Transference and Countertransference

by coldandblood

Summary

When you’re trained in therapy, you’re taught to think five steps ahead and know how to guide someone along their path. When you’re an alpha you’re in control and even when you’re not, the consequences are rarely yours to reckon with.

When you’re in therapy, you speak not knowing what secrets your words might accidentally reveal. When you’re an omega, you live knowing you’re designed to lose control over and over and your only options are to fight or to give in.

Will fought tooth and nail to have control in a world that constantly scraped and scratched against his very being. Hannibal wanted to know what would happen if Will lost his fingerhold.
When Will looked at the world, he didn’t see what others saw. He saw what was there and what wasn’t, what was there and the motion of it getting there, what was there and why. He saw things not as someone else did them but as they were actively done. He concerned himself with how the creation came to be. He was good at looking at the pieces of the creation and understanding their origin.

Imagination was a pursuit with distance, removed from the present reality. He could empathize with anyone in his imagination but in the present, it got too muddy. The rules were too difficult to separate through in real time. He had difficulty understanding what was and wasn’t meant to be said. He said things when and how he wasn’t supposed to and didn’t talk in the ways he was supposed to. He came across as callous, said things too abruptly or loudly or with too much emotion. Interacting with normal people drained him. The rules, the voices, everything – it all grated against him, chewed and clawed against the malleable mush inside his skull and he popped as many Aspirin as he could to keep it at bay. It was one of his ways to cope.

He also kept away to cope. He kept away to keep control. He lived alone in the woods with his dogs and taught class to students and tried to keep that directionality.

But even when he separated himself from others, his body tried to betray him. Having his brain set on fire by the maelstrom of human interaction and voices wasn’t enough apparently. His body had to try to set itself on fire at regular intervals just to up the ante. He got on suppressants as soon as he could. Even if doctors couldn’t agree on the exact categories or definitions or terminology for his psychology, they all agreed it was for the best that it not be exacerbated by heat and provided him with suppressants. They even increased the dose as his tolerance grew despite that being a risky undertaking. Whenever he would feel the heat creeping up on him, he’d ask for an increase and they’d increase it. When he woke up in a sweat from a nightmare of Elise Nichols, clothes and bed drenched, he simply changed, got some towels, and made a mental note to ask for another increase in his dose.

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Hannibal felt drawn to psychiatry for its intricacies. He listened for the word choice, the subtext, the intonation, the melody, the implication and, as he listened, he planned and he saw the possible paths and he chose the path and guided his patient there. He knew how to push people to the brink and then over it, feeling sweet satisfaction when he found the exact squishy source of the problem and poked at it until it spilled out for his patient to see too. Psychiatry was a profession where he could say he felt proud for having made someone cry. Of course, others interpreted this as pride at
having facilitated a break-through and were unaware that Hannibal was proud for having put the pieces together before breaking them apart. He enjoyed the power as every alpha does in some way, enjoyed solving the puzzle as many do, and enjoyed the sweetness in having vulnerability laid bare to him to decide what to do with it in ways most psychiatrists likely do not enjoy quite the way that he did.

He, however, did not enjoy Franklin’s tears. They came too easy. There was no accomplishment there. He was still waiting to see where he’d get his satisfaction from with Franklin. In the meantime, there was some enjoyment in assuring Franklin that the lion was not in the room when Hannibal knew he himself was not only the lion, but likely something much, much worse.

On the other hand, when he met Will Graham, he immediately took note of the intricacies, delighted in Will’s word choice. He wanted to sample the thoughts Will described as not tasty. He’d gotten his aperitif of those thoughts, got to experience a simple soupçon of the free-flowing associations and a hint of the forts Will built. Hannibal found himself relating to Will, because he knew what it was like to take drips and dregs and develop theories with startling accuracy. He himself was a bit startled by how unbothered he was by the rudeness, the intrigue overrode it. He found something quality to taste and examine and evaluate, to run over his tongue like wine at a tasting.

He found himself wanting to approach this puzzle with both his personas, if not all of his being. He wanted to construct something for Will to respond to with one persona and experience that response with another persona while knowing that Will was blind to who exactly was doing the tasting. He wanted to experience Will in appearance, in the glass, in the mouth, and in his finish. He wanted to know the complexity and character, his potential, and his possible faults.

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Their breakfast together was a mess of clashing dispositions tied together with similar humor. Politeness and directness colliding into each other. Hannibal felt pride at Will accurately perceiving and in some way appreciating his gift and its wrapping. Hannibal was genuine in his expression of their similarities and the lack of flaws therein because he could see no flaw in being able to see the world in the way he suspected they both did. He rejoiced in Will’s appreciation of his word choice. It was a similarity that he valued that they shared and he wanted to give Will the gift of finally crafted diction as Will had done for him.

He wanted Will as his mongoose and he would get what he wanted.

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Hannibal once had a professor who bestowed this piece of wisdom on her students: when stuck, get curious. Of course, this professor assumed she was looking out at a group of would-be psychiatrists who were motivated by the usual things: compassion, care, benevolence. She didn’t know that among them was someone who was drawn to study therapy for selfish reasons alone. He wanted to be able to know others’ motivations in order to better manipulate them and be able to predict others’ reactions and behaviors in order to more efficiently capture or evade them. As such, he took this piece of advice and warped it beyond the kind, compassionate intention to suit his needs as he did with much of what he was learning.

When the moment presented itself, when he was standing amongst piles of paper, feeling the reverb of Will’s cunning instinct amplifying his own, and was unsure what he wanted to do next, he decided to get curious. What might happen to Will’s forts, if he were to walk into such a disordered scene? If he were to push Will to the brink now, what might happen?

Seeing Will trembling with a shaking, inexperienced hand on a bloody throat, he was not disappointed. He had pushed Will to the brink already and wanted to know what more he could do. This push was primary, basic and in it he could see that there was so much more potential to be had. He wanted to see what more he could get. He’d broken the surface and wanted to slip himself into that broken space, slither into that crack to get at the darkness, the slick wet underneath.

He knew he would have Will as his own. He saw the path and knew he would guide Will down it. Will would lose control, confront the fear that he hid from, and from it arise as something fearsome and Hannibal would have that fearsome thing as his.

Chapter End Notes

This is going to have a lot of therapy nerd stuff because I’m kind of fascinated by the portrayal of therapy on this show.

But also I’m dirty and complex so it will have sex too. So, stay tuned for that.

By the way, please do not lose faith in actual therapists based on this description of Hannibal as one. I’d feel really bad if people lost trust in therapy because I’m writing a villain therapist.
The nightmares. The power of his imagination, a topic of simultaneous controversy and acclaim when awake, ran wild when asleep. Images that followed him when awake, haunted him whenever he let himself rest. Will, a man of cunning free association, found himself associating nearly everything with Garrett Jacob Hobbs, a man who wrought destruction in his path. Will felt a sense of dread knowing that it was unlikely he’d escape that destruction any time soon and felt a need to try to protect Abigail as best he could from being consumed as well.

Being someone who formed bonds more easily with dogs than with people and someone who viewed human interaction with a hefty dose of skepticism, the connection he felt with her was certainly a singularity. Having had his hand on her throat, gushing with blood, feeling his frenzy alongside her panic, had formed something in him that wasn’t there before. Those moments created something. A Big Bang that transformed the tiny volume of his interpersonal connections into a fireball of Abigail, Hannibal, and him, which then just as quickly cooled with Hannibal’s hand covering his. In this cooling and in the moment of Abigail’s hand in Hannibal’s and Will seated alongside them, they’d formed a trifecta of stars in a new galaxy. He spent the night sitting at Abigail’s bedside, feeling the radiation created in this connection as a constant presence in the background.

The psych eval was no surprise, unfortunately. Will’s experience with being referred for assessments was extensive. Every school he’d ever attended wanted to do another round. He was forced to sit in many offices, seated across from various professionals with brows twisted in confusion, who would believe that the old round of tests simply used the wrong measures or were conducted by someone who couldn’t accurately interpret the responses. If it wasn’t so frustrating, it might be comical that these teachers, counselors, administrators, etc. could have so little faith in their predecessors and be so insistent that they could do something different. He didn’t fight this new evaluation, because he knew wouldn’t mattered if he had. The assessment would be done regardless. Will was unfortunately familiar with just how little it mattered what he wanted next. He was familiar with how pervasive this was and always would be. He would always be the oddity that needed further examining.

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Hannibal forged the evaluation for a variety of reasons: 1. He never much cared for the bureaucracy in the first place, 2. Mandated treatment presented unhelpful challenges, 3. He knew it would help in gaining Will’s trust, and 4. Knowing the path he was going to guide Will down, distancing the two of them from the constraints of a formal therapeutic relationship would aid considerably in achieving his goal.
Having practiced as a psychiatrist for years and mentored others in their developing skill set, he was familiar with the basics of working with a patient like Will. Each level of a patient’s experience in therapy presented its own challenges. Someone brand new to therapy might not know what to say or how to use the time. They answered questions in rambling, tangential fashion out of a combination of inexperience and uncertainty. Someone with some degree of experience in therapy could be prone to overanalyzing themselves. Having learned their patterns, they would start to question everything, even progress. Someone like Will with extensive unsuccessful experience in therapy became disillusioned. Nothing could help them, so nothing would. This presented a problem because a vital ingredient in the therapeutic process was the patient’s belief that it could work. In the absence of this ingredient, the treatment would spoil and sour, thereby confirming in the patient’s mind that nothing would work, which would perpetuate the rot.

The only way to subvert this dynamic would be to join with Will, which he was perfectly happy to do. Joining was his grander scheme anyhow.

Hannibal watched Will prowl around his office, sticking to the perimeter and keeping the high ground. He found it charming in a way. It was endearing for Will to cling to these illusions of protection and power while Hannibal knew himself to be entirely in control of this situation. If for now Will derived safety from circling him from above, Hannibal would let him. It would be good anyway for Will to get in touch with what it felt like to stalk and track anyhow.

“What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there. That is the intention of therapy after all,” he stated plainly, but not coldly. “It is meant to be the place where the darkness is viewed in suspension. You see the particles for what they are and strain them out to keep them from settling in deeper.”

“That’s not what therapy is,” Will scoffed, his expression contorted in disbelief.

“No?” Hannibal asked with practiced feigned unknowing, behaving as if he didn’t already know what Will would say next. He would allow Will to say what Hannibal knew he would and then sooner or later he would turn the words that came spilling from Will’s own mouth against him with no way for him to escape it. Will would provide him with pieces and Hannibal would use them to suit his design.

“Therapy is only suspension in the sense that it means having hooks in your back, dangling, hanging limply until someone decides they’ve had their fill and pulls you off the hooks again.” The image of Elise Nichols hooked on antlers flashed in Will’s mind, quickly followed by Garrett Jacob Hobbs hooked and drawing ever closer with no way to stop him. He blinked hard and looked away quickly. He wouldn’t go there. Not now. Hannibal rubber stamped him, but he could take that back. It wouldn’t be the first time someone made Will a promise and went back on it.
“Do you think I’m trying to hang you on hooks?” he questioned. The air felt heavy in the way it tended to in therapy when focusing in on the present moment and present dynamic. It can result in a patient feeling caught in the headlights or caught in the act. He watched Will stop in his stride, halting his process of stalking from above.

“I think you’ll try,” he announced and bitterness seeped deeper into his tone and flavored the sardonic turn of his eyebrows as he stated, “They always do.”

“Your past therapists?”

“Therapists, analysts, assessment specialists, take your pick. They hook and pin you like a frog on dissection day or a butterfly in a shadow box. Hooked, then unhooked and given nothing of significance to show for it. If you’ll excuse me, I’d rather not repeat the process another time. Isn’t that the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over wanting different results? Maybe the experts in sanity are the insane ones for thinking that having me do this again would serve any purpose.”

“Is that what brought you here? Others’ insanity?” Hannibal queried – one part recognition, one part purposeful ambiguity, one part challenge.

“Insanity and Alpha tendencies,” Will clarified. “That’s why Jack wants you to evaluate me – probably true for Alana too, whether or not she will recognize it. The Alphas want an Alpha to watch after the poor, fragile Omega. I can’t be trusted to take care of myself. I might fall apart or be overcome with the stereotypical need to nurture pups, too blinded by my nature to make sound decisions on my own.”

“Are you talking about Abigail? A surrogate daughter?” Hannibal asked as he recalled how sitting by Abigail’s bedside had been so eerily familial. It had sent a pang through him, remembering when he’d last felt fatherly. He hadn’t let himself become too sentimental. It wasn’t the time. Even so, there was an errant thought that snuck in that he’d not felt alone in these fatherly feelings with Will placed in symmetry to him on the other side of the bed. “You saved Abigail Hobbs’ life. You also orphaned her. Regardless of Omega stereotypes, that could come with certain emotional obligations.”

“What about you? You’re an Alpha and you were there and you saved her life too. Do you also feel obligated?” Hannibal could see the fight in Will. He could see how Will was primed to strike. What others might see as Will shrinking and cowering, Hannibal saw as akin to an animal curling in before the pounce. He longed to wield that ferocity. Others might think to tame Will to have him on a leash. Hannibal wanted to unleash him. He wanted Will unrestrained from the constraints of convention and the limitations of his current understanding.
“Yes. I feel a staggering amount of obligation,” he admitted as he arranged his expressed in duplicitous openness.

Will found himself feeling shocked. His previous experience with asking therapists questions about themselves came with detached deflections to remind him of his place – something like “I’m supposed to learn about you.” To hear Hannibal admit how he felt brought to his awareness once more the sizzle of radiation created by the expansion of his relational universe.

“Is this therapy or a support group?” Will tested. He knew better than to give in too soon. He learned to be wary. Where others might feel wholly reassured by a change of pace, Will felt trepidation creep in. He needed to understand the beast he was dealing with. He figured it was in his best interest to remain vigilant and double check – maybe triple.

“I’m here to do what you need, Will. Therapy is an exchange. You only have to give me the materials and I will fashion you something in return.”

“You would know a thing or two about fashion, wouldn’t you.”

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The letter sliding back across the table came as a pleasant surprise. Hannibal could only feel pleased by the opportunities Will unknowingly kindly provides him.

What Will labelled as a hallucination could quite possibly be a traumatic re-experiencing symptom, which made his proclamation of stress genuine. Interweaving the idea of victims – and principally Will having a victim – with Will’s ability to imagine enjoying killing, well that was planting a spore of his own. Will’s pause and solemn nod was a sign of it taking root. It would be a patient, careful practice. Place a spore and leave it to grow. Place another and see them connect. Let the spreading and connecting create a network that bloomed and covered Will’s whole being. Let him look at the current victims covered in mushrooms and see not only Garrett Jacob Hobbs, but an augury of himself. He would weave in the idea of victims and killing and pleasure with the incremental increase of physical proximity and intimacy. The Will that paced at a distance, now allowed Hannibal on an even level and allowed him to approach.

However, Will’s laugh at him gave him pause. He felt momentarily irritated, but he knew that irritation like this was likely a sign that he was pushing too hard too soon. He had been taught to pay attention to this feeling and to keep the proper pace with his patients. If he tried to move too
fast, it would be like struggling in quicksand: the harder he fought, the more stuck he would be and eventually all the vitality would be stripped away. He had to exert his force firmly and steadily in just the right way if he wanted to break through. Will might have laughed just then at the idea of his ability to connect with others physically, but Hannibal could see his potential. He would find a way to speed the process and, in the meantime, make sure to take the proper careful pace.

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“I was told that you’ve had another shooting to save our dear Abigail,” Hannibal began. Will had come into the office with an energy that signified emotions quickly boiling under the surface of the lid, which had Will displaying all the markings of someone trying to harness that energy rather than be submerged in it. Will’s usual self-identified tendency not to make eye contact was amplified and left Hannibal talking to the side of his face or the back of his head.

“Yes,” Will agreed as his rapidly blinked and licked his lips in agitation. He wasn’t feeling particularly talkative at the moment. Maybe that meant he shouldn’t have come to talk therapy, but his head hurt, his nerves refuse to calm, and his heart continued to pound in his chest as if to signify that the threat compounded with Stammets’ arrest instead of abating as it should have.

Hannibal took note of the brevity and, remembering to keep his pace, offered an invitation in the form of saying, “I would understand if it felt like déjà vu.”

“No exactly,” Will replied much the same way as he did before.

Knowing that open-ended questions can be strategically applied as encouragements, he decided his next best move would be: “How so?”

“There were some similarities, but also some differences,” Will admitted through the block that seemed lodged in his throat, preventing any sort of eloquence. Ultimately, his tone and emphasis made the general area of disturbance quite clear, even if he did not provide the specifics.

“Will, we’ve discussed this. I can only help you so far as you allow me to,” Hannibal reminded him, trying to pull Will in even if he had not looked in his direction since he walked in the room. “You came here today for a reason. I wouldn’t want you to leave here not having gotten what you came for.”

“Maybe,” Will started, fighting to get the words out as he peaked ever so slightly in Hannibal’s
direction. “Maybe I’d like to discuss distinguishing things, categorizing them, putting them where they belong.”

“You’ve continued to have a hard time recognizing things, getting confused.”

Will gave a few tense bobs of his head before continuing, “Hobbs scrambled my ability to categorize. I’m supposed to be a great profiler and I couldn’t even tell if he was a psychopath. He wasn’t like any psychopath as I understood it. I got confused and the distinctions became muddled. I couldn’t so easily concretely say what kind of crazy he was. If I couldn’t say what kind of crazy he was, if I couldn’t tell where the differences were, it was harder to distinguish between his kind of crazy and mine.”

“Why is distinguishing important for you?”

It was a question that would feel obvious to the client and the therapist would ask knowing that the client would think it ridiculous, while the therapist would know that challenging that perceived obviousness was part of the plan. It served Hannibal’s first goal in his course of treatment for Will: address Will’s need for rigidity, his absolutes, the ideas of good and bad.

“Isn’t it usual for someone to want to be different from a serial killer?” Will asked in an ornery sort of way, but at least he looked at Hannibal as he did – even if it was just so Hannibal could see the challenge in his expression as well.

“Will,” he tutted, his tone a warning of another reminder. He watched the defiant expression morph to reluctant acquiescence as Will took a seat and he moved to mirror him.

“I can understand the design and, from that, the person behind the design but I can usually know that the connection ends there because, outside of the construction, my feelings are different from theirs. I can care in the ways they don’t. I can value people in ways that they don’t. The caring and the valuing made me good and crazy and not having those things made them bad and crazy,” Will explained, managing to maintain eye contact as if hoping that Hannibal could look directly in and see the confusion for himself and spare Will from explaining. “Alana told me not to feel sorry for myself about saving Abigail. I told her that I don’t feel sorry for myself, I feel good.”

Hannibal felt satisfaction hum in his veins. It was the telltale feeling of having felt through the darkness the first bloody beat of the heart of the problem. He felt his footsteps alongside Will’s on this path they were traveling together. Will was approaching the first curve nicely.
“Is that what’s haunting you? Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?”

“I would like to feel able to remind myself of the difference between feeling good for saving Abigail and feeling good for killing Hobbs,” Will stated. The resolution was clear, although thwarted by the hint of a waver. “I may have intended to have the same result when I shot Stammets. I didn’t kill Stammets, but I thought about it. I’m still not entirely sure that wasn’t my intention pulling the trigger.”

“You’re afraid of what it might mean that you felt good killing Hobbs and intended to kill Stammets,” Hannibal paraphrased, picking out the critical pieces and placing them together.

“That feels like a pattern,” Will quavered.

“A pattern of behavior in your world might be considered malevolent. In mine, patterns do not necessarily have to be good or bad,” Hannibal explained. “Why do you think you’d want to kill Stammets?”

“Seeing him wheeling Abigail away and knowing what he intended to do to her, I felt the need to eradicate him, pull him out by the roots.” His teeth gritted and jaw tensed against the words even as he unleashed them.

“That seems understandable,” Hannibal offered. He wanted to introduce another option for Will’s consideration – a pattern that could be good, could be considered one of the most fundamental propensities. “As we’ve discussed, you care about Abigail, you feel an obligation to her. If she were threatened, you would want to eliminate the threat. It seems fairly common for parents to threaten violence towards anyone who would harm their pup even if they are not ultimately placed in the circumstances to act on it. If provided the unfortunate circumstances, they might feel proud of themselves for bestowing that protection.”

“She wasn’t my pup when I killed her father. Am I allowed to feel proud protecting someone who at the time wasn’t even mine to claim as a ‘surrogate daughter’?” Will asked in dismay.

“It’s not a question of what you are allowed to feel. You feel it. You felt it. In Hobbs’ death, a parent attempting to kill his child was replaced by a guardian prepared to kill to save the same child twice. Is that not preferable? Can a pattern of protection, even one that includes violence, be good?”
“I liked killing Hobbs,” Will confessed, a little breathless. He could feel himself spinning and he was afraid of getting lost in the swirl, not sure what might be at the bottom. “If I felt good killing Hobbs and I liked it, I’m not sure that can qualify as a pattern of protection.”

“It does not have to be one thing or the other,” Hannibal insisted. “This is the challenge in therapy. Nothing is absolute. Nothing is without nuance. We warn against black and white thinking. Seeing things in terms of good and evil, right or wrong, it’s the fuel that feeds distress’ flame. Trying to force a feeling to have one source with only one interpretation works against the complex nature of the world.”

Will’s brow furrowed in frustration. He’d wanted the spin to slow, not accelerate. He’d entered the conversation confused and as it progressed, he’d been comforted and felt conflicted about the comfort. He both craved the reassurance and rejected it. He wanted Hannibal to tell him he was okay, but had difficulty believing the reassurance when it came. “I asked you to help me differentiate and instead you tell me it doesn’t matter?”

“I can only give you my professional advice,” Hannibal pointed out, using honesty to his advantage. Calculated honesty would ultimately be his greatest tool with Will. “I can point to many empirically validated modes of therapy that warn against rigidity and warring with one’s self. We could invest our time in differentiating feelings only to realize that all of that effort only maintains the problem. As in all things, it is a balance. Sometimes when one focuses so much energy on being afraid of what they feel and trying not to feel something, it only results in the opposite effect. Maybe leaving Hobbs behind would require investing less energy in fighting the emotions and instead prioritize understanding them.”

Will rubbed at his eyes with his fingers and bemoaned, “I should’ve stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana.”

Eager to hammer his point home, Hannibal asserted, “A boat engine is a machine, a predictable problem, easy to solve. If you fail, there’s a paddle.”

“You’re supposed to be my paddle,” Will declared with tones of desperation and demand.

Will had dropped his hands from his face when he spoke and looked to Hannibal with distraught trust. Hannibal savored that trust, felt the accomplishment for both Will and himself. He could feel his own expression soften in genuine affection. “I am,” Hannibal confirmed. “You and I are going to wade the tumultuous waters of uncertainty together and when we get to the other shore, we will look back and be glad to have done it.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm debating with myself whether to go full therapy nerd and write about all the therapy scenes or stick to mostly just Will/Hannibal. If you have thoughts, feel free to comment and let me know.
The challenge of being surrounded by psychiatrists and investigators was that Will could never let his guard down. There was a constant probability of being examined and having the results of those examinations exposed. He couldn’t go to work without watchful eyes or have a cup of coffee without hypotheses about his dogs and his coping. It was what made going to see Hannibal perhaps particularly ironic. He went out of his way to visit an office to have done what he has to otherwise avoid throughout the day. He supposed Alana was unique in that way too. He’d asked her to be honest and tell him her thoughts.

He respected Alana and her observations and analyses. It would be extremely hard not to and Will had never tried. Alana could be an effective buffer because she had Jack’s respect. She had the perfect combination of Alpha aplomb, undeniable expertise, and genuine humanity to target Jack’s particular defenses. There were times when – although he wished it wasn’t the case – he recognized that, as an Omega, it was a great asset to have an Alpha willing to assert themselves on his behalf with another Alpha, particularly a fairly traditional and abrasive Alpha like Jack.

However, because he respected her, he felt his habitual nature kick in and he remained dead set on providing her only with half-truths and half-lies. She had to resort to reading the half-truths and the resultant critique was, of course, only partially correct. She could observe his collection of strays, but she couldn’t know about the true nature of the interconnections. He preferred that she think he was simply adding a stray because it was true enough to satisfy and it was palatable. He respected her too much to expect she’d tolerate his kind of thinking. There weren’t many he’d expect to tolerate his kind of thinking. If Alana was too respectable, too decent to accept his thoughts, he wasn’t sure what it said about someone if they could stomach them.

During his meeting with Alana and Jack, Hannibal might have best described the general attitude in the room as tense or perhaps strained. It was hardly a surprise with three Alphas. Particularly when Alphas tended to respond to differing opinions and competition with what might be best described as posturing. In the ritual display, each had their own unique means of posturing: Jack was a combination of overbearing force and chest pounding; Alana seemingly had her argument run in a zigzag pattern; and Hannibal, as always, went for calculated camouflage. In the clash between Alana and Jack, he tried to maintain a degree of assertive professionalism while also fading out of the fray. He wanted their respect but would rather not be placed within their crosshairs.

However, his assertive professionalism might have benefitted from just a pinch more camouflage. He wanted a degree of deference as all Alphas do, but to have it conclude with Jack seeking his
input as “Will Graham’s psychiatrist” was unfortunate. Of course, it was not entirely inaccurate and could be useful in the short term. However, it would be inconvenient in the not too distant future for Hannibal’s grand scheme and his camouflage more generally if others continued thinking of him first and foremost as Will’s psychiatrist. Once others got too far into the habit of thinking of Will as being his charge, they would feel the need to apply the associated barriers and codes. It would then be much more difficult to blend and maneuver.

Mating between patient and provider is not forbidden so much as frowned on. The volatility and variability of heat and its impact on self-restraint naturally had unpredictable results. As such, it would hardly be reasonable to wholly forbid something so uncontrollable. Nonetheless, Hannibal did his best to avoid the unseemly. It served his camouflage to be seen as fastidious. It was in his favor if others generalized and came to the conclusion that if he is so exacting in his cooking, speech, and clothing, he would be similarly scrupulous morally. It wouldn’t do to have others questioning if the former category of meticulousness comes more naturally than the latter. He would prefer it if no one found reason to be interested in speculating and gossiping about whether there’s any deviancy hidden within him.

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Hannibal entered the classroom to a different display – an unknowing courtship display, in fact. It was a special kind of courtship to have the object of his attentions and intentions sing songs of his superiority and artistry. He kept his camouflage, of course, but could feel the colors of his pride and pleasure seep through at the edges – very slight but so scarce that it felt as if it shown garishly. Being camouflaged as he was for survival meant resigning himself to being unseen and unknown but here he was being known even if he was still unseen. Even if Will still had not put his particular face to the description, this was a level of understanding Hannibal had not anticipated before meeting Will and, in particular, never expected to associate with more enjoyment than startle response.

Attraction had never been so simple as purely Alpha or Omega, dominant or submissive, aggressive or passive. As with other creatures in nature, Hannibal found that the variety of personality dimensions in attraction were much more diverse. In this particular case, he found himself drawn in by the level of perception and exploratory behavior he saw Will exemplify, as well as the level of potential Will held for further exploration.

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Hannibal enjoyed the two of them entering Abigail’s room as a united front. This was the role he would work to bring to the forefront of others’ minds over the course of his plan. He enjoyed the many ways Will embodied conflict and contradiction. He enjoyed Will’s smart clothes contrasting with his unkempt hair and smattering of facial hair. He enjoyed being able to see the clash between his restraint and disarray. He enjoyed observing Will’s self-control struggling against what
wrestled underneath. He enjoyed watching it break through every now and then to jostle and lunge and lash out. He enjoyed feeling the ebb and pull this created in the air between them. He could feel the energy flow off of Will as his quick hand snatched the card away from Abigail’s delicate, vulnerable fingers. He let the erraticism crash against him so he could drink it in. The water could rock under Will’s rickety boat and Hannibal could hold a paddle – and use it simply to knock Freddie from where she’d grabbed on the side.

Abigail, the sweet doe-eyed Omega with a deep wound across her neck, was caught up in the storm and might both be in the boat with them and contributing to the riotous waves around it.

He could appreciate Abigail’s particular verbiage in her declaration – *You killed my dad* – for how it also, unbeknownst to her, served his purpose in helping Will to see his vision. He appreciated how it most likely would serve as an experience to discuss and process and *utilize* in a future session during one of his and Will’s back-and-forths. He also appreciated what she brought out of Will. He appreciated that she forced Will to have affection for a being who rattled him and gave him practice in loving someone who also contained darkness. He appreciated that the things Abigail gave voice to guided Will to respond with “*there’s nothing wrong with you.*” He appreciated the way that sounded coming from Will’s mouth.

As Will had observed, Abigail seemed uniquely capable of bring out love in those around her. Meanwhile, Hannibal, alongside Abigail, noted that she also brought out her father’s violence. Hannibal appreciated that she could unknowingly be his collaborator to have a similar impact on their dear Will.

Of course, for all that Hannibal appreciated, Will made sure to remind him of his pace. He was reliable that way. In the cadence of his chaos and control, he would always provide a particular punctuation. Hannibal was never at risk of letting his pride string a particularly long sentence when Will forced punctuation in the middle. Will’s utterance of “*it’s the ugliest thing in the world*” was sobering. Hannibal recognized that he needed to remind Will of the beauty he saw, the beauty he had rhapsodized about, the beauty he called *art*. He wasn’t sure when or how but he filed this away for later.

This moment in the greenhouse was meant to be about rattling Will – and it did clearly serve that purpose – but, unexpectedly, Hannibal also found himself a bit disconcerted. He felt the surge of obligation and paternal connection, which was not entirely unforeseen, but he also had an interesting thought cross his mind:

With Will providing closeness and kindness and Hannibal providing direction and prudence, he and Will could create the most *awe-inspiring* creature.
Will felt like he was shaking out of his skin. This was nothing new. Neither was the tight pain in his chest, the pounding of his heart, or the slight stickiness of his skin. He knew this feeling very well, unfortunately. His feelings had him wobbling on a very confusing line. Affection, hope, and obligation tugged him one direction, while uncertainty, confusion, and frustration pulled him in another.

The substantial quantity of his frustration, as well as some disgust, could be attributed to the shameless opportunist who decided to exploit a girl during her treatment. He had tried to keep that frustration at bay, but expending so much energy trying to shove anxiety down deep made it difficult to try to add anything else in. Similar to adding Winston to the pack, he added something new and it kicked up a fuss in the ones already there. Only his pack was more well-behaved than his emotions. His training process was likely akin to do as I say, not as I do. He had added frustration and disgust to a pack of wild, warring creatures which only fed the fight. It would even out eventually, he knew, but it wasn’t as easy as clicking his tongue to quiet it. His hand had lashed out at Freddie and then later his tongue.

Still, he didn’t know where that came from – that threatening side of him. Usually the dogfighting resulted in ferocity turned inwards or, at worst, moderate snark. A threat – particularly one that set him in a similar class to the killers he hunts – emerged from him unexpectedly.

He thought about what Hannibal had said about obligation and protecting a pup. He wondered if he was right and that’s what had brought the fight out of him. Maybe a vague enough threat to Freddie Lounds wasn’t the smartest idea, but maybe he was doing what he could to protect an Omega pup who was just finding her way. He found himself once again in an internal conflict that had consumed his thoughts and disrupted his sleep. He wanted what Hannibal said to be the case, but he didn’t know what it meant to want that. Did he want it because it was true or because it would ease his conscience? Could it be both? Did he want it to be both to spare his conscience?

He was confused.

He was confused and no amount of aspirin seemed to make a dent in his headache. It didn’t help that his doctor still hadn’t called him back about increasing the dose of his suppressant. He was at the strength that required special permission, which left him to wait with night after night of interrupted sleep soaked in sweat.

However, despite all the confusion, sitting on that bench with Abigail had felt an easy kind of good. He needed to say those things to her. He needed her to know that there was nothing wrong with her. He needed her to know that if she felt broken, then she’d have company with him. He sat on that bench with her and he looked up at Hannibal, who stood there so sure, so proper, so put-together and who’d said with such certainty moments before that they could get rid of the nightmares that
plagued them. He wondered how it felt to look at them from on high as the person who knew the answers. He wondered what Dr. Hannibal Lecter thought of the two strange Omegas wrestling with their demons. Part of him was rankled by the idea of an Alpha potentially enjoying a sense of superiority, part of him wanted to peel away the self-satisfaction, and another part of him strangely felt pride.

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Hannibal, in his possession of carefully honed and refined skills in observation, naturally noticed a few notable occurrences during their subsequent meeting.

First and most obvious, they were back to the display and the posturing. Three Alphas with potentially differing opinions once again in a room discussing what to do with the Omegas. It was a dull and distasteful cliché – one he knew Will would not appreciate. He knew that he and Will had a similar pallet when it came to this distaste.

Second, he noticed that Will had barely been consulted at all. He was merely expected to sit as others spoke over or around him. Hannibal took notice and bided his time. With others, it might build the relationship if he were to engage in some sort of advocacy or extend an invitation into the conversation. However, he knew Will well enough to know that he would not appreciate Hannibal positioning himself as another Alpha wanting to speak for him under the guise of care.

Third, he noticed that the words Alana spoke and even the considerations he himself named could have been applied to Will as well. Perhaps he could have advocated for Will as Alana did for Abigail. Both Abigail and Will would be returning to their critical incident, both taking with them shared experiences that had left them changed. He could have suggested Will stay away from what some might call the scene of his crime, others might label as the site of necessary violence in the name of heroics, and Hannibal, in particular, would simply consider the locus of Will’s lost control. His and Alana’s conceptualization of healing was understandably different. What for Alana were drawbacks – recklessness, aggression, reenacting – were potential gains for both Abigail and Will alike in his perspective. As he’d said, they could reduce the possibility of denial.

Anticipating that Jack would decide to send them regardless of what was said, Hannibal knew that this weekend would be full of opportunities to bestow therapeutic insight and wisdom on Abigail with the hopes that both surrogate daughter and proxy parent alike would absorb the messages.

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Hannibal found himself presented with an opportunity to follow through on the note he had taken.
His newest display, similar but not identical to the last he had gifted Will, would hopefully serve his purpose.

They discussed his past work in front of his current work, bonded over their shared understanding of the two exhibitions. He stood next to Will has he provided his insights with increasing determination and confidence. He could feel the power rise and, as with Will’s chaos, Hannibal drank it in. They were close in proximity, intimate. Will did not know yet just how close they were. That would come.

Will looked to him when standing strong in the face of Jack’s criticism. Just as Hannibal had taken note create his spectacle at the proper time, he found the precise moment when biding his time and holding his tongue was no longer strategic. It was slight. His firm utterance of Agent Crawford was brief but seemed to serve his purpose.

He was creating their folie à deux. They would forge a pair and were in the process of creating some sort of unit in which their perspectives and understandings could be understood not as delusions but as accepted beliefs amongst each other.

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The phrase Abigail, show me what happened slipped so easily from his tongue. The parental tone – comforting and firm – was so instinctual. He saw her kneeling there with him and looked at the mess that she made. She had broken the rules and spilled on the floor and it was his duty to decide what needed to happen next. He thought of their scene in the garden house, remembered the experience he had, recalled his reflection on Will’s compassion and care and his prudence and direction. Will had done his part in providing her with steady, deliberate honesty, which left him to respond in kind. He would see the vision and guide Abigail safely to its realization.

This peculiar, little Omega was important to them and couldn’t be let go so soon.

Hannibal and Will were bound in obligation. Hannibal and Abigail were co-conspirators. He knew someday they would converge and it would be just as transformative as the event that originally brought them colliding together. Until then, she would remain unaware of the full extent of their collusion just as it was not yet time for Will to see the big picture. What was important was that Abigail knew they were bonded now through the concealment of her violence and in her knowledge of his influence. They would await the day when Will would be ready to see both. Time would tell what role she might play as they forged their beliefs and norms together.

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Hannibal managed to send Abigail on her journey back over the wall shortly before Will arrived. He was tense and rumpled as usual. He seemed pulled so taught that Hannibal wondered what might happen if he tapped against a stiff elbow or an awkwardly curled hand. He found himself imagining that the smallest impact would send a shock through Will’s tightly wound form. He found himself wanting that very much.

After a long stretch of silence settled between them, Hannibal placidly offered, “That was quite the trip.” He would provide something for Will to react to at the very least.

Will might usually be so generous as to give a huff of a desultory laugh. However, Will, seemingly consumed by his thoughts, simply hummed. He maybe gave a small nod but it was difficult to say with certainty when it could have just as easily been a particularly notable tremble.

He tried again: “You stood in the breathing silence of Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ home and in the spot where he took his last breath. You moved through the very spaces he moved through. You were in his cabin where he killed and in that cabin you encountered a victim.”

“It feels like he’s following me,” Will expressed with an errant twitch to his eyes and corner of his mouth. It felt like the words forced themselves through a thick barrier in his throat. He wasn’t sure if he was grateful for the barrier or frustrated by it. Part of him knew he’d come here for a reason, but he wished he knew what that reason was. “I tried so hard to know Garrett Jacob Hobbs. To see him. Past the slides and vials. Beyond the lines of the police reports. Between the pixels of all those printed faces of sad dead girls. It felt like we’d become one and now I can’t separate again.”

Hannibal found himself feeling oddly jealous of a dead man. He felt the stereotypical competitive Alpa nature rear its head and insist on prominence in his quarry’s mind. “How did you feel seeing Marissa Schurr impaled in his antler room?”

“Guilty,” he confessed breathlessly, the air rushing through the slight opening of a tense mouth.

“Because you couldn’t save her,” he offered.

Will abruptly winced. He wished that were the case. He wished the guilt that plagued him could so easily be considered the honorable guilt of a dutiful protector. He knew this to be an affliction shared by many of his peers. Unfortunately, the source of his guilt would only result in further alienation from his coworkers. “Because I felt like I killed her.”
Hannibal drank in the wince just as he had the twitches and inquired further, “Why do you think you would feel that way?”

“I got so close to him,” Will explained and sat forward in his chair, his body’s tension succumbing to a wave of desperation. “Sometimes, I felt like we were doing the same things at different times of day. Like I was eating or showering or sleeping at the same time he was. Seeing a girl dead in the way he would have done it, I felt connected and felt guilty for that connection.”

Hannibal wished he could tell Will who Marissa Schurr’s killer was and who he’d truly connected with. He felt himself bristle from the need to wait but found it in himself to calmly state, “Perhaps it is not your understanding of Hobbs that disturbs you but your growth in your understanding of yourself. We discussed your desperation to differentiate. Your guilt may be a result of a flawed feedback loop rather than genuine wrong-doing.”

Will huffed in restrained frustration as he sunk back to sitting along, but not against, the back of the chair. His head still ached from his last attempt to wrap his mind around Hannibal’s proffered ambiguity. “How do you possibly practice without knowing the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable?”

“It is possible to engage in feedback without declaring a person or their actions as wholly unacceptable,” he explained. “In both of our work, we relate to the individuals others struggle to understand. We comprehend individuals who hold views of the world and have ways of behaving that others condemn, and our strength lies in seeing the rationality in the irrational. We understand that what drives a person does not adhere strictly to concepts of right and wrong. I can hear that you enjoyed killing and felt connected to a killer and not condemn you. I can even feel more strongly connected to you once you’ve said it because of my appreciation for your honesty.”

“I don’t want to be indulgent,” Will uttered, solemn and emphatic. His head lulled ever so slightly down to the side. His downcast eyes picked a spot of floor to distractedly fixate on.

“What would happen if you were to indulge yourself?” Hannibal asked, prepared already for the response he wanted Will to vocalize between them.

“I might no longer know when to stop myself,” Will nearly whispered. He curled his fingers in tighter until his nails dug into his palms.

“Why should you be stopped?” he questioned, calmly. He held his leaned-forward posture
carefully in place, not wanting to ease away in his body language or push too close. He hoped instead to encourage Will’s body to move itself to engage and lean towards him again.

Will looked cautiously away from the spot on the floor to look at Hannibal for just a moment – just enough time to take in enough information to help him evaluate and assess but not too much and risk feeling overwhelmed. “Freddie Lounds thinks that I am insane,” he said as if it were purely an offered reminder.

“It is the insanity that gives you nightmares,” Hannibal inferred from what was said and unsaid, Will’s response a deflection that revealed in its deception what it meant to conceal. “You find madness like a bloodhound even in your sleep. Your mind attempts to consolidate and you become disturbed by the crossing of wires.”

“There are flashes of insanity – mine and others – they blur and haunt me and hunt me,” he gasped. A wave of numbness coursed through his body and he unclasped his hands to grip his thighs.

“A key component in therapies recommended for nightmares is imagery – namely, the ability to replace distress with a pleasant image and thereby take away its power. I want you to describe the safest scene you can imagine and we will use this scene to combat the nightmares.”

“That’s starting to sound hokey,” Will quipped dismissively and he tried to gather himself together.

“Your sanity is our joint responsibility and I take the responsibility seriously. I intend to help you learn to displace what you fear using something altogether more favorable and, in doing so, achieve satisfaction through indulgence,” Hannibal asserted and after seeing Will waver added, “If you find yourself still reluctant, I can provide you with empirical evidence.”

“Fine,” Will grumbled. “Sometimes, at night I leave the lights on in my little house and walk with my dogs around me to the flat fields. And when I look back from a distance, the house is like a boat on the sea. It’s really the only time I feel safe.”

“Good,” he praised softly, voice taking a soothing tone to match the constructed scene. “I want you to think of this before you go to bed at night; see the lights in the house, the shine of the moon, the dogs trailing around your feet. Think of every detail. Practice letting this image bleed from wakefulness to sleep.”
Hannibal saw the markers of Will’s family in his home – both the family he’s created with his pack and the traces of Will’s father. He saw the generosity and care as he stepped around the myriad of dog beds. He saw the trust and adoration Will instilled in the creatures he rescued from abandonment. He could see the Will’s father in the boat motor, the fishing bait, and even in the way Will folded his shirts and socks. He could see the likely army background. He saw how he bonded with Will over simple, masculine past times like fishing and boating.

He could imagine a younger Will on a boat in Louisiana, his nose and cheeks turning pink in the hot sun. Just a pup with the sun in his eyes, glasses slipping in sweat down his nose, and his bangs in need of a trim left hanging and covering his face. He imaged both Will and his father to be fairly withdrawn – perhaps particularly so when out on the water. Maybe they were even seated back to back, easing Will’s aversion to eye contact. It could be an easy time together, an escape from misunderstanding. The confusion and complexity would slip away in nature’s simplicity. They could bond in the calm silence and just wait on the fish to bite.

He could see that Will likely grew up close poor. He could see it in his belongings, both in the quality and condition. He had nothing showy or pristine and everything could be or would be repaired by Will himself. He was used to saving money, used to the scarcity. He grew up with buying the cheaper, lower quality item and making it last as long as he possibly could. Poverty creates wear and tear. It would have worn away at him.

He envisioned another young Will, just as rumpled as he would continue to be as an adult, who was incredibly different from everyone in numerous ways. An Alpha father with an Omega pup – a distinctive and remarkable pup at that, a pup that baffled peers and professionals alike. Where a pup who experienced poverty might already have difficulty following rules and controlling impulses, young Will, with his empathy and complexity, would face additional difficulty. He would struggle to understand the mundane, arbitrary regulations and be criticized for breaking rules he hadn’t known existed.

Naturally, when faced with repeated undue punishment from others, Will would be a pup who grappled with himself and who would have all odds staked against him and be forced to take the blame when he faltered. He would be told he was wrong and that he needed to assimilate to be right. However, the willfulness and cleverness inside of Will could only be suppressed, never erased. The outbursts would have been punished and criticized and controlled. Will’s expression of loneliness and frustration from school would compound with a father who only knew to address it using guilt, anger, embarrassment, and shame as tools. Restriction and repetition was likely the key. Will would learn the process. Fold the shirts and roll the socks as many times as it takes to get it perfect. Fold in the sharp edges. Feel the blade pointed inward so long as no one else gets cut. If the fold is wrong and the blade should slip out and wound another, feel shame for having failed. After feeling the shame for so long, he might start to believe that the best way to keep others away from the blades and prevent further shame would be to do his best to dissuade anyone from trying to unfold him.
He saw the hook and the lure, pricked his finger, and sucked away the blood. He wanted there to be blood in this house. He wanted every weapon that had turned inwards to return to their rightful place. He wanted to find every piece of Will that has been blunted and chipped away and sharpen them until they emerged once more as sharp and keen as they once were.

In the process of his investigating and assessing, he found a particular source of restriction that seemed to be exactly what would do the trick.

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“Tell me about your mother,” Hannibal requested plainly. He hadn’t seen a trace of Will’s mother in his house. There wasn’t a single photo or memento. He could attempt to speculate and make assumptions about what it would mean for someone to omit such things from his home. He imagined it could mean Will either grieved very intensely or not at all.

“That’s some lazy psychology, Dr. Lecter,” Will taunted. “Low hanging fruit.”

For a moment, Hannibal could imagine the pup whose willful cleverness could easily point out the flaws in an adult’s argument and fail to realize that he wasn’t supposed to notice. As the pup felt increasingly frustrated, his control would slip and that same cleverness would become particularly sharp. The observations would cut deep. Through these experiences, he would become aposematic, the slight edge he portrayed as unfriendliness was designed to signal to predators that he’s not worth sinking their teeth into. He had called his thoughts *unpalatable*. He seemed to consider them poisonous as well.

“I suspect that fruit is on a high branch,” Hannibal argued, knowing just how carefully he would have to unfold all that constricted Will. “Very difficult to reach.”

“So is my mother. Never knew her,” Will confessed reluctantly. Will wasn’t sure if his grimace was aimed towards himself for what he said or that he’d said it at all. He’d had this conversation before – the discussion of what it was like for him to never know his mother. It would be followed up with speculation about the meaning and impact: Did he have a fear of abandonment? Did his empathy feel like a burden because he longed for a connection he would never have? Would he have better social skills if he’d had a mother in the household to guide his way? Apparently, he’d have a personality if only he’d had siblings. Alas, his mother had decided she already had one child too many. Or maybe she just found her family lacking and went searching for an upgrade.

“An interesting place to start,” Hannibal encouraged, enticed by the tell Will had displayed. Will was demonstrative, particularly in the way his face displayed his anguish. His eyes, forehead,
brows, jaw, and mouth effectively cooperated to communicate the hurt, exasperation, and frustration.

“Tell me about your mother,” Will challenged, feeling himself rankled by the prospect of redundancy and bad memories. Why should he have to answer this question over and over? Nothing good would come from it. “Let’s start there.”

“Both my parents died when I was very young. The proverbial orphan until I was adopted by my Uncle Robertas when I was 16,” he admitted simply and succinctly.

“You have orphan in common with Abigail Hobbs,” Will pointed out plainly, but not cruelly.

Hannibal was unrelenting in his sincere, placating tone. “I think we’ll discover you and I have a great deal in common with Abigail. She’s already demonstrated an aptitude for the psychological.”

“Is that the secret?” Will joked darkly, followed by a deep sigh. “Is a tragic backstory the skeleton in the closet of those skilled in psychology?”

“When peering into darkness, it may become more captivating. It could become a matter of find it intriguing or risk being consumed,” he offered in invitation.

“I’m not sure the two are mutually exclusive,” Will murmured as he ran his hand anxiously and forcefully up and down his thighs.

“Strength lies within the overlap of darkness and curiosity,” he assured.

Will’s expression twisted in displeasure. He had difficulty with the idea that pain created anything other than pain. “Abigail has already had to be stronger than any pup ordinarily should have to be."

“The word ‘ordinary’ doesn’t seem to suit her anyhow,” Hannibal soothed, hoping his tone and words would offer comfort in their sincerity.

Hannibal was rewarded with a slight smile and eyes that held slightly less distance, when Will replied, “Another commonality, I suppose.”
“What value is there in being ordinary?” he queried, opting once again for a Socratic approach.

“I wouldn’t know,” Will argued. “Not enough familiarity with the subject matter. It’s just as foreign to me as the concept of family. Like an ill-fitting suit. I never connected to the concept.”

“Unfamiliar and yet I sense that, even in the unknown, you value and seek it,” he emphasized, knowing that Will’s dismissal was at least partially inauthentic. He knew how strongly Will pursued the concept of ordinary despite knowing it would always evade him. He wanted very badly to be a simple boy on a boat where the silence between father and son was for the benefit of the fish rather than to maintain the illusion. “If we were to tailor the suit, how would it fit differently?”

“It’s constricting, if I take too deep of a breath, reach too far too suddenly, it could rip apart at the seams. If only it weren’t so tight and I could move,” Will gasped through shallow, emphatic breaths. “But I’m pretty sure you can’t tailor something bigger.”

“There is a Japanese art form called kintsugi that involves taking what is broken and fixing it with gold to enhance the breaks rather than disguise them. It is a style of art that understands that filling in the gaps and seeing what was broken can make something more valuable, not less.”

“That assumes I have access to gold,” he contested.

“Goldwork, in fact, requires very little gold. My guess is that you have more to work with than you realize and could fashion a new suit with what is already available to you,” he argued in return. “I know from being in your home that you are very adept at using all the means at your disposal and yet you might still find that you haven’t realized the worth of some of what you have and what you have already created.”

“What have I created then?” Will fired back. There was a teasing smile that flashed so quickly that both Hannibal and Will himself might only know it as something they recall afterwards rather than experiencing it as it occurred – like a hand noticing heat only after recoiling from a flame.

“You created a family for yourself,” Hannibal stated calmly, though not to put out Will’s flame but to show Will that he could endure it. He wanted the fire to rise in Will and burn. He wanted Will to experience the destruction, see the creation, and know that they would endure.
“I connected a family of strays,” Will replied easily, feeling himself still risen to a challenge.

“I was referring to Abigail,” Hannibal indicated, knowing the truth to his words and the implication of Will getting caught in the accuracy – a catch and release strategy that Will might have appreciated if he weren’t the one on the line.

Will did feel himself get caught and yet refused to entirely concede and continued to fight. “I have been encouraged not to think of Abigail as among my pack.”

“I don’t see why she should be excluded,” he challenged. The reframe of exclusion rather than inclusion was sure to prompt a reaction and if the reaction was paternal protection, it would be all the better in his eyes.

“Something cannot be excluded if they are not meant to share the same grouping in the first place,” Will clarified. “Pups and puppies are not the same.”

“When we were in Minnesota, we talked about family as a set of norms and beliefs. You created norms in your pack. You took them in from loneliness and isolation and taught them to connect to each other. Taught them how to explore and when to come home. These are fundamentals of attachment that apply to all creatures, including humans, including Abigail. Start to see the gold that you can turn into more thread.”

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Interactions between therapists were always complex. Clinical work acted as small talk. Technical terms and theoretical constructs were treated as commonplace colloquialisms. Assessments of symptoms took the place of vague placations. The question *How is she doing?* would be an invitation for a diagnostic exercise and what might in others be a reply of *I’m trying to help her* would be stating treatment plans and interventions. Observations of self-medication would become jokes to convey that they were trying their best to not conduct themselves *too professionally*. Conversations were characterized by how much of one’s therapeutic style bled into the personal and how much the other person noticed and, potentially, resented being analyzed off the clock. Conversation partners might try their best to use their skillful discretion to hold themselves back but they couldn’t stop their eyes from seeing and observing. Their casual discussion of treatment and reactions to treatment would become personal.

When his and Alana’s conversation of Abigail’s treatment turned to a critique of Hannibal’s suggestions, he knew they required a deflection lest the conversation lead to further analysis and conceptualization, which would risk Alana seeing just how truly invested he might be. When Jack
came to dinner and plainly, but lightheartedly insisted that Hannibal not diagnose and share his analyses, he was reminded that such dynamics are not exclusive to therapists. Jack likewise turned dinner conversation into comparing assessment outcomes and conceptualizations. Hannibal’s diversion this time would be to engage while also concealing. He would state generalities about Will to protect the details and engage with Jack’s conjecture to decrease the need to supply his own. His camouflage gave the illusion of blending with Jack’s interests and made it appear that the anchor Will craved, which was the same anchor Jack wanted Will to have, would be the anchor Hannibal intended to provide, even though Hannibal had no intentions of the sort. He could let Alana have her confident expertise and Jack had his authoritative bravado and they could both think they were in charge of their domains so long as their self-satisfaction kept them from noticing the true happenings within their territories.

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Will sat staring at a computer screen and at the faces of boys with dark hair who were too small for their age. He saw the efforts to manage their apparent dysfunction. The Turner and Frist families had lost boys who may have already been lost before they had been abducted. He felt caught in a maelstrom of emotions, afraid that any movement might be enough to get torn apart in the tumult. Anger, despair, irritation, desperation. He could see it mirrored in the eyes in photos on the missing posters – the boys who were the perfect fit for the side of a milk carton, sympathetic and yet disposable.

He feared what would happen until they found the lost boys and feared what would happen afterwards. There were more children who were broken in ways that couldn’t be repaired and who would search for homes that would likely never exist. He thought of the orphans with homes destroyed by violence and broken promises and who longed for a place to belong. The turmoil beat against the dam and he withdrew deeper within in search of sturdier defenses.

He found himself thinking of the orphans again – this time thinking of the orphans being gathered together and given them structure in freedom. He thought of reaching out with a token, something to forge a bond as he encouraged a frightened, wary creature closer within his grasp. The swirl could ease to softer ripples like those around a topwater lure.

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“Good evening, Will,” he greeted and, unnecessarily, added, “Please come in.” He took note of the present peaking out of Will’s back and remarked with intrigue, “Has Christmas come early? Or late?”

“It was for Abigail,” Will replied in frustration.
“Was?” he echoed curiously.

“I thought better of it,” Will explained, still flustered and confused. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I was…I was upset when I bought it. Maybe still am.”

“What is it?” he asked, taking some care to try to tuck the present back in the bag.

“Magnifying glass. Fly-tying gear,” Will offered as means of explanation.

He noted that today would be another standing session for Will. There was meaning to be found in how Will used his body in Hannibal’s office, when he needed to stand and how even when he let himself sit, he didn’t let himself relax. He took an intentional seat as he watched Will fiddle with a letter opener between his clever fingers. He did his best to not let his eyes linger too long as he scanned Will’s form.

“Teaching her how to fish,” he remarked. “Her father taught her how to hunt.”

“That’s why I thought better of it.”

“Feeling paternal, Will?” he asked, finding himself wishing very much that he and Will would continue to be united in their paternal feelings in new and unique ways.

Will reared back in his tense pose, jaw clenched as he looked down. “Aren’t you?”

He had noticed this pattern in Will. When Will felt particularly vulnerable, when asked a particular question that touched a certain open wound and threatened to unfurl him, Will threw the question back. Hannibal was being tested, he knew. Tested in more ways than perhaps even Will was aware of. In his vulnerability, he tested if Hannibal could be trusted – would he be honest, would he tolerate Will’s outbursts, would he let Will in too. It was a longing for connection. In his vulnerability, he wanted to be reassured that he was not alone – even if he didn’t know how to ask for this directly. Anger could be an easier emotion to tap into. Anger was empowering and energizing in ways that sadness and shame were not. He could angrily demand what he could not vulnerably ask for.
“Yes,” Hannibal expressed, honestly. “We’ve discussed our paternal feelings before. They are neither new nor forbidden. Tell me, why are you so angry?”

“I’m angry about those boys. I am angry because I know when I find them, I can’t help them. I can’t give them back what they just gave away.” Will expressed, betraying the anguish, as well as the frustration.

“Family,” he offered as confirmation.

“Yeah,” Will agreed in resigned frustration.

“A family the likes of which you’ve never had,” Hannibal surmised, feeling the tension grow.

“Yeah,” he agreed again, this time feeling his anger bleed further into heartache.

“Idyllic families, nuclear families, families with a mother and father and a unique, complicated, erratic pup – they’re coming apart in front of your eyes. What you never had discarded in cruel tableaus. Mothers loving and forgiving their sons even in their moment of death when your mother took away her love before you can even remember,” Hannibal stated. He could feel himself zeroing in on the exact gap in Will’s defenses and honed in on his target. It changed the atmosphere in the room. Everything felt sharper. He knew he needed to put the heat on and push Will until he teetered and then hold him there.

“Yeah,” Will choked, wetly. He clutched a hand over his eyes. He wanted to block out the world and keep the world from seeing him in turn. He could hide the tears in his eyes this way.

Hannibal saw Will wavering under the intensity and knew he couldn’t relent. He knew that Will would move away from the emotion at the soonest possible opportunity and it would be Hannibal’s job not to let him. “You bought a gift to strengthen your relationship with Abigail the way you strengthen your relationship with your dogs and how your father strengthened his connection with you, but you question yourself. You question your ability to form and sustain a family. With families slaughtered around you, your good intentions and family activities feel tainted.”

“Yeah,” Will gasped and moved his hands to rub away the evidence of wetness around his eyes as he took a deep breath and pretended it didn’t stutter in his chest.
“You can trust your instincts, Will,” Hannibal encouraged, his voice soft to soothe a spooked animal.

Will laughed mirthlessly and felt more comfortable settling into disbelief and skepticism, which granted familiarity amongst the shadows he preferred to avoid. He tried to ignore how the laugh felt thick in his throat.

“You don’t believe me,” Hannibal observed. He had lost his momentum, lost his hold on the spot in Will that was blocked and needed bleeding. A leech’s bite healed in its bloodletting, breaking up a clot and allowing movement – not entirely different from the that happens at a mating bite. There was an interaction between systems, forged in blood, that allowed for more symbiotic functioning. Will had always been formidable and would continue to prove himself as a worthy match. He would not let himself be held too tightly while the sensation still drove him to fight. Hannibal had seen a glimpse and gained experience in how to tap into the hidden places within Will. He could be patient and utilize the knowledge another, more opportune time.

“Not really, no,” Will stated cynically.

“Why not? You trust your instincts all the time in your work with the FBI. You stand firm in your assessments.”

“I use the evidence,” Will emphasized. “Crime scenes are snapshots of the past and I recreate the process. I can stand firm in use of logic even in the pursuit of the irrational. She’s in the present, in the future. The constant shifting emotion blurs the image and I can’t see. Logic is what keeps the instinct and empathy in check to prevent disaster. It tells me when my empathy and instinct need to be restrained and reprimanded.”

“I suspect that in addition to utilizing evidence, you have a particular instinct when assembling the pieces. You hold something unique, distinctive, and intuitive that others do not. It is nothing to be ashamed of and yet your logical side punishes it. Your so-called logical side seems to be a disciplinarian determined to treat your base drives as disobedient regardless of whether it’s deserved, which hardly seems logical. Having met your pack, I’m sure you’d agree that’s a poor training system.”

“Better that I take it than she does,” he expressed in resignation. “She already endures so much that I can’t help her with.”

Hannibal hummed in encouragement. He thought of what Will had said in the greenhouse – There’s no such thing as getting used to what you experienced. It bothers me a lot. “Considering
our commonalities with Abigail, we might instinctually know what Abigail needs better than others
who do not understand her as we do. It’s perhaps our responsibility, yours and mine, to help her
find her way.”

“Helping her to find her way assumes I know how to find the way.”

“Trusting your instincts is how you find it. As we move through the world, our interactions with
others shape us. We learn what seems to be acceptable and what is unacceptable. Our friends, our
family, our lovers shape us. The trick is to know when the sculpture has gone too far. The features
have been manipulated too much and we become inauthentic. We can no longer recognize
ourselves or trust what we see. It is hard to feel effectual if others have muddied your instinct and
nature, hidden away into something forbidden. This is a space where you get to see what it is like
to bring them back to the surface. We create an environment to dredge through the muck and if you
like what arises, then you present it to the rest of the world. That’s how you find your way. I want
you to get in touch with your instincts even if that means going against what you’ve been told. If
others wanted you quiet, I want you to be loud. If they wanted you reasonable, I want you
unreasonable. I want you selfish — even if that means feeling paternal and buying gifts and maybe
doing the wrong thing.”

“So, you want me to buy Abigail gifts and become attached even if Alana’s warned me that just
because I have a pack doesn’t mean I can handle a pup?” Will asked skeptically.

“I want you to get in touch with your instincts even if that means going against what you’ve been
told,” he agreed.

“You would advise me to go against our very highly regarded colleague’s advice,” Will asserted
again, still doubtful. “You preach instinct and ambiguity but would you dare practice it yourself?”

“I find my instinct to be a useful tool like yours,” he explained, unflustered. “As a psychiatrist, I
sometimes feel I can understand how psychics craft their performance. As I listen, I get the
impression that I’ve pulled a connection out of the ether. Not exactly sure why it came to me in
that way, but as I express it to a patient, they come alight. I have seen the same in you when you
work. You may distrust instinct, but I do not. Even when my instinct indicates that I defy the
expertise of an esteemed colleague and see that what is in one’s best interest is incredibly
individualized and does not fit within strict delineations.”

“And what does your instinct tell you to do with Abigail?” Will continued in his challenge.

“Like you, I also feel paternal and I find myself wanting to connect with Abigail through sharing
my pastime. In fact, I was hoping to have her to my house for dinner. Our good friend Dr. Bloom has advised against taking too personal an interest in Abigail’s welfare. However, I find myself feeling that just because some might consider it ill-advised that does not inherently make it impossible.”

“Dinner?” Will asked, finding himself a bit surprised and, perhaps, a bit pleased.

“I was hoping you would join us, but I would also understand if you did not wish to.”

“Dinner would be nice,” he agreed as he took his seat. He stole a glance at his bag and the present that still stuck out of the pocket.

“Dining at my home would be considered unconventional for client and psychiatrist,” Hannibal prompted, conducting a test of his own.

“Convention doesn’t seem to suit us anyhow,” Will offered as a reminder in return and even gave an impish smile.

“My thoughts exactly.”

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The words he exchanged with Abigail continued to nearly eerily echo those typical of the guardian he was establishing himself as: you have to sleep in your own bed; with me, you don’t have to lie about anything; have you thought about applying to schools; I want you to do drugs with my supervision, where it’s safe. He positioned himself as guardian, positioned Abigail away from being her father’s daughter, and would be positioning Will to complete them at his table.

This little thing, with her bad dreams and the secrets that can only be kept between the two of them, stood in his kitchen haunted by Hobbs much like Will and, much like Will, required an unconventional mode of therapy. Just as he’d discussed with Will, the unconventional did not have to be forbidden. He was teaching his Will and Abigail to become empowered, to let feelings wash over them rather than drown them. Abigail might be the best instrument at his disposal when it came to unleashing their awaited guest.
“Eggs and sausage. We had this last time you cooked for me. Careful, I might start to think you’re a one-trick pony,” Will remarked as he tried to acclimate himself to the new environment. It was all so much to take in. He was unfamiliar such expensive appliances and cleanliness devoid of dog hair and dirt tracked in from outside.

“Let me know when you would like for me to cook for you next and I will be sure to vary the offerings,” he replied easily, not betraying the true genuineness of the offer or acknowledging the peculiarity of such an offer given his position.

Will hummed. The sound was casual, but warm. Hannibal stole a quick glance at Will’s profile as Will continued to scan the room. Hannibal could see the gears turning and instinctually piecing together observations. Will had studied him in his office and could gather evidence from the books in the bookcases lining his walls but those would all be intentional choices and intentional signaling of expertise and learnedness. Will now had the opportunity to observe Hannibal’s home, where he should ostensibly be most unguarded and natural. Will would see him as a person with a home, someone multidimensional beyond the professional.

“This is also the meal the Hobbs family was making just before we arrived. You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Will observed, neither suspicious nor approving, simply stating.

“Our young Abigail made the same observation,” he commented, amused again by the pair of them, the creatures too clever for the world and who were falsely told they were too clever for their own good.

“How did she react?”

“Calm and curious, as usual.”

“It’s going fine then?” he asked curiously. He liked the idea of dinner, liked that he liked it, potentially liked it because it wasn’t his idea to scrutinize. He felt he could grant leniency to Hannibal’s ideas as they related to Abigail and leniency to himself in his overlap with Hannibal’s ideas – even if he could not yet entirely trust his own instincts or shake the part of himself that kept his guard up.

“More or less. She experienced a bit of anxiety and I gave her something to help,” he answered, nearly honestly. “I want this to be a corrective experience. She needs to develop a new relationship with the idea of a family meal. Becoming too activated would risk being retraumatized, which
would only compound matters.”

Will did his best to squash the worry clawing at his insides and instead acquiesced with a nod quickly followed by an expression that turned from neutral to mischievous at the blink of an eye. “Are you going to try to medicate me next?”

“Do you need to be?” Hannibal asked with a tone that was teasing, but receptive. Truthfully, he had considered dosing Will as well, willingly or otherwise, and had decided that the risk of Will noticing would pose the possibility of a costly, potentially irreparable rupture. However, if Will wished for it, he would happily oblige.

“No,” Will refused nonchalantly – though this continued to remind him of the voicemail he’d left with his doctor that had gone unreturned. “Not by you at least.”

Hannibal gave his own casually warm hum. He could easily identify a conversation best saved for later, so instead of a reply he simply led Will to join Abigail as she sat in a polite daze.

“Are you hungry?” Abigail asked airily. “Hannibal made breakfast for dinner.”

“So I can see,” Will replied carefully as he took his seat. He could feel Hannibal pass behind him to add the rest of the food to the spread on the table and Will turned to watch as he took his seat.

Silence settled oddly between them as Will and Hannibal watched Abigail process the scene in front of her.

“What is it?” Hannibal prompted, wanting Abigail to verbalize whatever was wading through her sluggish consciousness. “Abigail? What do you see?”

“I see family,” she breathed with affection and awe.

Hannibal turned carefully to see Will’s reaction and was pleased to see Will’s soft eyes and the tenderness in his slight smile. He had hoped Will would receive such a tableau with affection. It would be a necessary part of Will’s own revival.
Will found himself looking at Abigail for longer than he might usually, perhaps put at ease that in her slight haze her critical eye could be delayed. Her big blue eyes conveyed innocence and he felt a surge of protective instinct arise. She was so unguarded, nothing of the woundedness and wariness that he wished he could erase forever. However, he could only keep eye contact with Abigail for so long both due to his general discomfort with the action and the fear of seeing the contentment fade away whenever the artificial safeguard wore off.

His eyes scanned the food instead, then passed over the empty chairs around the rest of the table. The memory of a dead family filling empty chairs around a dining room table with rotting food flashed into his mind. He felt the tightness in his chest like an instinctual flinch. He thought about the lost boys’ mother figure and how she’d so desperately wanted love and preached the formation of a new family born in destruction and death. The thoughts threatened to wither any warmth that had started to bloom. He tried to push away the memory of families thrown away and destroyed forever and squash the worry that forming a family created in spilled blood would be another commonality with those he was meant to be hunting.

He closed his eyes tightly and took some deep breaths to force his chest to expand again. When he opened them again, he tried to see what Abigail saw. He looked then to the head of the table and at Hannibal dishing portions onto each of the plates with practiced ease. He was once again attending to Will and Abigail as they gathered their wits. Will could feel Hannibal’s usual air of careful consideration in effect and knew, as always, that even if Hannibal’s eyes were not on him, Will was being watched. He found himself feeling accustomed to this sensation – perhaps becoming so habituated that he was able to let it fall away to reveal something else lying underneath. That something was so vague and intangible that he couldn’t grasp it long enough to give it a name. As he wrestled with the intangible, he found himself looking at Hannibal’s hand resting casual and tangible on the table and he wished he could reach out to feel what Hannibal’s hand felt like in his.

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They’d eaten dinner together and Will returned Abigail to the treatment facility, which had felt less like the united family sitting around the dinner table and more like he was a parent with partial custody returning a pup after having her for the weekend. On his drive home, he’d tried to remind himself that both versions were acceptable kinds of family – and they were still better than he’d known before.

He tried to keep the feeling of family and connection in his mind as he started to visualize his house on the field and his pack fanned out around him. His mind sunk into flashes of images: the field behind his house covered in fog; a girl on a stag head out in the middle of grass; blood on his hands in a kitchen – the kitchen changes, his, then Hannibal’s; his still bloody hand grasping another’s on a dinner table set with strange meat prepared for breakfast. The voice of the hand’s mysterious owner emerged amongst the images and asked *What do you see?* and he heard himself say *I see family.*
I was feeling annoyed with myself that it was taking so long to update, but then I realized that this update is 20 pages long and now I feel less bad.

Please give me some love because this chapter was a beast and I feed on praise.
He walked beyond the field outside his house, past the grass wet with dew until his house was no longer a boat on the sea but a star faintly blinking in the distance. Beyond the field, no longer merely a stag head, the full beast stalked behind him. He had goosebumps but not from fear. He recalled in a flash the blood and violence hung on antlers. The images and insinuations faded to the background just as quickly as they came and he was undisturbed. He felt no need to run or flee. Instead, he found himself wanting to turn around and feel the fur between his fingers and the breath puff against his face. Any attempt to face the beast directly was fruitless. He couldn’t turn around. His feet continued to walk and he remained facing forward. His body was rigid and unyielding but his mind thrashed and struggled against the constriction. Although his head remained downturned, he felt indignation and determination build. Chills poured down his spine as a puff of air brushed hot and damp against his hand, which had gone slightly numb with cold. The goosebumps heightened as he felt a rush under his skin. The longing and ire remained and he continued to struggle, nonetheless he found some comfort.

“Although I may be, is it safe to assume you’re not sleepwalking now?” Hannibal asked as he dispensed himself and Will a cup of coffee each. He had been nearly finished preparing his coffee and intended to focus his attention on breakfast when his doorbell rang. Surprise guests were usually tolerated at best and an unexpected guest first thing in the morning would usually be intolerable, particularly when it required that he answer the door in his robe. However, when he’d found Will on the other side of the door he found it to be a welcome surprise.

“I’m sorry it’s so early,” Will apologized, feeling a little embarrassed for having just shown up suddenly. He hadn’t really been thinking. He wasn’t even sure he really decided to come over. He knew he had to make decisions to get from Wolf Trap to Baltimore, but they hardly felt like decisions. It felt like he just ended up here. He hesitated on the other side of the kitchen island and shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. He wasn’t sure where to stand or how to stand or how to act in general. He knew Hannibal cared about manners and propriety, which was unfortunate when Will hadn’t been raised with sophisticated table manners and, even if he had been, it would be well and truly lost in his foggy, fatigued brain.

“Never apologize for coming to me,” he reassured warmly. He eyed Will’s posture, familiar but not in the way he preferred – familiar from time spent in their office rather than familiar from their dinner together. He wanted the Will that sat at his dining room table. “Office hours are for patients. My kitchen is always open to friends.”

Will quirked an eyebrow and twitched his lips in a slight smile. “Is that what we are now?”

“Is that what you would like?” he asked genuinely as he extended his arm to present the coffee as an offering. Letting hope slip into his tone was advantageous, as well as sincere.

Will said nothing and let silence speak for itself. He held eye contact in a way that was rare in its
focus and purpose. One side of his lingering slight smile tilted higher in impishness and affection. His hand reached out for the coffee. His fingers were warmed by the brief brush with Hannibal’s own and the heat of the coffee emanating from the cup.

Hannibal kept that gaze and matched that slight smile as he asked, “How are you feeling?”

Hearing the question made Will’s attention snap back. Where there had been warmth and comfort in the fuzzy edges, wariness sunk in his bones and fatigue blurred his thinking. His muscles felt stretched out from being spun too fast in the dryer. He sighed deeply in frustration and exhaustion, “You said Jack sees me as fine china used for special guests. I’m beginning to feel more like an old mug.”

“Lack of sleep will do that,” Hannibal replied easily and inoffensively in between sips of his coffee, concealing his curiosity in the benign action.

“I’ve been sleep-deprived before without sleepwalking,” Will argued, frowning into his own coffee cup as he drank a bit. He felt his tongue get slightly burned by the hot liquid he hadn’t thought to blow on. He tried to play off his startle by asking, “Could it be a seizure?”

“I’d argue good old-fashioned post-traumatic stress. Would you prefer it was a seizure?” he asked as he moved to put the pieces together to make breakfast. He would need to be sure to make something different from their last two meals together even if he didn’t get his requested notice beforehand.

“Might be easier to treat. I’ve been practicing the visualization like we talked about. The nightmares have been better but I’m not sure sleepwalking could be considered progress,” he lamented. He hated that his mind felt like whack-a-mole – knock down one problem, another will just pop up somewhere else until they come too quickly and there are too many to whack. Will hesitated to think about what game over would entail.

“Somewhere between denying horrible events and calling them out lies the truth of psychological trauma,” Hannibal normalized. “There may be some fluctuation in symptoms until you’ve achieved the proper balance.”

“It’s not exactly reassuring to have one problem fade and another quickly take its place,” he griped. He took another drink of his coffee and could this time enjoy the heat instead of recoil.

Hannibal moved to the refrigerator to select additional ingredients and cast his words of explanation over his shoulder as he worked. “The topic of sleepwalking has been of interest for centuries. In medieval times, sleepwalking was considered a disorder of body and soul. Thirteenth century writers explored sleepwalking in terms of three explanatory models: habit, desire, and fear. In habit, the sleepwalker is simply repeating their customary waking behavior when asleep. In desire, the sleepwalker pursues the fleeting wishes and desires experienced when awake. In fear, the sleepwalker confronts the fears that were not – or could not be – adequately addressed during the day.”

“It didn’t feel like just some habit playing out and,” Will paused and tried to dig back into the rapidly fading memory of his dream until he recalled, “I wasn’t scared.”

“Desire, then?” he proposed and he snuck a calculated glance or two at Will to see his reaction. The next step might be the trickiest to take.

“I thought therapeutic best practice had moved past dream analysis,” Will shot back defensively. He had tried his best not to think about how he’d found himself waking up from his nightmares –
and, most recently, sleepwalking – not only wet from sweat, which wasn’t unusual, but also from slick, which was unexpected. He tried not to think about how his dreams laced with bloody hands held affectionately and breath cast over sensitive skin gave his shivers a pleasant tinge.

“Did you not come here for some sort of analysis?” he questioned as he set about preparing the meat.

“I thought I was in my friend’s home, not my psychiatrist’s,” Will insisted sharply. He felt himself recoil at his own anger. He wasn’t even sure who he was angry with – Hannibal for being accurate in his analysis or himself for the truths that were there to be observed. He sighed in apology. “Let’s just avoid analyzing which stage of psychosexual development I’m fixated on.”

“That seems fair so long as that means you agree not to label me anal retentive,” he quipped with a teasing, pointed look at the immaculately clean and particularly orderly spread on his counter. There was nothing spilled or out of place even in the middle of cooking. He flicked his eyes to look at Will with that particular shared playfulness that had tinged their silence before.

A genuine, spontaneous laugh burst from Will and, along with it, an open smile that was momentarily devoid of tiredness. “I think I can agree to that.”

Hannibal smiled amiably in return before redirecting his attention once again to his task and explaining, “Onset of sleepwalking in adulthood is less common than in children. Your experience may have overwhelmed ordinary functions that give you a sense of control.”

“If my body is walking around without my permission, you’d say that’s a loss of control?” Will scoffed.

Hannibal looked up at him quickly from where his head had been tipped down in focus on his task. “Wouldn’t you?”

“I’d say loss of control is an understatement,” Will bemoaned.

“Your dreams were the one place you could be physically safe, relinquishing control. Not anymore,” Hannibal validated. “It’s difficult to lie still and fear going to sleep when it’s there to think about. You listen to your breathing in the dark and the tiny clicks of your blinking eyes. It’s even more difficult to not be able to trust yourself once sleep does come.”

“I thought about zipping myself up into a sleeping bag before I go to sleep but it,” Will paused, almost afraid of the association that came to mind. An ironic laugh made the words easier to expel, “it sounds like a poor man’s straight jacket.”

“Just as it is difficult to balance denying trauma and calling it out, it is difficult to decide how to proceed when what usually lends a feeling of control no longer suffices,” he interpreted as he started to arrange the components of their meal onto plates. “If it is desire that fuels your sleepwalking, perhaps taking a look at what you’re desiring offers an alternative to a straightjacket.”

Will hesitated and murmured, “What if it isn’t an alternative, but a one-way ticket?”

Hannibal’s voice was open, but firm when he asked, “Why would that be?”

Will blinked rapidly as he looked away and the silence this time held a different meaning. There was no kind look to offer connection and clarity, only the anxious silence of words churning inside but remaining unsaid.
“The topic of aggression in sleepwalkers has also been of interest since medieval times,” Hannibal explained. He was creating intricately cut garnishes with the sharp edge of a small knife. His eyes were cast to the precise movements of his hand and the blade in his grip. “The favored example of a sleepwalker used to be an aristocrat who, in sleep, would mount a horse thinking he was riding off to battle or to hunt. The question might be, do you desire a battle or the hunt?” he asked, looking to Will as the knife shifted closer to his thumb.

“The hunt seems inevitable whether or not I desire it,” he replied, thinking of the next phone call that was sure to come and the manhunt that would unavoidably ensue.

“You entered into a devil’s bargain with Jack Crawford. It takes a toll,” Hannibal validated.

“Jack isn’t the devil,” Will argued, resistant to the idea that Jack would take blame for his own difficulty. Jack wanted him to be the prized china, believed in him and had faith that he could endure the challenges and save lives.

“When it comes to how far he’s willing to push you to get what he wants, he’s certainly no saint,” he countered pointedly. He placed two plates on one arm and picked up his coffee. With both hands occupied, he nodded towards the dining room and said encouragingly, “Let’s have breakfast. I can’t expect you to hunt without proper sustenance.”

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Hannibal enjoyed having Jack for dinner. It was not only beneficial to keep the man that pursued him in his good graces for the sake of his camouflage, but also he got a particular enjoyment out of how Jack seemingly unknowingly gave his blessing for the acts that he would otherwise condemn. Agent Jack Crawford failed to recognize the latitudes he offered to someone like Hannibal with his confident declarations of *he should have hopped faster* and *cruelty doesn’t apply in the kitchen*. So consumed with his bravado and certainty in his convictions, Jack was imperceptive in precisely the way that gave Hannibal advantage and he was insensitive in a way that Bella was not. Bella’s teasing *Be kind to animals and then eat them?* was a different kind of observant. Both the Crawfords offered descriptions of Hannibal’s particular point of view in ways that heartened him but did not hold the promise of satisfaction. Jack and Bella’s declarations did not make his nerves sing the way Will’s perception did. There was a difference between a potential adversary and his clever wife lending Hannibal’s philosophies a casual, nondescript air, and praise lent to him by Will’s insight and comprehension. It would be protective for Jack to understand Hannibal as charming and eccentric, but ultimately common. He didn’t want what was protective and common with Will. He wanted what was true.

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“I need a consult,” Will announced on his way in through the door. He looked tired. He was tired. He knew his face was pale and haggard in ways that he recognized were increasing in severity as time wore on. It was threatening to become his norm. He felt like he couldn’t remember what it felt like to be well-rested. His nerves were dulled and intensified at once, stimuli took a while to register and chafed harshly when they did.
“Oh?” Hannibal replied as he distractedly closed the office door and watched Will deposit his coffee cup on the desk and shuck off his jacket a bit clumsily.

Will scanned the myriad of books spanning all the shelves that lined walls upstairs and downstairs. He remembered looking at some of the spines during his treks around the office, but wouldn’t know where to start. “Do any of these fancy books of yours have any information related to how brain functions are impacted by tumors and/or the parts of the brain associated with faith and religiosity?”

“I can find some books and journals that might interest you,” Hannibal confirmed. He thought of a book on neurotheology that resided in a bookcase on the upper level and moved to ascend the latter to locate it. “It sounds like your latest hunt presents with additional layers of complexity,” he surmised as he looked over his organization system to find what he was looking for.

Will sighed heavily, “The age old question of origin. How do you profile someone who has an anomaly in their head changing the way they think?”

“This can be a challenge for mental health and medical providers alike. It’s often a consideration to have in mind with a wide variety of ailments and can be complicated by somatic and/or existential factors,” he began as he wrapped his fingers around the intended book and started to flip the pages to find the passages he recalled could be helpful. He scanned the words and paraphrased, “Epilepsy used to be a sacred disease due to the tendency for partial complex seizures of the temporal lobe to cause intense religious experiences. When epilepsy later became a sign of witchcraft and cause for persecution, physicians saved lives by diagnosing symptoms and ‘deviant behavior’ as illness.” He closed the book and tossed it confidently down to Will, momentarily enamored by the open, wanting expression he had the opportunity to see Will display from down below. Will had allowed him the high ground.

Will caught the book easily. He felt the weight of it and ran his fingers over the embossed title. He exhaled softly and lamented, “The diagnosis of a brain tumor isn’t going to absolve the Angel Maker of the violence or prevent persecution.”

“Can’t beat God, become him?” Will inferred. He reached for his coffee and brought it to his lips as he mulled over the idea. The coffee was cheap. It was from a coffee place attached to the gas station he’d stopped at on his way over. It was a far cry from the likely excessively exotic and niche variety of coffee he’d been served in Hannibal’s kitchen. He could taste that it was slightly burned and no amount of sugar could remedy that. He was desperate for some energy and the hope that caffeine would quell the dull pound in his head drove him to drink it even if he didn’t much care for it.

“The fear may make it feel like the only option left,” he continued.

“He feels abandoned,” Will clarified. Fear was too simplistic an emotion for the situation. He thought of what would drive a man to create angels to pray for him at night. He thought about how fear alone would not be sufficient justification. Fear on its own could lead a man to search for answers and long for protection, sure. Something else brought out the hunger.

“Ever feel abandoned, Will?” Hannibal asked as he feigned continued attention on scanning his shelves. He ran his fingers over the bridges of several books and considered his options.

“Abandonment requires expectation,” Will stated with a wry laugh. Will had learned the dangers of expectations long ago.
“What were your expectations of Jack Crawford and the FBI?” he questioned as he scanned faux-casually over a book detailing the relationship between religiosity and sense of self. His eyes glanced half-heartedly over the page – the words deeper consciousness, physical limits of self, and biological origins of spiritual longing jumped out at him in invitation. He was willing to find something relevant, but not overly determined to do so. Will’s search for resources was likely partially interest in information and mostly a desire for answers not found within the confines of textbooks.

“Jack hasn’t abandoned me,” Will replied, slightly off-put by the shift in conversation. He furrowed his brow and scrunched his nose in distaste as he took another sip of bitter coffee.

“As you’ve said, your perception of abandonment might be informed by your expectations. If you expect that abandonment only comes in one form and that one form exists in the extreme, then there may be things you overlook,” he maintained, trying his best to balance holding true to his perspective with an air of openness to discussion. “You say he hasn’t abandoned you but at the same time you find yourself wandering around Wolf Trap in the middle of the night. Rather than mount a horse, you walk an empty road on a hunt you feel will never end, a hunt for unmet desires.”

“I don’t expect Jack to babysit me,” he scoffed with another wry laugh. Expecting Jack to particularly attend to the ins and outs of his topsy-turvy mind seemed too big of an ask. Jack gave him a heads up where he could, told him when the soup would not be good for his soul. He wasn’t sure what more to ask for. “He’s not supposed to be making sure that I stay in bed at night.”

“Jack gave you his word he would protect your headspace, yet he leaves you to your mental devices,” Hannibal offered as a reminder of promises made and expectations left unmet.

Will tipped his head and his gaze fixed on Hannibal. “Are you trying to alienate me from Jack Crawford?” he questioned suspiciously. The off-put feeling had trickled into irritation at the idea of being encouraged to hold expectations that in his opinion would only spell disappointment and disaster.

“I’m trying to help you to understand this Angel Maker you seek,” Hannibal suggested. He could tell when the heat he’d put Will on had burned. He wanted Will at a constant simmer with controlled increases of heat for the proper balance and best final results. “You find yourself sleepwalking in desire of something, constantly on the hunt. You hunt a man who wanders alone, who wrestles with abandonment and fear, who fears what awaits him in his sleep. He has been abandoned and sees no other way to speak to God and curse his abandonment except to find comfort and community in angels of his own creation.”

“What are you trying to say? Jack’s abandoning me, so my subconscious is throwing a tantrum and I’ll start making angel wings with my fishing line to get some attention?”

“Babysitting, staying tucked in bed, tantrums – the words you use to describe yourself are revealing,” he pointed out. “You associate having expectations and getting needs met with fruitless clashes in your youth. Just because they were fruitless then, does not mean that always will be the case. Your dreams are expressing unmet desires, which may include unmet expectations – the desire to have your needs met, to not be left alone with your mental devices. You’re not unlike this killer. You want to feel such sweet and easy peace. In the absence of this peace, there is self-destruction.”

“If he were self-destructive, he wouldn’t be so careful,” Will argued half-heartedly, almost from reflex. He took another sip of coffee with the far-off hope that another jolt would help him to piece together better words when his mind feels frustratingly devoid of his usual quick responses.
“Unless he’s careful about being self-destructive. He believes he has found a cure for what plagues him at night. He is not self-destructive simply because he kills, but because his killing is not addressing the actual source of his abandonment, which means he will never feel fulfilled. Holding on to the idea that something will offer relief when time and time again, it fails to do so is self-destructive, even when the attempts to achieve relief are carefully done, perhaps particularly so,” Hannibal explained. When he was given no response and was left to look down at Will’s bowed head below, he added, “You realize, you have a choice.”

“What is it?” Will asked distantly.

“Angel Maker will be destroyed by what’s happening inside his head. You don’t have to be.”

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Will felt hot, too hot, hotter than he should. It was cold enough outside to freeze his breath, but he still felt hot. He wanted it to be fever, but he knew better. The warmth was building when it should be tapering off. There was a sheen of sweat covering his skin and he throbbed as slick spilled out of him in a gush. By reflex, he clenched. He curled his toes, held his hands in tight fists, and tried to breathe. He was startled from his tension by a warm puff of air ghosting across the back of one of his hands. It shocked through his system and he found himself releasing his tense grip to open his hand in search once again for the stag’s thick fur. As he was allowed to touch the fur, he found it to be damp. Curiously, he pulled his hand away to discover blood. Rather than recoil in fear or disgust, he brought his hand closer to his face for inspection before experiencing the odd instinct to lick the blood clean from his thumb – perhaps as one would if it were a cut, perhaps not. As he touched his tongue to the pad of his finger, he felt the silhouette of the stag with its broad, proud antlers and large, sturdy frame loom prominently over him and behind him. He tried once again to face the creature, but himself once again restrained. As he groaned and tried to fight, he felt his thumb fall from his lips and hang limply at his side.

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Will’s head was swimming. He was tired and being tired made his thinking convoluted. Where he might usually be comfortable with the disorganization and have faith that what was important would arise, too many different thoughts and different streams of thinking were colliding together in a whirlpool that seemed to suck everything in deeper rather than allow anything to float to the top. He was meant to focus on the killer and the hunt, but found he had difficulty keeping his thoughts strictly on the crime scene. It was hard to push away the thoughts of the similarities, abandonment, unmet needs, expectations. His attempts to shove them aside were initially successful, but ultimately pointless and the clamor meant that he had no answers. Each question became more and more unclear and the only answer he could give was an I don’t know.

He found himself being unruly to an extent even unique to him. He was usually some sort of ill-tempered and standoffish, sure. He had critiqued Jack in the past, though from a distance or within the context of providing a better interpretation of a crime scene, which, for all intents and purposes, was his job. He could try to say he didn’t know where the unruliness came from or why he now critiqued and perhaps even mocked Jack openly in front of others. But he knew. He knew it was
partially just the tired of it all. Tiredness could make anyone irritable. He knew that the tiredness made it more difficult for him to keep biting his tongue. There might also be a part of him that knew – but declined to recognize – that with each I don’t know he’d felt himself frustrated not just with himself but with the pressure placed on him by Jack to always be the fine china and never chip – even when being tossed recklessly from place to place.

Jack, of course, traditional Alpha that he was, unsurprisingly reared back, puffing himself up to intimidate Will. His posture foreshadowed the attack that could come and made it clear to Will that it would be Will’s decisions that dictated if the attack would come. The instinctual and animal in them all responded and the others scattered around them to avoid getting caught as collateral prey. He couldn’t exactly blame them. Will found himself cowering away in shame himself.

Though, after he took his step away and tried to refocus on his work, he had a momentarily realization that the shame was not for speaking out but because he’d cowered. He hadn’t stood his ground and wished he could have for just a little while, just a little longer. He wished that he’d felt able to fight instead of fawn.

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When Will arrived for his appointment, he was wearing his casual clothes, the halfway point between everyday attire and fishing getup. He had gone home before his appointment. He was desperate to feel comfortable. His clothes grated his skin, any contact felt too tight and any rigidity felt too restrictive.

“I talked back to Jack,” he reported shortly after entering the office. He was too tired and too impatient to wait for any How are you doing? or even Please, take a seat. He approached the center of the room and added, “You would have been proud.”

“Were you proud?” Hannibal asked curiously. He scanned Will, took in his clothes, his posture, the tone of his voice, his diction to start to build an understanding of where this conversation might come from and where it might go.

“Hard to say,” Will admitted. “There was a feeling in the split second between saying it and Jack’s response, but it was smothered so quickly that there wasn’t enough time to classify it.”

Hannibal tipped his ever so slightly head in interest, curious about this development and Will’s interpretation of it. “What smothered it?”

“Discomfort,” Will stated, before his expression shifted in chagrin, “then shame.”

“Why did you feel shame?” Hannibal encouraged gently, his voice soft and smooth.

“For cowering,” Will confessed as he resisted the urge to bow his head once more as he spoke. Telling the story sent ripples of unwelcome residual emotion. He wanted to overcome the cowering, not repeat it.

“Making a change can take getting used to,” Hannibal comforted. “You’ve tried to reconstruct others’ thinking, find patterns. Now you find yourself in a behavior pattern that’s difficult to break. The first cracks can be the most challenging, but it gets easier once you’re able to break the surface.”
Will laughed bitterly. *Challenging* felt like another understatement. He’d lost control, lost a foothold, lost the ability to distinguish one thing from another, lost the comfort of a restful night, lost control of his ability to keep his tongue in check. He was expected to break a habit when he needed stability the most. He was balancing spinning plates while the world spun wobbly under his feet.

Will caught sight of the statue across the room and felt familiarity for reasons he didn’t immediately understand. The world stopped spinning for a moment as his eyes became fixated. He moved closer to the sculpture. He lifted his hand to touch the metal carefully and felt the chill of it against his thumb. As he explored the figure, he felt his attention pull towards Hannibal approaching behind him. He could feel the encroachment sizzling at his nerves, fulfilling and overwhelming. It was something his body craved but couldn’t handle properly and a surge of uncertainty habitually rushed to blanket the cravings. He kept himself still to allow the stifling even as he could feel not just a body close behind him, but also the vibrations in the air made by a face tipping closer and with it another crackle off unfamiliar want was sparked. His frayed nerves seemed to catch every shift in the air. There was a slight inhale that was so infinitesimal that his ears had no hope to hear it and it was only perceived by the change of the atmosphere around them.

“Did you just smell me?” Will asked, voice shaky from precariousness. He tipped his face back towards the source of his uneasiness and, when this made the intensity grow, he was uncertain if that was for the better or worse.

“My apologies,” Hannibal murmured, in some way caught off-guard by his own brashness as well. He had felt a pull towards Will since the first moment of meeting him. He kept an awareness of Will’s presence and stance whenever they shared space in a way that he knew went beyond simply utilizing posture for therapeutic data. However, he had never come so close in a way that felt quite intimate. He’d imagined how that might develop eventually, but he hadn’t imagined it this way. The explanation for his behavior was, in some ways, simple. He had smelled Will’s scent in its many tones and undertones in concentrated form when he’d visited Will’s home. He familiarized himself with Will’s scent, noted how it was comprised of the scents of cooking venison over a campfire with its smoke; newly printed newspaper; a hint of frankincense; and a trace of freshly mowed grass. It had lingered in the air and in the fabric and provided an echo in the absence of the source. Naturally, he was drawn in by the scent emerging directly from its genesis. It was still faint enough that others weren’t likely to notice but strong enough to call to him. Additionally, in the scent, there was another, newer earthy tone tinged with sweetness: freshly turned soil after a spring rain – a scent that denoted preparation for things to come. He could think of no adequate excuse to give Will and settled for stating fact instead. “You have a change in your scent.”

Will winced. He was usually able to cover his scent fairly easily with his aftershave. He’d been given an aftershave that was biting in its harsh metallic scent to override and counteract his natural scent. He never liked the idea of others *smelling him*. It was somehow too intimate – his scent revealed information about him that he’d rather others not know. He thought he’d caught a whiff of something different in his scent from time to time – in the morning when waking up, when out walking his dogs, when changing out of his clothes, as he was laying down for bed. He’d hoped it was his mind playing tricks on him in his exhaustion, something psychosomatic from tiredness and paranoia. To have it confirmed to him so plainly, made him cringe at how naïve that hope was.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Hannibal comforted, almost a soft whisper in his ear. He felt a strong desire to tip further in, to brush his lips against Will’s ear, drift them down to where his scent was pouring through the soft skin of his neck. He resisted. He knew it would be better to bide his time.

Will blinked quickly and took a shaky deep breath as he felt Hannibal’s words as much as he heard
them, the change in the air still hummed against his skin. His voice gave a odd gasp as he tried to joke, “That’s easy for you to say.”

“The body becomes accustomed to certain medications over time,” Hannibal explained, eyes studying the tumultuous flex of Will’s throat. He drank in the disconcertion and tension and let it appease his urges for the time being. “It requires higher and higher doses to have the same effect. It seems that you may be suppressing much of what wishes to come naturally and you’re experiencing how your impulses can only be suppressed for so long.”

Will was grateful for the feeling of agitation that built in him even when he knew the feeling to be particularly dangerous in these circumstances. It was a familiar danger though, manageable in just how often Will felt obligated to keep it in check. The warmth and crackle around the edges of his consciousness, however, were two sensations that foretold something he did his very best to manage by avoiding experiencing it. He moved away to give himself a reprieve and declared, “I know what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?” Hannibal asked. He felt the loss of proximity as an open, empty gap and longed to feel himself and Will enclosed together again.

“There are two kinds of Alphas: the ones like Jack who would rather I’d never have a heat so that they can avoid the inconvenience and the ones like you who think you’re doing me a favor by teaching me to return to my true submissive, subservient Omega nature,” he explained bitterly, thinking of all the conversations when his heats were treated like a choice he made just to be troublesome or when patronizing voices scolded him for being so foolish as to think that he should or could do anything but tailor his career and life in general around regular intervals of debauchery.

The fondness and conviction bloomed in Hannibal’s chest as he asked, “What if that’s not what I’ve been thinking? Have I ever said or done anything to indicate that I want you to be submissive or subservient?"

“You want me to have no self-control, to succumb to mindless biological urges,” Will shot back, a summarization of past discussions that held a particular skew.

“Why would I want that?”

“So that you can feel superior and look down on the little Omega, pity the thing and know you’d never be so disorderly, so debased,” Will spit, his expression downturned, mouth in a frown, brows furrowed.

“What I want is for you to no longer live in fear of your nature,” he explained truthfully. Will would be able to feel the true depth of the admission even if he still did not know what that admission truly meant. “I want you to no longer hide away from what defines you and instead be empowered to use the assets at your disposal.”

“Well,” Will began, pausing to chuckle sarcastically, “this should be interesting. Please, Doctor, tell me how exactly you think a heat helps with that?”

“Patients with chronic pain – particularly chronic pain that medication fails to address – are taught to manage this pain not by fighting against it, but by learning to join with it and allow it to pass through,” Hannibal informed him. “It can feel counterintuitive and as if the practitioner wants the patient to be in pain, but it comes from the knowledge that suppression is a tricky and ultimately ineffectual business.”
“Join with it?” Will questioned. He turned completely away and took another step or two. His skin still pricked and felt too tight and though he couldn’t flee the source entirely, he could distance himself from the accelerant. “Are you serious?”

“If you were to halt your suppressants, what do you fear would occur?” he queried, his eyes fixed on the slope of Will’s neck and the restless ways his hands shifted and clenched.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath to tamper the feelings and images flashing in his mind—heart pounding, hands slick, tumbles and tussle, chaos and entropy. “Fire and brimstone seems like an appropriate comparison,” he expressed plainly.

“Is it the destruction and wrath that you fear? Or the judgement?” Hannibal questioned.

“Yes feels like a good answer,” Will breathed in a rush of air.

“Why should you be punished?”

“Let’s say,” Will started as he selected his words carefully, “I might engage in activities that would necessitate repentance. I was informed early on that mixing my particular intricacies with the chaos of heat only spell disaster. I wouldn’t join with my heat so much as be devoured by it.”

“You’re afraid of the aggression you feel,” Hannibal interpreted, “but bloodlust is natural. We inherit our emotions and our impulses from animals. As Alpha and Omega, we are hardwired to associate blood and pain with deep connection. We are made to bond by biting into each other’s throats. You were not designed to be domesticated.”

“You’re only proving my point,” Will insisted. “You’re telling me resign myself to biology and just using different words to do it.”

“My intension is to normalize how you feel in the context of nature, which can be different from asking you to be reduced exclusively to your nature,” Hannibal clarified.

“If I were normal in the context of nature, my experiences would be the same as others, entirely unremarkable,” Will extrapolated in return. “But you can’t honestly tell me that everyone feels the same way I do.”

“We can hold the same baseline traits and individually experience them to different degrees. Nature can be intricate in its expression and still be nature. Feeling shame for something natural and innate would be unfair. Learning to be attuned to it rather than suppress it would allow for a greater sense of control,” he summarized. Hannibal wanted to pull the ends together. He wanted Will to see how everything wove together and intertwined—how he can be unique and have basic drives, how suppression rather than expression would be counterproductive.

“You want me to be oppositional, not do as I’m told,” Will reminded him defiantly. “How do you react then to me saying no?”

Hannibal felt the pressure, felt Will redirecting the focus, felt how he was being tested and nothing but honesty would suffice as a reply. “I would feel disappointed,” he admitted, “but amongst my disappointment comes an appreciation for your assertiveness, which, I might add, requires a degree of force and aggression. It is possible to find connection in bellicosity. You will make your decision and I will appreciate the willfulness.”

Perhaps ironically, Will felt some of that boldness and assertiveness leave him when he heard the answer he’d asked for but hadn’t expected. Not sure what to make of it, he stated, “Let’s just… hope my doctor calls.”
Hannibal gave him a contented look in concession and acquiesced with, “We can revisit the topic another time.”

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Listening to Mrs. Buddish, he heard the tale of the Angel Maker’s abandonment, an abandonment of his own creation. There was the complexity in pushing away until the moment when one felt abandoned. The slipping away, the loss of connection and family that pushed a man to seek company in angels made from devils, angels who could never satisfy. A man whose loved one hoped for him to become weak and hoped that his weakness would drown out his terror and anger.

Will looked upon the man in his final transformation and felt the fear in himself. He felt how weakness and cowering would be most palatable. He felt how it would be preferable to others for him to be a weak, sick man, how they would find him easier to understand, easier to relate to. He felt how, in his desire to relate, he tempered his anger to the exact inoculation point. He could have just enough bite, but not too much.

In that moment, something clicked.

The words tumbled from his mouth with unexpected conviction, “I don’t know how much longer I can be all that useful to you, Jack.” Jack bemoaned Will not talking to him and it rankled him. The act of Jack pretending that Will simply elected not to speak irritated him – the implication that Will was like a wife withdrawing and withholding information. He was aggravated by Jack’s attempts to claim that they were looking together, as if standing next to each other looking at the same thing was the same as looking together. These attempts to guilt and minimize and patronize only fed his determination and he felt no need to cower. Jack taunted him with the idea of quitting. He held out the idea of quitting casually as if it meant nothing to him at all, and, in doing so, it held its own tenor of abandonment: talk back, I know you won’t go anywhere; talk back, I’m happy to let you go.

Will remained in the barn alone with the exception of what was left behind of Elliot Buddish, strung up as an angel from above, and in being left behind himself, Will assembled the pieces.

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When Will called for an appointment, he was kindly told that the office was occupied for the time being, but received an offer for dinner instead. When he found himself in Hannibal’s kitchen once again, Will also found himself being inattentive. He noticed Hannibal’s attempts to make conversation and gave unhelpful, short answers. His words and thoughts were caught up in trying to figure out how to tip himself over into the topic he wanted to talk about. With repeated lack of success, eventually Hannibal had just grown silent, preparing ingredients and casting a patient, but meaningful look at him every few minutes.

“I think I maybe started to understand,” Will declared, words finally emerging from behind the block in his throat. He ran his hands over the cool counter surface and felt the solid surface. He looked at Hannibal in his preparation but he wasn’t really watching, just scanning his eyes.
distantly over the process. The gears turning inside still distracted him. Some had clicked; many
were still left slowly spinning.

“Understand what?” Hannibal asked curiously. Will’s presences and energy have always been so
elaborate. This was no exception. After a series of dead end topics, he simply bided his time and
watched Will think so intensely that it seemed to fill his whole being.

“What we’ve been talking about. What you’ve been saying,” he offered. It was a partial answer, he
knew. It was given in distraction as he tried to construct a more descriptive one. He was still
placing the connections. There were flashes of insight and realizations that he felt were connected
but couldn’t yet fully articulate why – Mrs. Buddish wishing for a weaker, less angry husband;
cowering in a dark, bloody alleyway; cowering in a hallway of lockers and linoleum; being pulled
open by analysts and never able to fully close; knowing what would happen if he didn’t close;
becoming so closed in, curled over, that he didn’t stand tall.

“How so?”

“I don’t want to make myself weaker. For others,” Will explained, feeling finally off to a good
start. “I don’t want to be subdued, stifled.”

Hannibal hummed supportively. He felt satisfaction and anticipation creeping in as he asked, “How
did you come to this realization?”

“I stood up to Jack again. He responded the way I thought he would and I didn’t really get
anywhere different because of it,” he explained with slight sarcasm before his tone adopted a more
earnest tone. “But it was somehow different.”

“What was different?”

Will blinked at the ceiling as he sorted through the ways to explain it. He felt dissatisfied with the
wording four times over until he landed on, “Jack could walk away because I cowered or he could
walk away when I don’t. Cowering doesn’t change it.”

Hannibal paused what he was doing and he set his emptied hands on the counter. He felt himself
tense and straightened his back and his elbows in suspense as he asked, “What will you do with this
new insight?”

“I haven’t fully figured that part out yet,” Will laughed wryly. “I’m not even fully done figuring out
this part.”

Something in the way it was said, rather than what was said caught Hannibal’s attention. “That
laugh has been making an appearance more than usual lately,” he noted curiously. He still felt the
tension in his neck as he tipped his head to the side. “What do you make of that?”

Will felt another laugh try to bubble out, but tapped it down in self-consciousness. Instead, he
answered honestly, “I don’t know.”

Hannibal shifted further away from his abandoned preparations and took a few steps towards Will
as he regarded Will with interest. “It seems to hold some meaning,” he offered. “We discussed your
expectations of Jack and what you think my expectations of you are but we didn’t discuss your
expectations as they relate to me.”

Hearing these words, Will felt hot. He had been on the spot this whole time but this was a change in
intensity, in temperature. Questions that had been prompts in his monologue seemed to turn into
hyper-focused inquiries. “Expectations,” he repeated and felt the weight of the word in his mouth.
He tried to fight reflexively going for the default _I don’t have expectations_ and, as usual, found that when he moved that aside, there was nothing concrete to grasp onto. “I’m not sure what to ask of you.”

“What would you like?” Hannibal offered openly.

“I think,” Will started and then paused. He took a step to the corner of the counter. He licked his lips in agitation and looked up at Hannibal’s patient, composed expression. He thought back to the pieces and tried again to arrange them. His brows relaxed out of their furrow when he realized, “I want to look together. I want to talk back and not be let go.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Hannibal affirmed. He hadn’t quite expected things to develop in this way, not exactly, but that barely had an impact on how gratified he felt. There was a particular kind of satisfaction in the rhythm of an exchange like this, an exchange that signaled progress with every turn. The way that answers poured out from Will was a particular kind of triumph.

Will took a step forward. His senses crackled at the edges once more and he could smell his own scent again. It snuck up on him as it had been recently, coming in ebbs and flows. He felt a little woozy and it sent his head spinning with the thought of an avenue that had been left untouched and uncertain, something else in need of clarification. “If I went off my suppressants – _if_,” Will emphasized, though his voice still betrayed with a waver, “What could I expect from you then?”

“What would you like?” he asked again in encouragement. He could smell the surge in Will’s scent too and it was a welcome warmth that pulled at him.

Will slid his hand along the smooth surface of the counter until his fingers lay overlapping Hannibal’s, almost ever so slightly interlocking. His fingertips prickled and it sent a ripple across his skin down his arm. Another sensation rose and, even as it felt like his nerves were shaking, his eyes were sharp and his voice steady, “Don’t you dare let go.”

Hannibal tipped his mouth gently into a contented smile. He spread his fingers slightly wider as he tipped his body closer. He felt Will’s fingers slide further between his own and he insisted, “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments would once again be appreciated. This was another beast of a chapter (15 pages/over 8000 words and it was just for one episode this time) and I still sustain myself with your thoughts and/or praise.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!