lips quirked at his daring. Since it would be counterproductive to give Anthony any further cause for alarm at this point, he said with as much warmth as he could manage, “One never knows without having the proper opportunity. I sense you’re not averse to exploring alternative paths to gratification.”

Anthony still eyed him carefully, but finally broke into a smile. “Well, if there’s an offer for gratification on the table, far be it from me to turn it down.”

Hannibal invited Anthony over when he knew Abigail would be out with her new tutor, but he didn’t inform her or ask her to stay clear of the apartment. If she happened to return home while he and Anthony were there, he was interested to see how she might react to this new threat, and he would prefer to see her responding naturally rather than be guided around parameters he’d established. In truth, he didn’t have parameters yet, and was merely exploring things as they appeared.

This was a better distraction than his work at the Studiolo had been. Anthony was thus far an enigma, and he didn’t seem to be the type to carry on boring conversations. It wouldn’t be anything approaching the dinners he liked to hold, but he still looked forward to entertaining.
When Anthony arrived, he didn’t seem as nervous as one might expect a man to be while wandering into a dangerous situation. Instead, he looked rather satisfied with himself, and eminently interested in his surroundings as soon as Hannibal let him into the apartment.

“Quite a nice place you have here,” Anthony commented. “Exactly the sort of baroque flourishes that I could have imagined the good Dr. Fell investing his money in. I assume you took it upon yourself to abscond with his riches along with his name?”

There was of course no need for delicacy at this juncture. “I’m accompanied by a comfortable amount of money, though his was mostly supplemental.”

He poured Anthony a glass of fine wine, which he sampled with obvious pleasure. “You’ve been spending your supplemental money with excellent discretion, apparently—this is a fine vintage. So either you’ve been raised to appreciate the fine stuff or you’ve been blessed with a particularly fine palate. Or both.”

“Both assumptions have merit,” Hannibal acknowledged. “I’ve spent significant time refining my culinary skills to satisfy my palate.”

Anthony smirked. “Are you telling me you’re a fine chef, as well? Impersonations aside, I must admit you have me rather charmed.”

Hannibal sipped his wine and pursed his lips. The flirtatious undertone, which ordinarily wouldn’t concern him, fell flat now.

Anthony brushed past it, seemingly unconcerned. “So it wasn’t a crime of greed or financial necessity. And the name could only get you so far, so I presume you’re quite the scholar yourself.”

Hannibal inclined his head with a slight smile. “The Studiolo seemed adequately impressed by my lecture on Dante, despite some reservations from Professor Sogliato.”

“Sogliato has a reputation for having unreasonable standards, even compared to many of his fellow faculty. He clearly resented you, but he didn’t seem to disdain you—that says quite a lot, I should say.”

“Ah, but if I were to agree, it would be a crime of arrogance.”

“Arrogance? Perish the thought,” Anthony said, sounding amused. “So what would bring such a humble man to Florence, if not riches or acclaim?”

“A necessary change of lifestyle brought upon by unfortunate circumstances.”

Anthony raised his brows and scoffed slightly. “That says very little. I think I could make better guesses just by looking around this place.”

“If you think you can find out more by your own eyes, then please feel free to make your observations. Though I suspect you will make your guesses regardless of my permission.”

“Nonetheless, it’s more fun if you’re playing along with me,” he said with a broad smile. “All right. For one—even allowing for some indulgence, this apartment is a bit large for one man. I assume you’ve come here with a companion.”

“You assume correctly.” The apartment was in fact large enough for three people, should that situation ever become possible. But he didn’t care to elaborate on that point.
“Didn’t that earn me something? A name, at least? Your original profession?”

Hannibal smiled slightly, keeping his expression inscrutable.

“You’re determined not to make this easy for me, I see,” Anthony said. He sounded neither surprised nor put off. “Very well, then. I know Dr. Fell had a daughter—Olivia was her name, I believe. Still a teenager, possibly away at boarding school. But a daughter following her father to Florence would be less scandalous than a recent widower acquiring a new flame. If you’re traveling with another, I can’t help but wonder what her fate might have been.”

“If you’d asked around at the Studiolo, anyone could tell you that I’ve arrived with my daughter Olivia. They seem fond of her. Quiet, polite, charming.”

“Doesn’t sound much like the Olivia whose tales reached my ears.”

“Teenagers are unpredictable and mutable creatures. As unstable as mercury.”

Anthony made a noncommittal noise. “Not that I’m inclined to sentiment toward teenagers, but she can’t have been as onerous as her father, at any rate. Whatever their fate might have been.”

“The difference between the tales you heard and the ones spoken at the Studiolo speak volumes about her character.”

Anthony tilted his head in thought, but nodded slowly. “I suppose that’s true enough. So Olivia Fell has found herself a mimic with a fairer temper.”

Hannibal inclined his head slightly. “Mimicry is a useful survival mechanism for many species.”

“Only for the mimic—not for the one being mimicked,” Anthony said quietly. He regarded Hannibal intently, but with no fear or judgement, despite the implication. “After all, I assume it would make alarm bells ring if Dr. Fell were to be noticed being in two places at once.”

“A survival mechanism isn’t inclined to be kind.”

“No, it isn’t. But as humans, we have much more choice afforded to us than did our animal ancestors with their instincts. Excruciating calculations or random dice rolls, it all falls under the umbrella of human behavior. Mimicry is also a choice, and one with limited motivations. I’m curious what the motivation was, in this instance.”

Hannibal took a sip of his drink, allowing his response to settle in his mouth before answering; still, he could not resist the impulse to edge the conversation toward more threatening territory. “As you said, we have many choices afforded to us. Some are wiser than others. You have many questions about survival instincts for a person whose own instincts toward survival seem somewhat poorly formed.”

Anthony didn’t balk, but his expression froze in place. “My curious nature does mean my actions may be somewhat brash. But I don’t know how I could be expected to pass by such an intriguing mystery without doing my due diligence in satisfying that curiosity.”

“You could have reported me to the authorities as soon as you realized I was assuming a false identity.”

Anthony waved a hand dismissively. “I’d have never learned the juicy details that way, just rumors buzzing between academics like bees in a garden. Besides,” he said, leaning back and eyeing Hannibal appraisingly, “I had a sense that you might be appreciative of an understanding ear.
“Pageantry can be a lonely endeavor if you don’t have a friend in the know.”

“A bold move.” An interesting one, to be fair. In better spirits, Hannibal might have been more receptive to his interest, at least for a while of idle entertainment. There must be more to his story that led him to befriend seemingly dangerous people. “Would you say you’re also in the business of pageantry?”

“I wouldn’t use those precise words, but yes. Poetry is a performance, as is all art—albeit one that usually has a knowing audience, rather than those with the wool pulled over their eyes. But even then, one can twist oneself into all manner of uncomfortable positions just to maintain appearances.”

“And tell me—with all your interest in the ‘juicy details,’ are you here to twist me into an uncomfortable position?” Hannibal asked. His voice was quiet but holding a certain tension, slowly treading toward danger.

“I’m here to help you untwist,” Anthony said, raising an eyebrow. “To our mutual satisfaction.”

“You’re making assumptions about what would satisfy me.”

“I could take a guess.” Anthony again eyed him up and down, not bothering to hide a degree of sexual interest. He was attractive and charming in his own way, enough that Hannibal would ordinarily be inclined to receive his flirtations—but not at the moment. Not when the sexual implication made him feel instead as cold and unyielding as iron. “You’re fond of control, aren’t you? Making me fumble for the truth of things rather than admitting to anything directly. You’re fond of your indulgences, as evident from this apartment and the quality of the refreshments. And you’re accompanied only by your daughter—or whoever she might really be, but you don’t speak of her in a way that suggests it was an ill-fitting cover story for a romantic partner of yours. As I said—a lonely endeavor. Or am I incorrect?”

Rather than attempting to deter Anthony as he made his unfortunate blunder forward, Hannibal found himself wondering exactly how far into the lion’s den he might wander before realizing it. Curiosity tugged at him, along with a cruel urge to play his game and encourage him even further.

“You’re not incorrect,” Hannibal said, voice soft and mirroring the twinkle of interest in Anthony’s eyes.

Anthony’s smile drew wide across his face with restored confidence. “Lonely and unsatisfied, despite the fancy dressings on your life. And willing to entertain someone who could undo those fancy dressings.”

“Are you the person to undo them?”

“I could be. If I may be so bold…” Anthony leaned in close enough to feel intimate. “It’s a crime for someone of your looks and talents to be without a proper companion. I could offer some companionship of a sort. Or did I misread your hedonistic tendencies?”

“Your reading was adequate,” Hannibal said, because it was true—at least, it would have been under normal circumstances. The last time he was in Florence, in his youth, he would have been receptive to Anthony in the manner he proposed. It wouldn’t be hard to find a way to pass a pleasant evening with him before killing him for the threat he posed. Anthony was attractive and presented himself well—though there was a slight unruliness to his curls and his stubble gave the impression of nonchalance, it didn’t sit poorly on him.
Those same characteristics hadn’t sat poorly on Will, either, Hannibal realized, with some
discomfort. Anthony was older, his manner and presentation entirely different, as were his eyes—
which is why the resemblance hadn’t been noticeable to him earlier, except perhaps on a
subconscious level.

“But you’re hesitating,” Anthony said, at his pause.

“Your timing was perhaps less than ideal.”

“The trials and tribulations of the heart?” Anthony asked, as though it could ever be so simple
between Hannibal and Will.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Well, you seem a practical man. Whoever it was, I’m sure they weren’t worth it,” Anthony said,
brushing it off as casual as anything.

The dismissiveness made him sour. He couldn’t say with certainty that the entire experience had
been worth it—the pain of his rending heart and his consignment to this new icy inferno. But had
Will himself been worth the risk and the ache that now filled him? The chance to be so close to the
beauty of his mind, and have someone who understood him so well? Yes. Surely, yes.

And how rude of Anthony to make this judgement blindly.

“You bear a resemblance to him,” he said, allowing his own judgement to simmer for the moment.

“Is that so? Is that the reason for your hesitance, or a glimmer of hope for my success?”

“Perhaps both.”

Now that he’d seen it, he couldn’t unsee it. He wondered how Anthony would look blood-
splattered and tear-streaked and pale with shock.

“Is there anything I could do to ease your hesitance?” Anthony asked.

“I’m sure you can find some way to convince me,” he replied softly. He tried to soften his gaze—
less predatory, more flirtatious.

Anthony smiled at that, and placed a hand on Hannibal’s thigh. “You’ll allow me to demonstrate?”

His hand skirted up closer to Hannibal’s fly. He was aware that the man was balancing on a thin
wire, that neither might appreciate where this may lead. But he still said, “Be my guest.”

Hannibal reflected, as Anthony pressed his hand against the light fabric of his trousers, that
perhaps his own perceptions had somehow been fractured after he assaulted Will. Because it was
not possible for him to fully disengage the part of his mind that was caught on those actions like a
snagged thread, looping back to that one incident rather than countless other acts of intimacy in his
past.

It felt strange to have Anthony reaching for something that Will had desperately sought to escape.
Strange to have his hand so soft and teasing when Hannibal’s own had been so forceful and cruel.
Strange to go through the motions of sex with a stranger for whom he felt nothing, when he had
only a weak and distorted form of it with the man who he thought he probably loved, at least as
much as he could love anyone.
But he let Anthony continue. He let him unzip and reach into his pants, working him over with experienced fingers, and he didn’t say stop. His body responded to the stimulation far more readily than it had with Will—no longer so clenched with emotion, no longer torn and anguished. But it hurt. It hurt to remember and to see Will’s blue eyes behind Anthony’s and to think of what had happened and what might have happened in another universe, to indulge in ostensibly mutual desire now when all he had been able to do with Will was take. Though was it desire, now? His arousal was only localized, tissue stiffening under friction—his heart did not pound, his mouth did not water, he felt no desire to touch in return. And he felt vaguely unpleasant, as if he were trying to choke down a bland meal.

Anthony leaned in until his lips caressed Hannibal’s ear. “Relax,” he said. “Just let yourself enjoy the moment, and forget about him, whoever he was. He’s not here, and I am. He’s not important.”

If Anthony had any other insights to share, he never got the chance. This was the breaking point Hannibal had anticipated.

He snapped Anthony’s neck in one quick movement—just enough to paralyze him, like Mason.

Abigail arrived to find Hannibal arranging him on the sofa as if he were sleeping. Her startled shriek brought him back to earth, back to his knees on carpet and the clearly unnatural twist of Anthony’s neck, the harsh and shallow breathing.

“He’s not dead,” he said flatly, and wondered if she would find that worse.

“But you will kill him, right?”

“Why do you ask? Would you like to do the honors yourself?”

She shook her head sharply. “If you aren’t going to kill him, what are you going to do with him?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“And who the hell is he?”

Hannibal stood and turned his back on Anthony’s limp form. “An acquaintance of the late Dr. Fell. He was curious about how I came to take his place.”

“So… he’s a threat. And if he’s a threat, we’re only safe if he’s dead, so why didn’t you just kill him?”

“I was curious in turn. He seemed to have brought it upon himself to not simply receive a quick end.” He glanced back at the man on the sofa, lying insensate. “I’ve rather worked up an appetite. Why don’t you help me with dinner?”

Hannibal gathered his supplies and set about amputating Anthony’s right leg. Now that he was paralyzed, his limbs would do him no good. Abigail assisted, handing him the tools he requested, though she blanched and avoided looking at the rush of blood that gathered on the tarp beneath him. Anthony was conscious, although the placement of the fracture in his neck would impair sensation, so anesthetic would certainly have been an unnecessary extravagance. The paralysis might not cause complete numbness, but it was likely more than he deserved.

“No screaming, Mr. Dimmond, or I’ll be removing your tongue as well, and you’ll find the lack of anesthetic considerably more problematic. Do you understand?”

Anthony responded with a choked sound, unable to wrest control of his own tongue. His face
twitched.

Hannibal narrated the procedure aloud for his audience of two, though he knew neither was appreciative. It helped somewhat to settle what had become unsettled, draw back within his control what had slipped through his fingers in impulsivity—he felt like a surgeon again, demonstrating a procedure for the surgical residents. Entirely calculated and controlled, each action deliberate and precise.

He cooked a succulent roast that he and Abigail shared. When Anthony rudely refused, he considered pureeing the dish and forcing it down his throat, but it would have been a waste and an insult to the skill used to prepare it. He could starve, for all Hannibal cared.

He left Anthony on the sofa all week, excepting some accommodations for the sake of remaining sanitary. Despite his implication that he'd only remove Anthony’s tongue if he screamed, he decided removing his vocal chords would be the safest approach, since he couldn’t be supervised every minute of the day, and he didn’t want to waste sedatives on him.

Every few days he took another piece. Limb by limb, he took Anthony apart. He liked returning from work to see him there, sweaty-browed and mute, a pale imitation of the one he had dared try to replace. It satisfied him to think of every slice of his flesh as another rejection, another declaration of what he would not and could not tolerate.

Abigail didn’t like it. She was increasingly withdrawn, looking more nauseated with each subsequent procedure rather than less.

Anthony’s final limb was a milestone of sorts, one that made Abigail finally break her silence and ask, “How much more of this until he just dies?”

With one final look at the sutures he had placed, Hannibal drew back from the body and removed his gloves. “There are certain organs I can safely remove. The human body can take a good deal of abuse before it finally loses its battle.”

“And you’ll keep going until then?”

“Presumably. Does that prospect unsettle you more than the thought of simply killing him?”

“It’s more cruel.”

“Cruelty does not concern me.”

“I know. But what’s this even about, then? Control?”

“The matter of control is also beside the point,” he said dismissively, though even as he did, he wondered if that was completely true. “He was arrogant, and his behavior offended me. That makes this more punitive than anything, and not particularly unusual for me. I had a similar experience with Abel Gideon. After an incident that left him mostly paralyzed, I brought him to my home and fed him on his limbs until he ran out. He had impersonated me, claimed my title. It was an effective way of familiarizing him with the man who properly deserved that title.”

“So why not feed this guy his own limbs?”

“It’s less important in this situation,” he said. As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized the implication. Feeding Abel his own limbs had been central to his plan, but with Anthony it didn’t matter, because he wasn’t trying to prove the same point. He wasn’t trying to prove any point, at least not to his victim.
“So what is important in this situation? Just taking everything you can until there’s nothing left? Will you be satisfied then?”

He didn’t know, and he couldn’t do more than shrug and say again, “Presumably.”

Anthony no longer seemed particularly self-aware. He was weak from hunger, and his body was doubtless panicking in its own particular way at its sudden lack of limbs. Consequently, they had reached a point where Hannibal could no longer pretend this was a punishment that was entirely for Anthony’s benefit. And he realized that in truth it didn’t matter to him if Anthony was suffering or not—but it did matter that he was there. Him and his weak resemblance, deconstructed so thoroughly that Hannibal could be assured that there was nothing beneath his mask, that he was no fay trick of the light trying to bewitch and disarm him.

Hannibal thought that was all. He thought it was enough.

When it came to its inevitable end, as it turned out, he felt no satisfaction, no sense of accomplishment or closure. He came home one day to find Anthony in a comatose state, and no combination of obtainable drugs pushed through his IV line was enough to keep him going once his body had decided it had enough. Hannibal watched what was left of the man struggle for its final breaths, with a sinking coldness that reminded him of anger.

When the body had been thoroughly hacked into morsels of meat and the inedible swaths of his curly hair disposed of, he thought instead the feeling might be loss.

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